

## CHAPTER 3

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# PEOPLE IN TRANSITIONS IN WORLDS IN TRANSITION: AMBIVALENCE IN THE TRANSITION TO WOMANHOOD DURING WORLD WAR II

**Tania Zittoun, Emma-Louise Aveling,  
Alex Gillespie, and Flora Cornish**

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*I am glad I have done this kind of war work, proud that I still have the moral and physical energy to follow it and hope that out of this experience I shall have gained a new understanding of life, people and marriage.*

—Zelma Katin, 1944, in Hartley (1994, p. 258).

When adolescents face the transition from girlhood to womanhood or from boyhood to manhood, they are usually provided, by their societies, with acceptable and workable models of how to be a woman or how to be a man. These meanings structure the person's evaluation of alternatives, their choice of action and identity. But when societies undergo major ruptures,

such as a state of war; or rapid economic or political change, the old models may no longer serve their purpose. Adolescents must become adults, but the old rules no longer work, and ambivalence may be experienced, as conflicting models of adulthood arise. World War II was one such rupture for women and men in Europe. Women were called upon to leave home to join the workforce. Separated from their families, working in the public realm, socializing with other migrant young people, they were forced into a new situation which did not fit with the old definitions of womanhood. In this chapter, we present a case study of the transition to womanhood of one young woman living in Britain during World War II. We conceptualize alternative models of womanhood in terms of semiotic sets. We examine how ambivalence about possible womanhood emerges in this young woman's life, and her attempts to handle this ambivalence.

### SEMIOTICS OF MIND

Thought can be described as a continuous flow of semiotic units. Thought is possible, when a new experience is turned into, or attached to a sign, or semiotic unit, within the mind. A semiotic unit is something which stands for some personal or collective experience (e.g., an event, a perception, an action, an idea, and a representation, etc.). A personal memory is a mental trace of an experience, and is thus a minimal, private semiotic unit. Other semiotic units are arranged in certain configurations and follow codes which are mastered and understood by many. A sentence, or a painting in a museum, is a semiotic construction, made out of many semiotic units, which have been created by some people with some intention of communicating or creating a certain experiences in others. One effect of semiotic units is that they enable people to distanciate from immediate embodied experience of an event (see Vygotsky & Luria, 1994).

Semiotic processes also follow habitual trajectories. There are pathways of ideas that we follow more often than others, groups of signs that we associate together, or that we believe to be "our identity." Routine situations mobilize these preferred patterns of related signs, feelings, and actions. These patterns we will term "semiotic sets" (using the notion of "set" proposed by Matte Blanco, 1975). A semiotic set can be made out of mediators of various degrees of generality: from values or semantic fields (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005) to concrete memories of experiences (Valsiner, 2007; Werner & Kaplan, 1963; Zittoun, 2006). Sets encompass identity dimensions, intentions for action, and meanings related to typical situations. They also include contents which more or less easily enter consciousness. The set can be mobilized by an association to the immediate context or a previous thought. For example, sitting on a bike usually mobilizes certain

automatized actions, attention to traffic signs, and a feeling of freedom. Or when a teacher stands in front of her classroom, certain ways of speaking, knowledge contents, implicit values about the nature of the situation, will be mobilized (see also Hundelde, 2005 for a similar notion of "identity package," Gillespie, 2006, for the similar concept of "perspective").

Societies or subgroups of societies stabilize certain semiotic sets. These are consensually accepted forms of life, conduct or ideas. "Cultural models," such as the consensual way of understanding and doing marriage in some parts of the U.S.A. (Strauss & Quinn, 1997), or "social representations," for example the shared way of understanding democracy in some subgroups of the young generation of Czech citizens (Markova, 2004), can be seen as collectively stabilized semiotic sets. Collectively stabilized semiotic sets are thus part of collective culture. A more personal set is part of personal culture. It can come from one's internalization of shared values, from one's first hand experience, or from a combination of the two.

### SEMIOTICS OF AMBIVALENCE

In a given situation, it may be possible to mobilize more than one semiotic set. Ambivalence, we propose, emerges when there is a simultaneous mobilization of at least two partly overlapping semiotic sets. Our approach thus contrasts with those which localize ambivalence at the level of the coexistence of contradictory feelings (Favez-Boutonier, 1972/2004), or the coexistence of incompatible verbal categories (Bauman, 1991). Rather, we see ambivalence at the level of semiotic processes and the transactions between the person and her world (see also Abbey & Valsiner, 2004).

