

making 'postmodern' mothers
pregnant embodiment, baby bumps and body image
meredith nash



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Pregnant Embodiment, Baby Bumps and Body Image

Meredith Nash University of Tasmania, Australia





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Contents

List of Figures		vi
Acknowledgements		vii
Introduction		1
1	The Research Story	11
2	Theories, Frameworks and Debates	23
3	'In-between' Pregnant Bodies	41
4	Visibly Pregnant Bodies	62
5	Dressing and Maternity Fashion	84
6	Eating for Two?	131
7	Exercise	168
Conclusion		203
Appendix		208
Notes		209
Bibliography		216
In	dex	235

Figures

1.1	Milanda Keri was the first model to appear pregnant	
	on the cover of Australian <i>Vogue</i>	7
5.1	Darrell Lea employee uniforms worn in the 1930s	85
5.2	EGG maternity markets itself as a retailer	
	for stylish, affluent mothers	87
5.3	Themed maternity t-shirts emphasise 'pregnancy'	
	and not 'fatness'	88
5.4	'Contemporary' maternity fashions from 1966	91
5.5	Maternity shift designed for belly 'concealment'	
5.6	Maternity outfits feature 'full' shapes to conceal	
	a pregnant belly	93
5.7	Pregnant women wear styles featuring	
	A-line tops and shorts in 1976	94
5.8	Pregnant women in Australia are shown wearing brightly	
	coloured outfits featuring 'up to the minute' styles	95
5.9	Cake Lingerie is one of several retailers	
	that sell 'sexy' maternity lingerie	
	to 'yummy mummies' worldwide	98
5.10	Bumps maternity in Melbourne	103
5.11	'Belly belt' from online Australian retailer Fertile Mind	112
5.12	Cosmopolitan Pregnancy (2006) featuring	
	Australian model Amber Keating	115
7.1	Launched in September 2011, Bump is a brand	
	extension of the non-pregnant Australian fitness	
	magazine, Women's Health	171
7.2	Preg Fit is one of the only Australian online	
	retailers to sell maternity running apparel	193
7.3	Body-hugging maternity exercise clothing is	
	important in both accommodating and resisting	
	normative femininity for pregnant women	195

Introduction

Feminist scholars have comprehensively examined why women suffer from body image woes (see Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993a; Wolf, 1990). On the surface, it seems strange to think that pregnant women fear 'fat'. After all, pregnancy is a time when women are *supposed* to gain weight. In this book, I argue that in the midst of moral panics about maternal 'obesity' in the West, body image anxieties in pregnancy are more common than we think, and that there are host of reasons why pregnant women are becoming more fearful of 'fat'.

Why did I choose this subject? This book, in many ways, flows from previous work I have done about pregnancy and women's health (see Nash, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). My interest in body image, however, began with the emergence of airbrushed versions of 'skinny' celebrity pregnancy at the beginning of the millennium. Considering the centrality of feelings about 'fatness' to the lives of most women, back in the early 2000s I was stunned to find that body image was a subject that was almost always left out of public conversations about pregnancy. Yet, every time I walked into my local supermarket I was confronted with women's magazines featuring numerous articles on the top ten fatty foods for pregnant women to avoid or yet another story about how Angelina Jolie lost her 'baby weight'. No one seemed to be asking everyday pregnant women what they felt about the trends which I was observing in western popular culture.

These trends appeared to be a rather odd mix of concern for the 'baby' and something more subtle: the fear of women 'letting themselves go' and escaping the rules of feminine beauty. How did women feel about this? Indifference? Anger? Sadness? And what would come next? Backlash? Where did feminism fit into 'baby bump' culture? How had

its legacy become so distorted that a pregnant woman with a tummy tuck and stilettos was a symbol of 'liberation'?

I began interviewing Australian women and started a website – *The Baby Bump Project* – in order to exchange ideas there. I also spoke to top designers of maternity wear, visited the studio of a prenatal fitness expert, and interviewed a pregnancy magazine editor. However, as I conducted my interviews with pregnant women I realised that many of the conversations that I was having with them were not simply about weight; the interviews revealed important insights into how women negotiate the performance of femininities and 'postmodern' motherhood. Thus, while I am centrally concerned with pregnancy body image, this text is also underpinned by a much deeper exploration of pregnant bodies and selves.

From one perspective, the voices of the pregnant women highlighted in this book are profound because they reveal much-needed insight into how motherhood changes a woman's relationship to her body over time. From another perspective, women's voices are powerful because they make a strong case for why embodied experiences of pregnancy are critical in the process of constructing, articulating, and reframing the performance of contemporary femininities. Throughout the text, I explore the idea of pregnancy as a 'performance', not only with the aim of provoking productive tensions within past and current feminist and sociological understandings of western women's bodies, but also to confront dominant biomedical understandings of pregnancy.

