

Blogging the Maternal: Self-Representations of the Pregnant and Postpartum Body

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how dominant media images of the pregnant and postpartum body contribute to women's self-perceptions and it evaluates how the content of the blog reflects, reinforces (inadvertently) and challenges Western cultural understandings of pregnancy and mothering.

Résumé

Cet article analyse les images dominantes des médias du corps de la femme enceinte et du corps postpartum contribuent aux perceptions que les femmes ont d'elles-mêmes et évalue comment le contenu du blog reflète, renforce par mégarde et met au défi les connaissances de la culture occidentale de la grossesse et du maternage.

Today, the popular media is exploding with images of the pregnant body. Celebrity pregnancies are speculated on and tracked on websites like "Celebrity Baby Watch" (www.celebrity-babies.com/), in entertainment magazines and tabloids like *Us Weekly*, *People* and *OK! Magazine* and phrases such as "baby bump" and "yummy mummy" have entered the lexicon. Pregnant celebrities are also being featured in glossy fashion spreads. Pop star Christina Aguilera appears on the January 2008 cover of *Marie Claire*, a pregnant bikini-clad Melania Trump was featured in the April 2006 *Vogue* and photos of nude and pregnant Britney Spears were featured on the cover and inside the August 2006 *Harper's Bazaar*. Media scholars have noted the onslaught of pregnant celebrity pictures following Demi Moore's *Vanity Fair* cover in 1991 (Mathews and Wexler 2000; Tyler 2001) and at least one has welcomed the trend and speculated that it might encourage the visibility of women's experiences of pregnancy, shifting the focus away from its usual subject: the fetus/baby (Tyler 2001).

Other scholars have shown these representations to be more problematic and have been critical of the narrowness of representation (Cunningham 2002; Douglas and Michaels 2004; O'Donohue 2006), protesting that these images put pressure on women at a time when they deserve a respite (O'Malley 2006). What is most often seen is a certain type of pregnant body: one that is slim, young, white and "perfect." This conveys the message that other kinds of bodies are wrong or "not normal." What pregnant bodies are acceptable and when, where and how should they be revealed? As Imogen Tyler recounts, Demi Moore's nude, pregnant body on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine produced "highly contradictory public responses." While some lauded it as beautiful, others found it

deeply offensive. The ensuing controversy permitted it to become "the best-selling single issue in the magazine's history" (2001, 75). In the same vein is a letter I came across in the July 2006 issue of *Vogue*. The letter writer, Marylu Kramer from Hinsdale, Illinois, reacts to a photograph of a pregnant Melania Trump that appeared in a previous issue. Kramer starts out by saying, "Yes, pregnancy is beautiful," but then pronounces the image of the Slovenian model "uncalled for" and "distasteful" (Kramer 2006, 54). Can the pregnant body be at once beautiful and repulsive?

The feelings that are stirred by representations of the pregnant/postpartum body evoke the conflicting and competing discourses surrounding it. In this essay, I argue that in the popular media, the pregnant and postpartum body is discursively objectified, ignored or represented only in a very particular and narrow way in order to avoid transgressing social mores. All too often, the pregnant/postpartum body we see in the media is a privileged body - one that is increasingly associated with wealth, whiteness, slimness and youth. As I studied these representations, I became increasingly aware of the prevalence of certain binaries: privilege and difference; beauty and monstrosity; and good and bad mothers.

An important effort to counter the narrowness of dominant representations of the pregnant and postpartum body, I believe, is a blog called, "The Shape of a Mother" (theshapeofamother.com). The blog contains women's self-portraits and accounts of their lived experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering. This essay uses discourse analysis to examine how dominant media images of the pregnant and postpartum body contribute to women's self-perceptions and evaluates how the content of the blog reflects, reinforces (inadvertently) and challenges Western cultural understandings of pregnancy and mothering. In addition, I discuss the practice of blogging among mothers and mothers-to-be and its capacity to contribute toward creating communities of women.

My understanding of discourse is

influenced by José Van Dyck's definition in which she emphasizes the connection between "signs" and "practices" involved in language (Van Dyck 1995, 19). Van Dyck underscores the importance of power dynamics inherent in discourse: "each voice occupies a position in a field of power" (1995, 20). I attempt to connect the representations to institutional and cultural practices and political economies. Discourse applies not only to words but also to images. As Coco Fusco states, "...images are much too pervasive and powerful in American culture to be taken for granted" (Fusco 2003, 43). Here, Fusco is speaking of photography in particular, which she argues is connected to the project of knowing oneself as a culture. I seek to understand and explicate how these discourses connect and create cultural meanings, how they help sustain cultural knowledges and how they may contribute to changing them.