Unfamiliar situations can evoke several overlapping sets. For ambivalence to occur, the overlap between the semiotic sets must concern zones which might both be valid in relation to a present or future event currently needing meaning, value, or guidance. For a given person, the ambivalence is then produced by a confrontation between incompatible semiotic mediators belonging to these sets as she is called upon to give meaning to the situation, to act, or is to be positioned socially in relation to this situation. Incompatibility may be due to semiotic and logical rules (something cannot be both good and bad). Incompatibility may also be due to the social structure in which the person is embedded, which might privilege one semiotic set.

Anthropological studies have shown that groups develop techniques which permit the occupation of incompatible semiotic sets. Carnivals, for instance, create times and spaces for experiencing alternative values, identities, meanings, and practices which are usually avoided in everyday life. They do this under strong cultural regulation, with clear limits. During carnivals, roles are often reversed. The prince, for example, might live like the

poor; thus engaging in activities usually excluded from the semiotic set of being a prince. After a fixed time, however, the person comes back to her previous social position and everyday life (see for example, Chappaz-Wirthner, 1995). Another domain for the cultivation of ambivalence is the "liminality" experienced by pilgrims upon leaving their host community (Turner & Turner, 1978). Once out of the gaze of the host community the pilgrim's identity becomes fluid, and thus a change in the pilgrim's semiotic set, becomes possible.

But occupying a different semiotic set is not always reversible. The experience of ambivalence may undo preexisting semiotic sets or transform them. For example, as future parents "try out" first names for their child to come, they imagine what their child might become; doing so, they imagine themselves as parents and facilitate their own change (Zittoun, 2005). We thus suggest that ambivalence can generate playfulness—the "as-if" exploration of new possible meanings, actions and identities (Josephs, 1998). As these processes occur in irreversible time, we suggest that playfulness can lead to the transformation of the person's semiotic organization. Yet such playfulness is not always possible. On the one hand, to engage in playfulness, the person herself needs to tolerate ambivalence. This is possible if one does not become anxious because of the lack of clarity of the situation. Also, it supposes that the person does not have an urgent problem to solve. On the other hand, the social environment must also tolerate people's playfulness or inconsistent behavior or discourses as they explore new possible identities, meaning and actions. For example, contemporary societies tolerate adolescents' exploration and invention of their appearance, preferred activities, and values, but are less tolerant of similar behavior when acted out by people in their forties.

In this chapter we will examine how one young woman, June, confronting the unfamiliar and problematic situation of life on the home front in Britain during World War II, is led to a state of ambivalence by mobilizing incompatible semiotic sets. We will focus on June's romantic relationships demonstrating how preexisting norms and semiotic sets proved unable to deal with the changed circumstances. In the liminality created by the war and geographical relocation out of the gaze of her home community, June's relation to boyfriends and her representation of love become uncertain. We examine how ambivalence emerges in June's experience, and how she attempts to manage this ambivalence.

### THE STUDY OF WAR DIARIES

In order to study ambivalence we have chosen to use an idiographic case study method—that is, to study one person at many points in time. The individual case study method is not used to generalize a finding to a population;

instead it is aimed at testing theory against the objectively perceivable messy complexities of a real case (Mitchell, 1984). The single case against which we want to test our theorization of the genesis and semiotic functioning of ambivalence is provided by a young English woman's diaries, written during World War II. Our reason for choosing these diaries is that they enable us to examine how ambivalence arises and is semiotically negotiated on a day-by-day basis, over the course of several years.

The diary that we analyze is drawn from the Mass-Observation Archive (Sheridan, Street, & Bloome, 2000). Mass-Observation was established in Britain in 1937 with the aim of creating a "people's anthropology" to redress the relative neglect of the perspective of ordinary people in social science (Bloome, Sheridan, & Street, 1993). Following public appeals by the founders of Mass-Observation, several hundred ordinary people across Britain volunteered to keep daily diaries about their lives and their communities and to respond to regular surveys. Mass-Observation has archived these diaries and survey responses, making them available to interested researchers. This offers the methodological advantage of allowing other researchers to have access to the primary data, and thus to challenge or supplement our analysis (Gillespie, 2005). Any researcher can gain access to our primary data by contacting the Mass-Observation Archive and requesting diary 5324. Diarist 5324, who we have called "June" volunteered to write a diary for Mass-Observation, beginning in 1939. An enthusiastic contributor, she documented her experience of the war almost daily until its end in 1945.

To study ambivalence as a semiotic process, we treat the diaries as the externalization of June's "stream of thought" (James, 1980). Searching within this stream of thought, we identified June's relations to boyfriends as a specific source of ambivalence. The coding of the data focused upon June's more traditional conception of boyfriends, her more liberal conception of boyfriends, and the tension and ambivalence created by these two often incompatible semiotic sets. The coding was carried out in parallel, by different researchers, and the same themes and codes emerged<sup>1</sup>. In the following presentation of our analysis, we begin by outlining the various semiotic sets that June was mobilizing at the outset of the war; then we trace how these become unsuitable in the face of new events, how this unsuitability is overcome, and finally, how a new semiotic set emerges.