As the reader will discover, in many instances the findings documented throughout this book are quotidian: the women I spoke to felt 'fat', struggled with buying and wearing maternity clothes, and mediated their eating and exercising through existing cultural and social discourses. Yet, this book is important because it provides a theoretical framework for thinking through some of these everyday observations and experiences, which will not only be useful for scholars and researchers, but also for health care providers and even pregnant women themselves. I have written this text in light of the continuing debates surrounding the changing iconography of pregnancy as an experience to be had in 'public'. At the same time, I also explore how discourses of 'public' and 'private' remain problematic even though the materiality of these discourses lies at the centre of women's pregnant embodiment. Throughout, I shall argue that pregnancy is made meaningful through women's individual lived experiences.

Why pregnancy? Why now?

The 38 women that became part of my longitudinal study were pregnant at a time when the global media exhorted mothers in Australia and elsewhere in the West to be 'sexy' 'yummy mummies', while simultaneously casting off motherhood as frumpy and disempowering. These women had to negotiate a balance between personal 'freedom' and the social acceptance of their 'publicly' pregnant bodies. As a generation of women 'empowered' by careers and tertiary education, and as both agents and objects of consumer culture, this negotiation was far from seamless. In pregnancy, these women found themselves to be at 'risk' socially, politically, and medically, depending on where they 'chose' to situate themselves within this complex dichotomy of constraint and 'liberation'. Pregnancy highlights the contradictions inherent in being a contemporary woman in the West: eat junk food but do not get fat; wear 'sexy' clothing but be a 'good' selfless mother; be 'fit' but do not exercise too much. Given these cultural prescriptions, the women I interviewed quite often found themselves simultaneously embodying the realms of both control and excess. Their experiences were based in entrenched class distinctions and social hierarchies, and were reinforced by strong cultural discourses about fashion, nutrition and diet, fitness, celebrity, and feminism - key themes framing the central empirical chapters of this book.

Given this context, what I term the 'postmodern' pregnancy throughout the book (and directly referenced in the title), refers to the evolution of a number of highly publicised, visible bodily experiences for women: having a pregnant body requires a constant renegotiation of 'public' and 'private' discourses in light of the obsessive cultural surveillance of pregnant bodies. Throughout the book, the accounts of pregnancy rely upon a complex interaction of context and individual experience enacted against culturally-dominant western perceptions and beliefs about pregnancy.1

Setting the stage: 'postmodern' pregnancy and baby bump culture

This research took place in Melbourne, a city of nearly four million inhabitants. The pregnant women who participated in the study were mainly middle class and white, and lived in a wide range of both inner-city and outer suburban areas. The women in the study were not necessarily statistically representative of the Australian population, but then again, I never intended to make such claims when I first conceived of this project. Rather, this book presents a broad overview of 'postmodern' pregnancy in an Australian context, and it is the individual voices and experiences of these women that have allowed me to discern some general patterns in their responses. This group of women fitted many of the emerging demographics of fertility in Australia, being mostly 'older' mothers that were having their first babies in their early-to-mid 30s, and some in their early 40s. In accordance with such trends, the majority of these women were married (see Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006c). A proportion of the women in the study, however, were in de facto or non-heterosexual partnerships.

In the last 40 years, the Australian fertility rate has declined from the 'baby boom' of 1961 to a historic low in 2001 (ABS, 2008). The fertility rate first started to decline in 1976, and ever since that time the population has been below replacement level (2.1 babies per woman). Since 2001, however, Australia's fertility rate has been slowly increasing. Fertility rates reached their highest level in ten years - 1.81 babies per woman - in 2005. At this time Australia also recorded the highest number of births since 1993 (ABS, 2006c). The declining fertility rate has been largely attributed to delayed childbearing and increasing levels of childlessness among middle-class Australian women. In general, delayed childbearing in Australia, as with other parts of the industrialised world, has been linked with economic advantage; professional women with greater levels of education and higher incomes tend to have fewer children. Thus, the median age of first births for Australian women has risen consistently for the last 20 years. Whereas the average age of women giving birth in 1983 was 26.9 years, by 2005 the median age had jumped to 30.7 years. Since 2000, women in the 30-34 year age group have experienced the highest fertility of all age groups (see ABS, 2006c).