I studied the visual and textual content of "The Shape of a Mother" blog over a period of six months, beginning in July 2006. I reviewed all new entries and comments on a daily basis, taking note of characteristics such as age, ethnicity and location. Much of this information had to be inferred from the content of entries or related links. My aim was to see how the women who participated were experiencing their pregnant and postpartum bodies and how these experiences were in/consistent with representations of pregnant embodiment in the popular media. It was important for me to consider women's own narratives and how women reacted to each other's stories: here, women are the producers and consumers of media, not simply the passive objects represented in it. I wanted to investigate whether women were able to provide support to each other or whether "The Shape of a Mother" would become another arena for competition among women.

As other scholars have noted (Herring *et al.* 2006; Keren 2006, 6-7), it can be challenging to apply common research methods to the study of blogs and blogging practices. New blogs appear and existing

ones change or are abandoned at an ever-increasing rate. It is difficult to know anything about producers of and contributors to blogs. The contributors to "The Shape of a Mother" come from different locations, but unless bibliographic characteristics are disclosed in the entry, it is impossible to know where each woman is from. Determining women's socio-economic backgrounds is similarly difficult. It is worth noting, however, that a significant number of women self-identify as teen-aged mothers and single mothers, and a small number identify as obese or plus-size mothers - types of mothers that lie outside the privileged ideal promoted by the mainstream media.

In the first months, entries consisted mostly of images and relatively little text. The majority of images were of pregnant and postpartum bellies. Entries usually appeared on a daily basis, with each one typically drawing anywhere from one to ten comments. Contributors would often return to comment and entries became richer in text as the months went by. July saw a total number of 172 entries, August had 31 entries, September had 25, October had 13, November had 6, and December had 22 entries (the site move in November and technical difficulties explain the decrease in entries during the months of October and November).

Mixed Feelings: Monsters and Marvels

What is the origin of the fear and revulsion surrounding the maternal body? In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* Mary Russo tells us, "[t]he grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change" (1995, 62-63). The etymology of the word "grotesque" evokes a cave or grotto: a dark, earthly, hidden place. As suggested by Russo's subtitle, "excess" is an essential component of the female grotesque:

For a woman, making a spectacle of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries:

the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap...were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy.[...]anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful. (1995, 53)

Being too large, too old, too overtly sexual, or too loud are all qualities of the female grotesque. In Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque, he describes grotesque realism as ambivalent, contradictory and antithetical to "Classic" aesthetics. Bakhtin offers the example of the Kerch terracotta figurines of senile pregnant hags as a "typical and very strongly expressed grotesque" (1968, 25). These figurines suggest both new life and death and decay. The pregnant body is an unstable and unfinished body that is growing and stretching, exceeding its "normal" form. It is an in-between body; a body that is more than one but less than two, with uncertain boundaries between woman (mother) and fetus (child), life and death. The grotesque body is "a revolting, yet fascinating, counterpart to the twentieth-century Western body ideal with its clear and finished image. In a culture struggling towards bodily perfectability and control, the grotesque body reminds us of the internality we would rather forget and threatens to return us to a place we believed we had escaped" (Stacey 1997, 88). The act of giving birth, in which the body expels what had previously been hidden inside it (fetus/baby, blood, feces), is similarly fascinating and repulsive to the viewer.

The trope of the monster is also associated with excess. Braidotti argues that a definition of "monster" has existed since the late eighteenth century "when Geoffroy de Saint Hilaire organized monsters in terms of excess, *lack* or *displacement* of his/her organs" (emphasis in original 1996, 138) and she claims the link between the monstrous and the pregnant body exists because of fear of women's generative power: "Theories of conception of monsters are at times extreme

versions of the deep-seated anxiety that surrounds the issue of women's maternal power of procreation in a patriarchal society" (1996, 139). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the birth of a "monstrous" baby was often interpreted as a divine warning (Braidotti 1996, 136). It was believed that an act of illicit looking could provoke the maternal imagination to kill or deform the fetus and that excessive or aberrant maternal desire could transform the baby into a visible image of its mother's desire (Braidotti 1996, 139-40; Creed 1993, 46).