### THREE SEMIOTIC SETS FOR WOMANHOOD

One of the most dramatic changes of the twentieth century was the transition in women's social position (Goldin, 1991). Women's roles in the home, in work, and in love have been redefined. In the early twentieth century, the majority of women were housewives. Today, the supremacy of the semiotic

set of the "housewife" has collapsed (Gavron, 1983), and over two-thirds of women are choosing careers outside the home. Historians and sociologists point to the importance of World War II in instigating this transformation (Goldstein, 2001; Joshi, Layard, & Owen, 1985). During World War II, women moved out of the home and into factories and offices. This movement often entailed geographical displacement, and thus interactions with new people. In this turbulent context, the traditional semiotic sets regulating womanhood were shaken, and new ones were defined. According to our analysis, June initially mobilizes three semiotic sets for conceptualizing womanhood, namely, "the decent woman," "the old maid," and "that sort of girl."

### The Decent Woman

At the beginning of the war, June is 18 years old. She lives in a small village with her mother and sister. Her father had died several years previously and the three women have continued to run the family business—a small village garage and shop selling sweets and tobacco. June also has an important role in running the home, spending several hours of each day preparing meals and running errands. Being hardworking and experienced in handling the household constitute the semiotic set of the *decent woman* promoted by June's mother. June and her sister enact this model bravely, though June does confess that she finds that life "rather dull" (13.09.1941).

June and her sister also have an active social life, going out for tea, playing tennis and badminton, going to the pictures and to dances. With the young men, June enjoys dancing, flirting, and being admired. Yet within the semiotic set of the *decent woman*, the nature of such relationships is tightly circumscribed. For example, June reports how she and her sister are taken to tea by two young men:

Mother liked them both and consented to us going with them out in the evening after we shut the garage. We went to Hunstanton & walked along the prom & cliff about a mile. We tried to get some coffee, but no-where in Hunstanton is open for non-alcoholic drinks<sup>2</sup>. (06.04.1940)

The young decent woman thus follows her mother's authority in her choice of men, and goes out to places where non-alcoholic drinks are available. The adult decent woman will appear to be married and to have children.

### The Old Maid

June is aware of a second, contrasting model of womanhood, that of the *old maid*, a woman who never marries. When one of her elder sister's young

men eventually marries another woman, June is enraged and writes: "[My sister] is now 26 & seems to have wasted many of her best years on J (...) I feel furious (...) If B is an old maid, I shall blame it to wasting all those years going with J" (13.04.1940). The fear of becoming an old maid—which indicates specific modes of relating with men, as well as, possibly, unattractiveness, loneliness, lack of elegance—appears repeatedly in June's diaries. The semiotic set of the old maid includes the idea of failure, that is, failure to get married and to have children. In her fears about becoming an old maid, June is implicitly accepting the culturally embedded superiority of married women, which belongs to the decent woman semiotic set.

### That Sort of Girl

The third semiotic set for womanhood that June mobilizes is that of "that sort of girl." This semiotic set emerges in June's diary following a call from the Ministry of Labour for the women of Britain to join the workforce on the home front (16.03.1941). June has to decide on a course of action. She would like to join the war effort, yet feels she could not sign up for the women's forces voluntarily, because she would risk appearing as "that sort of girl," which has "the stigma of man-chasing attached to it if one volunteered, & because usually the sort of girl that goes in is what I consider rather brainless" (16.03.1941). Thus the semiotic set of the *decent woman* (who is clever, cautious in her relationships with men, takes care of her home, is well organized, hard working and clean), is incompatible with *that sort of girl*, who is "man chasing" and "brainless." That June uses the criteria of "suitability for a (decent) woman" in her deliberations is clearly evident: she considers cooking, working as a teacher, and working in agriculture as a land girl, eventually doing the latter.

## PRE-WAR SEMIOTIC SETS WITHIN WARTIME BRITAIN

At the beginning of the war, June is at the end of her adolescence. She is entering the time of young adulthood during which she will have to define and stabilize values and choices for her life as an adult woman (Zittoun, 2006). In a stable society, people are provided with collectively sanctioned and supported transitions to adulthood. June is aware of three socially acknowledged forms of womanhood. The *decent woman* is positively valued. She is well-presented, clever, responsible, careful in her relationships with men, takes care of the home, and on the way to marrying. The *old maid*, by virtue of not marrying, is seen as having a pitiable life without fun. *That sort*

*of girl*, by contrast, is too interested in fun, being easygoing, brainless, and man-chasing. While aware of these three semiotic sets, June does not have to mobilize them simultaneously, as she associates herself only with the *decent woman*.