All of my participants working in the paid sector received between ten and twelve weeks of paid maternity leave. A handful of my participants took one year of maternity leave, the majority of which was unpaid. Given that when I began this research, a national scheme for paid parental leave had not been introduced in Australia, and that provisions for childcare in Melbourne, in particular, were woefully inadequate, being pregnant and 'at work' was still seen as perhaps visually and culturally inconsistent.² At the time, this may have pointed to a 'backlash' against feminism(s) by both the Australian government and women themselves. It is significant that none of the women in my

study identified themselves as 'feminists'. In spite of hard-won changes to Australian women's legal and political status over the last 30 years, anxieties about pregnancy and motherhood clearly continue to brew. If the second wave of feminism encouraged middle-class Australian women to expand their understandings of themselves beyond marriage and motherhood, the falling birth rate in Australia clearly sits uneasily with the more recent trend of postponing motherhood throughout the West.3 Many women in my group were quite anxious about clinging to their positions in the paid workforce or having to make a somewhat defeated 'choice' to stay at home for a certain period of time in order to be 'full-time' mothers. They seemed genuinely frustrated and, at times, angry that the versions of 'feminist' discourse presented to them in women's magazines and by celebrities, for instance, seemed to suggest that being a mother and having a career is a seamless negotiation: that women can 'have it all'. Ways of combining motherhood with other feminist aspirations are rarely discussed in the current Australian political climate, or elsewhere in the West. The issue of maternity leave particularly highlighted my participants' fractured and partial adherence to everyday feminisms.

Yet, as I write this book in 2012, pregnant bodies exist as spectacles and pregnancy is no longer a mysterious event. Over the last two decades, pregnant bellies have increasingly become 'things' to be touched, looked at, represented, and debated as a woman's bodily integrity is circumscribed by a visibility that is both 'private' and 'public', 'inside' and 'outside'. Given the unprecedented access to pregnant bodies via technology, foetuses have been granted social, cultural, and legal personhood as technology traverses the body and the mind of the mother (see Nash, 2007). This 'cyborgification' of the foetus implicitly constructs and reflects the visualisation and experience of 'postmodern' pregnancy in the West. In consuming these images, pregnant women construct themselves as 'postmodern' subjects.

The cyborg image of the foetus has undeniably challenged views of western pregnancy. In particular, the seductive potential of the 'postmodern' foetus or 'baby' has been given new meaning in global popular culture in its representation as a 'baby bump', a term that first appeared in a 1987 British style article in *The Guardian* (Safire, 2006). The term rose to particular prominence in North American celebrity magazines in 2002. 'Baby bump' refers not only to the visibility of the contours of a pregnant belly, but also to the foetal subject inside. While terms such as 'knocked up', 'bun in the oven', and 'in a family way' were once used to describe pregnancy in public, these terms have slowly been put to rest in the popular global lexicon as the shape of pregnant bodies, as repositories of cultural, biomedical and political meaning, has changed.

The depictions of pregnant bellies, in and of themselves, have become the focus of public attention primarily through a group of (mostly) North American, British and Australian celebrities and the recent, obsessive documentation of their pregnancies in lifestyle magazines and tabloids. Celebrity pregnancy became a topic of media interest in the early 1990s in the West. The 1991 Vanity Fair cover photograph of naked and heavily-pregnant American actress Demi Moore is widely regarded as having reconfigured western cultural views of pregnancy. Initial reactions to this image were ambivalent. With the exception of New York news-stands, the magazine was dressed in a white envelope so that only Moore's head was visible to potential buyers, implying that her pregnant body would be offensive to readers (see Matthews and Wexler, 2000). In its appropriation of dominant feminine beauty ideals, the Vanity Fair cover offered readers a representation of a pregnant woman as 'sexy' or desirable. While Moore's pregnant body perhaps reinforced normative beauty codes, it can also be argued that it dramatically disrupted these codes.

Moore's pregnant pose has been replicated many times, mainly by American and British celebrities, since its initial publication two decades ago. Country music singer Kasey Chambers (*HQ*, May 2002) and supermodel Miranda Kerr (*Vogue*, January 2011), however, are the only Australian celebrities to have posed naked and pregnant.⁴ In my study, the pregnant portraits of the North American singers Britney Spears (*Harper's Bazaar*, August 2006) and Christina Aguilera (*Marie Claire*, January 2008) were the most relevant for the women that I interviewed.

And what is the effect of this new surveillant culture targeted on celebrity women's mid-sections? As I discuss in Chapter 3, today women's bodies are constantly surveyed for any evidence of pregnancy, whether they are famous or not.⁵ As soon as a woman diverges from normative femininity, her body becomes a target: women can either be 'fat' or 'pregnant', with nothing 'in-between'. Moreover, the exposure of naked, pregnant celebrity flesh may have familiarised the world with the notion that pregnancy can be 'sexy' or that pregnant women should be slender but, in practice, as I show, my group of women displayed considerable ambivalence about celebrity images. As I explain in this book, what I term the 'monolithic pregnant body' is defined as the idealised pregnant body. This body is defined in part by media images of celebrities as having the 'perfect' pregnant body, as well as by discursive



Figure 1.1 Miranda Kerr was the first model to appear on the cover of Australian Vogue while pregnant (January 2011). Copyright: News Magazines

cultural constructions that illustrate appropriate ('good') or inappropriate ('bad') performances of pregnancy. In effect, the monolithic pregnant body is another construction that defines the performance of pregnancy. While many women told me that they felt pressured to conform to the 'yummy mummy' model of contemporary pregnancy, overall their views of celebrity pregnancy were more realistic than I