At this time, there was quarrelling between two groups: those who believed that female desire or wishes ("envies") could imprint upon the fetus (Paré, Descartes and Malebranche), and others who argued for the "neutrality" of the fetus from its mother (Blondel, Buffon, Maupertuis and the *Encyclopédie*) (Braidotti 1996, 146-47). The "fundamental contradiction" at the core of this quarrel belies a deep ambivalence toward the pregnant body:

...the mother's body seems to be caught in a deep contradiction that splits it within itself. The female, pregnant body is posited both as a protective filter and as a conductor or highly sensitive conveyor of impressions, shocks and emotions. It is both a "neutral" and a somewhat "electrical" body. There is an insidious assimilation of the pregnant woman to an unstable, potentially sick subject, vulnerable to uncontrollable emotions.

(Braidotti 1996, 149)

Evidence that the trope of the monstrous pregnant body persists continues to be found in popular media culture. In December 2005, it was widely reported in the popular press that Donald Trump had used the word "monster" to describe the body of his pregnant wife during an interview with radio talk show host Howard Stern. Despite his qualification that his wife was "[monstrous] in all the right places," suggesting he was both

repelled by and attracted to her pregnant body, Trump was widely criticized in the blogosphere.¹

The combination of attraction and repulsion is often evoked in the horror film, another popular cultural site of the monstrous maternal. Barbara Creed's analysis of women and the horror genre, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* draws heavily on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Creed underscores how the horror film constructs the maternal figure as abject, echoing Kristeva's assertion that abjection is by its very nature ambiguous: "it both repels and attracts" (Creed 1993, 11 & 14). Like Braidotti in her discussion of the monster, Kristeva emphasizes how "fear of [the mother's] generative power" lies at the root of this phenomenon (Creed 1993, 43). Creed draws our attention to a number of popular horror films whose plots revolve around a monstrous womb and whose horror often culminates in a birth scene: *Demon Seed* (1977); *The Brood* (1979); *Xtro* (1983); *The Incubus* (1981); *The Fly* (1986) and *The Manitou* (1978). The pregnant body has long been seen as being inherently monstrous and thus a site of conflicting desires.

A Brief History of Blogging and the Momosphere

Blogs (web logs) first emerged in the late 1990s as a new form of digital communication. Following the introduction of hosted blog tools, specialized software created to open up the medium to less techno-savvy users, the number of blogs mushroomed. Currently, blogging is a well-known medium of modern communication that functions alongside and together with mainstream media. A blog can be an online diary that chronicles the blogger's personal life or it can occupy more of a traditional journalistic function, imparting information on a given topic. Because of their format, blogs can be revised or updated at regular intervals and readers can comment and be directed to other pertinent and related Web resources. Blogs are also important because they create unique online spaces

and communities where people can choose to lurk (read and/or look only) or to actively engage others in conversation. Though blogs are public spaces because technically anyone can view them and participate, some blogging has been highly personal and private.

Academic studies of blogging have focused less on blogging culture and communities and the affective qualities of blogging as a practice, and more on its connection to news dissemination and the public sphere.² As Paul Théberge explains, "[t]his emphasis on the informational and political uses of blogging has tended to mask the much more prevalent uses of blogging as a form of popular culture" (2005, 497). Not only is this latter function of blogging more prevalent, I would argue, it is also especially significant when the blogs in question address issues specifically connected to gender identities. There exists a disproportionate emphasis on adult male bloggers in both mainstream and academic discourse (Herring *et al.* 2004) and this bias minimizes the importance and influence of the contributions of expecting and new mothers to Internet communities. The number of existing blogs maintained by mothers is high, and the "momosphere" continues to expand.³ Popular blogs maintained by mothers include the following: "Dooce" (dooce.com), "A Little Pregnant" (alittlepregnant.com), "Fussy" (fussy.org), "Mom 101" (mom-101.blogspot.com) and "The Mother of All Blogs" (anndouglas.blogspot.com), a Canadian blog. Their content touches on the joys and challenges associated with mothering, such as juggling work and kids as well as women's experiences with infertility ("A Little Pregnant") and postpartum depression ("Dooce").