However, the advent of war brought great changes at all levels, changing the opportunities and responsibilities of both men and women. As men are called to the front, women take up traditionally male roles. June's family's hired mechanic leaves the garage, and the sisters take on his work. Customers respond to the news, saying "Well, there's many a girl doing a man's job these days" (03.02.1941). Working as a mechanic would have seemed strange for a *decent woman*, but it is necessitated and acceptable due to the war. Similarly, with the Ministry of Labour's call for women workers, it becomes commonplace for women to leave home and take up work in distant parts of the country. June enjoys the sense of adventure of her departure from home to become a gardener in 1941. Like many British women, she embarks on a new set of experiences for which society has barely prepared her.

### AMBIVALENCE, PLAYFULNESS, AND CIRCUMVENTION STRATEGIES

June leaves home to work in the fields as a "land girl". In an unfamiliar situation of living away from home, with other young people, working outside every day and socializing with soldiers, June mobilizes her existing models of womanhood to make sense of her situation. However, these prove contradictory and insufficient for her experience and cause ambivalence.

During her first apprenticeship, June moves from sheer enthusiasm for the "delightful" garden to becoming a fully skilled and knowledgeable gardener, using books, and lectures to reinforce her expertise. She now calls herself a "land girl" and socializes with her new friends, going out to dances, where she enjoys the soldiers' attentions.

I must say it is pretty great being a land girl here. Everyone treats us as heroines especially the soldiers. Nothing but admiration is forthcoming from them & the villagers (...). At dances 'I' & I are immensely popular & I am sure it is because of our work as words of admiration about it come from all our partners. (It certainly is not our looks as I now weigh 10 stone & 'I' does too.) (29.10.1941)

"Enjoying being admired by men" is an action associated more with *that sort of girl* than with the *decent woman*. Indeed, June experiences a significant contradiction between her experiences of enjoying her lighthearted relations with men, and the moral expectations of the *decent woman*. In April 1940, she

had described refusing an invitation to go for a walk with a man, based on two principles "(a) I don't go for walks with anyone unless I knew them well & (b) I thought he was married & too old (over 35)" (20.04.1940). But these principles prove impractical during wartime. In June 1941, she meets a charming soldier, and writes:

Now an awful thing or is it? On my way cycling back from S I picked up with a soldier who rode with me to E. He seemed so nice, a French Canadian, & I made a date to meet him tonight. (16.06.1941)

She meets him again the next day:

I am also almost in love! Or is it in love with love? Ye Gods, what fools men do make of themselves! I went out with my French Canadian soldier again tonight. He is sweet. What it is to be young & foolish! It certainly is good for morale in wartime to be made love to! I am not quite sure if I am happy about it or not. It is pleasant. It is fun. He is nice & a gentle-man. I would not go out with him if I did not feel safe & trust him. He is lonely & so am I. We are both from home & friends. How silly life is! (...) I blame the war for this! (17.06.1941)

Here June engages in complex dialogues with herself. She questions the nature of her enthusiasm: is she in love, or in "love with love?" To be "in love with love" may be associated with the foolish "that sort of girl" semiotic set, while a *decent woman* would experience genuine love. Not knowing how to categorize her feelings, June simultaneously mobilizes two semiotic sets. She marks her ambivalence through her rhetorical question: "an awful thing or is it?" Her previous rule of not meeting with men she does not know has been broken, and internalized voices of the *decent woman* might condemn such a meeting as "awful," but she is not fully convinced of this judgment, and energetically argues with it. First, she suggests a reshaping of her rule to be about trusting, not knowing, saying "I would not go out with him if I did not feel safe & trust him." The man has respectable qualities (pleasant, fun, gentleman, and nice), and she and he are similar (loneliness and isolation), which reduce the "unknown." The second strategy to circumvent the rule is to use the exceptional state of war to invalidate the rule: "I blame the war." The war gives love affairs new meaning: maintaining morale, which is clearly a good thing. June can add a clause to the set of the *decent woman*: that this is fine if it is for war reasons. After this reasoning, June decides to continue the adventure, and accepts a meeting with the man. But her new semiotic mediators are not powerful enough to withstand disappointment:

I am furious, Furious with myself for being such a damn silly fool. He never turned up tonight. Of course there may be a reason but I expect not. I have

vowed & declared I will not make dates with soldiers etc. I don't know. (...) I was ten minutes late then, but always am on principle. I feel sure he never came. (...) I might have known from past experience a man that pretends he has fallen violently in love is a damn liar. After all I am not 16 now. I should have known. I did know in fact. When I was under 18 I used to believe them. They all go the same way. I declare I won't give them a chance again, but get to know them first. The trouble is I liked him so much. Never again! (Thursday 19.06.1941)

Perhaps she reacts so strongly because the semiotic set of the decent woman, who would be sensible enough not to trust an unknown man, was never far away, and now seems to have been proven right. She does not have a robust new semiotic set to cover this eventuality, and feels foolish for abandoning the model of decent womanhood. Yet the rage soon disappears, as the man comes to call on her, repentant:

I had to forgive him. I can't help it. I'm sure I am being balmy [sic] going out with a soldier who I only know about from what he has told me. But I like him so much & cannot resist his company & friendship while he wants to have mine. (...) I wish I knew if he means all he says & all he tells me is the truth. It is so difficult. I give him the benefit of the doubt. I blame the war all the same! My family would think I was crackers. I shan't tell them yet. I will let time decide. By that only can I tell his true character. I can't help hoping time will show a favorable decision on the matter. (25.06.1941)

Now, love—or attraction—challenges the boundaries of the *decent woman* semiotic set. Perhaps a decent woman can go out with a soldier, if he proves to have good character in the long run. Yet June is still trying to judge the young man according to its earlier principles (being truthful, having the right sort of character). She is still a woman as defined by her community, and the shadow of these absent others is present in her actions (“my family would think...” and she “wouldn't have dreamt of doing this sort of thing at home” (27.06.1941)). Again, it is the exceptional status of war that allows for a circumvention of the traditional rules. Before long, this Canadian soldier disappears from June's diaries, and she continues to have love affairs with new and interesting young men. She continues to express ambivalence in the conflict between the judgmental point of view which she thinks her home community would have, and her experience. But, with increasing time away from home, she begins to reject the critical point of view on her relationships, and to have confidence in her ability to define her own standards for deciding who to meet “What will my people say and think. I don't care what anyone says or thinks. I only know we are ‘nuts’ about each other” (18.01.1942). Her actions have become very different from those of the *decent woman* into which she was socialized at home.

### **Ambivalence, the End of Playfulness and the Emergence of the Independent Woman**

From the summer of 1944, June and her co-workers begin to expect the end of war ("everyone seems to think the war will soon be over now" (19.07.1944)). And with the end of war—the end of the state of exception—the circumvention strategies threaten to collapse. It is no longer possible to play with and oscillate between different semiotic sets without consequence. Rather, the prospect of a return to peacetime forces June and her fellow workers to consider their present and possible futures and to act. "We, on the staff, have had quite a lot of discussions on our post-war plans." (08.09.1944). But there is great uncertainty: "We all seem unsettled as we do not know what will become of us and our jobs in the future" (30.04.1945). Nevertheless, it is clear to June that a decision must be made. June's postwar world will no longer tolerate such playful ambivalence, and she must decide what kind of woman to become.

### **The Impossibility of Return to the Past**

Essentially, we suggest that such a return to past semiotic sets is impossible, because people live in irreversible time. People can never come back to where they were before an extended playing time, during which they engaged in new actions, elaborated new meanings, and new identities. These new experiences deeply change the person, her position in the world, her knowledge, and her abilities to deal with others, the world and herself. Accordingly, June progressively defines new semiotic sets, which are more or less supported by collective definitions.

Concretely, June, as well as the women she works with, begin to consider the possibility of losing their jobs as the men return to take their positions and as their effort will no longer be required in peacetime. They risk losing their independence and income. Thinking about returning home, June writes: "I have grown away from & have no real desire to go back to Norfolk for good when the time comes. I used to think there would never be any where else like it, but now I don't feel the same" (10.02.1944). Return to a pre-war life is not desirable for June, as her definitions of womanhood have expanded. Her choice is no longer simply between the semiotic sets available to her before the war.

### **The Personal Semiotic Set of the Independent Woman**

Towards the end of the war, there slowly emerges in June a new model of herself as an independent woman. It develops through her relationship

with men and her new experiences of work, as the end of the war suppresses the current circumvention strategies.

First, towards the end of the war, relationships to men have taken a new form, that of "wife pinchers," the way in which the girls in the hostel where June works are happy to pinch the place of husbands' wives. The exceptional situation of war means that these actions can be seen as temporary and not particularly significant. In this liminal time and space, social norms are turned upside down yet collectively sanctioned: "no one seems to mind" (31.03.1945). The assumption is still that the old model of womanhood will return when the exceptional situation of war ends. Yet through this experience, women also experience a new form of responsible lightness which belongs neither to the *decent woman* nor to *that sort of girl*.