The Shape of a Mother

"The Shape of a Mother" is a popular Internet blog started on July 5, 2006 by Bonnie Crowder, a stay-at-home mother of two who lives in southern California.⁴ The blog has been widely linked to by other Internet blogs, was profiled in the August 4, 2006 *Guardian* newspaper and was said to attract

up to fourteen thousand visitors per day only weeks after its creation (Harris 2006). Crowder states she was motivated to create the blog by her feeling that real women's postpartum bodies were invisible in Western society. Women whose bodies show visible signs of being stretched from pregnancy and that have not "bounced back" are often filled with shame or embarrassment; they feel that their bodies are "not normal." Negative feelings about real bodies that can look very different from the smooth, firm, "perfect" pregnant and postpartum bodies seen in popular media are evoked in the words of "Rachael": "I thought I was a total freak!" (theshapeofamother.com/2006/09/rachael). Crowder's goals were to help unburden women of their shame and permit people to see what real women's bodies look like during and after pregnancy.

The content of the site consists of women's stories about their bodies in the context of pregnancy and childbirth and photographs. Women send their photos directly to Crowder, who publishes them along with her own comments, anecdotes and links to related sites. Each woman's story and/or picture(s) appear(s) as an entry in the blog in reverse chronological order under the woman's name. People are able to leave "comments" after entries. Crowder posts entries most days, as her time permits. After the appearance of several negative comments in July, 2006, she began moderating the comments; deleting those she feels are "nasty" or "cruel" (theshapeofamother.com/2006/07/support). The women who submit photographs are not only choosing to show their bodies but also deciding how their bodies appear and how to describe their own experiences. As Crowder herself has observed, when women can share their stories this way, it permits them to rethink conventional notions of beauty and to potentially see their own bodies as beautiful (theshapeofamother.com/2006/07/myself). Most images that appear on the site show bodies only. Some women have included their children in the pictures, as in the image of Crowder and her son that graces the front

page of the blog.

The pictures are usually accompanied by the subject's story that further contextualizes them by describing pregnanc(ies), childbirth(s) and listing statistics such as pregnancy weight gain, the baby's weight at birth and the duration of the pregnancy. They also inevitably describe the current appearance of the subject's abdomen, as seen in the photo(s), and sometimes other body parts such as legs, breasts, and behinds. Language that is more scientific is sometimes used to impart relevant information about complications during pregnancy or difficulty in conception or childbirth, etc., but the language used to describe the current state of the subject's body and her feelings is informal.

Not everyone submits photos. Some women write just to express how happy they are to find that such an Internet site exists and along with it, the promise of self-representation and self-acceptance. A poster who calls herself "tranquilmama" writes, "Somehow it's immensely freeing to share these photos. It's somehow making it okay for me to look how I do" (theshapeofamother.com/2006/07/tranquilmama). Similarly, "Pony" comments, "Somehow I knew Demi Moore wasn't quite it, but still thought I was wrong wrong wrong" (theshapeofamother.com/2006/07/who-am-i). "Pony" is of course referring to the 1991 *Vanity Fair* cover and she is suggesting that the image of Moore set a standard few women can attain.

Competition: Getting Your Body Back

The pregnant and postpartum bodies of celebrities that now appear routinely in fashion magazines and tabloids are dissected, evaluated and categorized in the text and later, by those who consume them. As *New York Magazine* writer Laurie Abraham stated in a 2004 article on this phenomenon: "Only in the past few years, however, have the 'bump,' the 'basketball,' and the 'belly on two sticks' entered the local lexicon....*Us Weekly*, *People* and the *Star* intrepidly report on who has stayed admirably attenuated

(Gwyneth Paltrow, Sarah Jessica Parker) and who has not (Debra Messing, Kate Hudson)." Pregnant women, or at least a certain demographic of pregnant women - affluent, urban, white - are comparing themselves to the popular media images that surround them and are terrified of looking grotesque.

Abraham sums up, "...women tell me they do not want to be while pregnant: 'a fat slob,' 'a huge blob,' 'sloppy,' 'horrible like Kate Hudson,' 'fucking gross.'" Abraham similarly confirms the competitive edge to women's communications that are exemplified in the "weight polls" at New York website "UrbanBaby" (newyork.urbanbaby.com) where pregnant posters compare the weight they have gained during pregnancy, not-so-subtly trying to underbid each other's entries (Abraham 2004). And like celebrities, these women tend to practise "gestation inflation" (suggesting they are further along in their pregnancy than they actually are), dieting and following extreme workouts during pregnancy and immediately after the birth. Clearly, women who have the luxury of devoting their time and money to workouts immediately following childbirth are women of a certain class who enjoy certain privileges. They are also women who choose to spend their time and energy this way. Why? This is more than the usual Western cultural obsession with thin, attractive bodies. The new "perfect" pregnant/postpartum body has become the new body standard for women and the work required to achieve and to maintain it is increasingly understood as part of motherwork.