Second, June has experienced being a worker, and that this is the collectively shared experience of women war workers. As a land girl, June becomes a skilled worker, reading theoretical texts about farming, writing technically about her work, and being defined as a gardener even outside her workplace. Wearing a uniform, with a body made strong and heavy by years of outdoor work, June has been transformed. As a group, land girls are practical and skilled. They are proud of their work, their contribution to the war effort, and their specific womanhood. They are also organized and claim their workers rights (working hours, wages, etc.). For the last 2 years of war, June stops working as a land girl and becomes a shop assistant and receptionist in her workers' hostel (17.12.1943). Yet she retains some of the qualities of the land girls. She is still skilled, autonomous, reflective, and politically aware. She is not shy, she engages in a theatre show and public singing and dancing. Slowly there emerges a new model of herself as an independent woman, whose work and hostel "has more attraction for [her] than [her] home" (10.09.1943). She writes with satisfaction of a confident challenge to her boss:

Today was outstanding by me having half an hours heart to heart chat with the boss, in which I came out top. Yesterday an incident occurred in which we asked for his support. In a weak moment he sided with the resident in question, going back on the rule he had only made three weeks ago. It made us all furious, so I made it my business to attack him in his office & tell him what I thought of him on the subject. He was marvelous about it & admitted his fault & after some home truths we parted good friends. (01.12.1944)

As an independent person she is also "sent into town with a factory car to do shopping, etc., for the firm [...] I quite fancied myself as the factory cars have M.T.C. drivers & though I have been several times with the higher staff in my off-duty time, I have not been officially for the [ink smudged] firm" (18.07.1944). This authority as woman worker is for June collective, and collectively acknowledged by men, whether as a land girl (in the media,

at fairs, and markets), or as a hostel worker ("I'd no idea the men so respected us and thought so much of our character." (27.03.1945)). All these attributes, taken together, constitute a new semiotic set of womanhood, which corresponds to none of the pre-war sets available to June. We call this semiotic set that of the "independent woman." The semiotic set of the *independent woman*, positively connoted, combines self-confidence, and is given authority and responsibility. It is not aligned with a specific profession. Rather it designates personal qualities, such as independence of action and thinking, personal authority, and equality of treatment with men. The semiotic set of the independent woman might also extend into new modes of openly relating with men.

### A GOOD MAN FOR A "DECENT WOMAN," OR AN "INDEPENDENT WOMAN?"

As the war comes to an end, June experiences a major ambivalence. She has to choose her future path, but mobilizes two incompatible semiotic sets for guiding it: that of the *decent woman*, who eventually gets married, raises a family, and renounces work, and the newly constructed semiotic set of the *independent woman*.

Since February 1943, June has been dating D, and comes to feel "this may be a more lasting love" in contrast with the "calf love" of her earlier affairs, and that D might make a suitable life partner (10.02.1944). June's relationship with D seems to re-present some of the features of her home life and her pre-war visions of being a *decent woman*. D and she share some basic values; they discuss marriage and a family; June is introduced to D's family. The relationship is regular and seems to bring some rare stability and comfort to June's wartime life.

I sometimes feel that I want to get away to somewhere where life is more peaceful & domestic with someone I love. These weekends with D make me dislike the restlessness most. Would life with one person mean absolute contentment if that person was one who loved you truly & you could love & be happy with? (01.04.1944)

Her relationship with D is very good—but as the last question suggests—is the *decent woman's* life, defined in pre-war terms, really what June *now* wants in a postwar world? On the one hand, June loves D and "would marry him if he could keep me which is what I want" (22.04.45). Yet on the other hand, June is a woman with new aspirations: "I am no one to think there is only one man to make me happy. I would rather stay single than marry anyone, but there are as good fish in the sea as come out" (22.04.1945). Though June loves D, she does not want to leave the hostel, saying "I am more in

love with myself & my own comfort to want to loose my independence" (22.04.1945).

A crisis erupts as June is forced to orient to the future and choose one concrete line of action: whether to marry D or not. In April 1945, June and D have a serious discussion about marriage. D would like her to marry him and move to Devon, where he lives. But for June, in making this decision, the semiotic sets she now has at her disposal—the *decent woman* and the *independent woman*—are mutually exclusive. June feels strong uncertainty and ambivalence, and suffers from it:

This last month I have not known what to do to decide my future. I am constantly changing my mind. Some days I want to marry D as soon as he can afford it, the next I think he is not the right one for me. Then comes the uncertainty of if I reject him shall I ever replace him by anyone as true. Then I think single life is all I want, the next day I feel crazy for love & sex. Sometimes I decide to leave here & go to Devon to him as he wishes, then I want to stay here. Then I want to go home. (...) Lately my nerves have been very bad and if they do not improve after B goes I intend to see the doctor. The slightest thing makes me jump lately. I feel a bundle of nerves. (26.05.1945)

Marrying D or not, choosing one or the other semiotic set, will have important consequences upon June's future life. June is at a crossroads. Eventually, she decides not to marry D and to preserve her independence as a worker. It is impossible to say for certain what brought her to this actual decision. However, June does quote her sister as saying: "if you don't know if you want to marry a man or not it must be you haven't got the right man" (29.05.1945). This sentence seems to have helped June to take some distance to the situation and to rediscover something she had written a couple of months earlier: "I am not in love enough [sic] to want to settle down" (10.02.1945). This is also consonant with some of her earlier reflections about the nature of "real love," or "love for love," or "passionate love," or relationships with "suitable" men. If this is so, then we might infer that June has a new semiotic principle, namely, the idea that a woman should settle down only if she is really in love. This romantic conception of love and marriage is not the one included in the classical *decent woman* (who could learn to accommodate with a "suitable," good enough, responsible, and stable man). The idea that love is based on passion and deep instinctive feelings was developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth century by the Romantics (Gergen, 1991). Thus we are dealing here with an echo of the deeply historical nature of all semiotic sets (Gillespie, 2006). That June should remobilize these ideas shows the cultural embeddedness of her semantic sets, while also revealing the bricolage nature of these sets, as they are constructed and reconstructed out of available cultural elements in order to suit present concerns.

It thus appears that June has now included in her experience of womanhood that of being an active and professional worker, having some independence and acknowledgment of it, and marrying for love. Such a combination is stretching the boundaries of the *decent woman* too far. Yet as the war is over, the previous circumvention strategies are out of date. Eventually, we suggest, under the pressure for action June composes a new semiotic set, that of the *independent woman*. If this is so, then June is now dealing with a new ambivalence, that of the overlapping sets of the *decent woman* and the *independent woman*. Indeed, the diaries tell us neither which way June orients, nor whether the *independent woman* semiotic set would be viable in June's postwar society, be this in her home community or in her new life environment.

### ELEMENTS FOR A SEMIOTIC THEORY OF THE GENESIS OF AMBIVALENCE

Ambivalence, we have suggested, emerges when more than one semiotic set is mobilized in relation to a single event. While semiotic sets are normally self-consistent and effective in their context, when conditions change, or people find themselves in unfamiliar environments, facing unfamiliar experiences, contradictory semiotic sets present themselves as possible interpretations. We consider ambivalence as the experience of troubling semiotic saturation in relation to an event. In addition, we suggest that the social context is deeply implicated not only in the *emergence* of ambivalence, but also in enabling or constraining the possibilities for the *handling* of ambivalence. We can now sum up how we have seen ambivalence emerge and how it is managed.

#### Emergence of Ambivalence

Ambivalence can slowly emerge from a person's participation in a new line of action, leading to new experiences, and encounters with unfamiliar others. These experiences then lead the person to new self-definitions, understandings, norms, actions, and possible futures. June's social world creates many easy opportunities for romance with the attractive soldiers. But her existing semiotic sets do not allow for such liaisons to be engaged in by a good young woman. Initially she faces ambivalence relating to contradictions arising from participating in two semiotic sets constructed while she had been embedded in her home community—the *decent woman* and the *that sort of girl*. Later, her ambivalence stems from contradictions arising between a preexisting semiotic set, the *decent woman*, and a new semiotic

set constructed on the basis of her wartime experiences, taking up new positions in new communities, the *independent woman*. In either case, however, the ambivalence arises not through an absence of meaning, but through a saturation of meaning.

While we have examined ambivalence at the level of the person, we have seen that the stimulus to a feeling of ambivalence comes not simply from a logical contradiction between semiotic sets, but also from a person's social context. Changes in the social context (a state of war, new work, new roles, or new communities) trigger a saturation of meaning, via the mobilization of more than one possible (appropriate) semiotic set. Alternatively, the stimulus to ambivalence is a social world producing experiences which are incongruent with existing semiotic sets, and simultaneously furnishing opportunities, cultural elements, and networks of social relations which can lead to the emergence of new semiotic sets.

### Handling of Ambivalence

We have seen June dealing with two major crises due to her experience of ambivalence. Such ambivalence may call for active meaning-making to achieve resolution of the feeling of ambivalence (Abbey & Valsiner, 2004). But do June's actions always reduce her ambivalence? In her conduct, we can identify two ways of handling ambivalence, both of which, are, again, guided by the social context.

#### **Playfulness**

June's first experiences of ambivalence are taking place in a time and space June understands to be a "state of exception." Because of the war, she is brought to live in new social spheres. Living in a new community, in other social groups, she has to learn a trade and new forms of social interaction. Through her practice, her body changes and she gets a new form of social recognition, defined by her belonging to a new group. Her identity is thus transformed by these personal changes, the gaze of others, and the collective experience. In the new situation, June faces events which trigger two contrasting available semiotic sets: that of the *decent woman* and that of *that sort of girl*. June then uses the collective definition of war as "a state of exception" as a circumvention strategy, which enables the coexistence of the sets, or the extension of boundaries of the *decent woman* semiotic set. Indeed, any action incompatible with a semiotic set is justified "due to the war." Accordingly, June can preserve her positive self image, while engaging in action and experiences impossible for her in pre-war situation.

British society, together with June, seems to consensually agree with the idea that war creates a state of exception, during which actions normally impossible (women doing men's jobs, or the "wife-pinching") are accepted. Yet the flipside to this is an implicit understanding that once the state of exception is abandoned—war is over—society should return to normal. In that sense, war can be seen as a large carnival, or a period of liminality. As such, it is experienced as "out of time," and especially, with no future. Killing can become acceptable, and otherwise decent women can become *wife-pinchers* and "we all just blame the war." Thus for June, World War II opens a vast playground, where alternative life options can be tried out. Yet playfulness can function as a field of experimentation only if people who engage in it have the illusion that they will recover their initial positions and goods, that experimentation is temporary, bounded, and that it has no lasting consequences for the future. New combinations within existing semiotic sets are made, the boundaries are extended to account for exceptional circumstances, semiotic sets otherwise contradicting can coexist, but these modifications are not intended to last.

### **The emergence of newness**

The war workers' semiotic adaptations, by leading them to new actions and interpretations, are not simply reversible. With the end of the carnival, actions become located in time again, and oriented towards the future. The approaching end of the war and the expected return to normal life triggers June's second ambivalence. She can no longer play, or entertain possible alternatives, but will have to choose a path for herself. She finds that she has undergone real transformations: she has new skills, and a new independent identity. These elements do not belong to the pre-war sets. Actually, they now constitute a newly created semiotic set, that of the *independent woman*.

The sedimentation of this emerging semiotic set in June's life can be described as a four step process. First, new experiences destabilize pre-existing sets, while opening fields for exploring the new semiotics of womanhood. Second, the new experiences are collectively shared and acknowledged; emerging semiotic sets, such as *land girl* or "*wife-pincher*" in the war hostel, are experienced as conferring belongingness. This collective experience both lays the ground work, and, crucially, legitimizes June's exploration of new understandings of womanhood. Third, and most importantly, the process is catalyzed by the necessity for action. Broadly, this necessity is brought by the looming end to war and to the state of exception; specifically, in June's case, this translates into a decision about whether or not to marry D. And fourth, this very personal decision leads June to define a new semiotic set, which enables

her to define her future line of action while acknowledging her recent experiences.

### THE SOCIAL FIELDS OF SEMIOTIC SETS

Beyond understanding ambivalence as the drive for meaning-making arising from a conflict in the logic between two semiotic sets, our analysis has highlighted the central role of social context in both the genesis and handling of ambivalence.

We have argued for the centrality of context in the genesis of ambivalence in two ways. First, the social context can trigger a saturation of meaning, via the mobilization of more than one possible semiotic set. This creates ambivalence—the possibility of being guided by either of two (or more) incompatible semiotic sets. Second, the semiotic context can then facilitate the emergence of a new semiotic set, which is incongruent with a preexisting, but persistently active semiotic set. Again this creates ambivalence—the possibility of being guided by either of two incompatible semiotic sets. In addition, our analysis of June's case illustrates the centrality of the social context in structuring or constraining the possible handling of ambivalence. In June's first experience of ambivalence, the liminality engendered by the unique social context of wartime allows for playfulness, and June can oscillate between alternatives with no demand to resolve the ambivalence. This social context furnishes a circumvention strategy that supports non-resolution of ambivalence (it is "due to the war"). In the second of June's experiences of ambivalence, it is again the social context—in this case the prospect of a return to peacetime, and perhaps a return to her home community or marriage—that triggers the need for a different type of response. With the end of war, war-specific circumvention strategies become out of date. However, June's experiences cannot be absorbed by the pre-war semiotic set, and new semiotic sets must emerge. History shows that major changes in womanhood have been maintained after the war, thus suggesting that the postwar society has acknowledged these new semiotic sets and enabled them to stabilize. Yet stabilization does not lead to the resolution of all ambivalences, for every person who has access to more than one semiotic set is open to the experience of ambivalence should these sets become active at the same time.

### NOTES

1. We thank Ben Tyler for his contribution to this process of concurrent coding.
2. We have not corrected spelling or grammatical errors in the diaries.

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