Women who do not have the desire to conform or cannot conform to this standard can be harshly judged. Women who gain or retain "too much" pregnancy weight are deemed grotesque and/or to be suffering from such character flaws as lack of discipline, will power and self-respect (Cunningham 2002). Misty Harris's article on "The Shape of a Mother" that appeared in *The Edmonton Journal* demonstrates how this careful scrutiny and judgment is being directed at Crowder and the participants of her blog. Harris quotes a new mother who feels that the

women who have participated in the blog have "eaten [their] way into it [their postpartum shapes]" and that they wouldn't have so many "rolls hanging off their hips" if they would only "do something about how they look[ed]" (Harris 2006). In contrast, this new mother in question is said to be prioritizing getting her body back into shape after pregnancy and there is the clear suggestion that all women should do the same. Crowder admits that she used to blame herself for the way she looked postpartum, indicating that not only is there external pressure on women to lose the baby weight quickly after giving birth, but also that this pressure has been internalized.

After watching model Heidi Klum strut down the runway for Victoria's Secret a mere eight weeks after giving birth to her second child, *Slate Magazine* writer Dana Stevens remarked, "[t]he speed with which women can 'get their bodies back' after delivery has become one of the many arenas of gladiatorial competition among new mothers but Klum took the cult of postpartum fitness to new heights...." Klum, a model, television personality and wife of British pop singer Seal, is also the quintessential wealthy, white, beautiful, heterosexual woman. Not only did Klum manage to make herself "thong-worthy," she also described the process as being pretty simple: "[Klum] 'naturally' lost a pound a day for the first five weeks after the birth, turning to her trainer for a whirlwind exercise campaign only during the last three weeks before filming the show" (Stevens 2005). This combination of "nature" and diligent workouts at once implies that women whose postpartum bodies retain some of the fat acquired in pregnancy are both "unnatural" and lazy.

What the women who participate at "The Shape of a Mother" share are mixed feelings: pride, joy and amazement at what their bodies have done and discomfort, shame and even revulsion, in some cases, in the face of the visible material residues of pregnancy and childbirth. In looking at their pictures and reading their stories, I was struck by my own mixed reaction. Though I loved the

concept of self-representation and I certainly understand the need to redress the unrealistic and narrow popular representations of pregnant and postpartum bodies, I wondered if the site itself was fostering negative competition among its participants instead of offering a testimonial space free of judgment, as Crowder had intended. In addition, on a more visceral level, I found myself disturbed by some of the images - I was put off by the rolls of fat and the stretch marks, the swollen late pregnancy bellies and the sagging postpartum ones.

In thinking more about the content of "The Shape of a Mother" I realized that it wasn't just what I saw in the images that bothered me, but also what I didn't see there; what was outside of the frame. The great majority of the subjects are headless. This preserves anonymity, an important consideration for many subjects, but does this headlessness serve to de-humanize and to de-subjectify the women in the pictures? Imogen Tyler writes, "[t]he pregnant body was and is often decapitated (and thus de-subjectified) within the frame, with the focus of the image being the torso alone" (Tyler 2001, 82). Tyler is speaking of conventional depictions of the pregnant body found in medical and popular health manuals. In its subversion of the usual mass media images of pregnant perfection is "The Shape of a Mother" inadvertently imitating conventions of scientific visual discourse, in which "doctors learn to see, to isolate, to compare and thus to match (or not), to scrutinise and then to intervene" (Stacey 1997, 55)?

From my own viewing experience, I found it difficult to look at the headless images and see the whole woman and her experience of pregnancy. In some ways, it was much easier to focus on the aesthetically unappealing physical characteristics that were emphasized in the photo than the individual or a collective experience represented therein. Though the images, in their composition and subject matter, may evoke scientific images in which women are objectified and pathologized, there are some important

distinctions to be made between the experience of viewing textbook (medical) images on paper and looking at pictures that were originally intended for private use on your computer screen at home. It could be argued that one enters into what feels like a personal relationship to the screen in this kind of looking, in contrast to the mere spectatorship of looking at a book or magazine. Viewers are compelled to look because they are more likely to identify themselves with the images seen on the screen. When I read the comments following the entries on "The Shape of a Mother," for example, I found several uses of the phrase "belly twin," meaning someone who has a belly that looks like one's own. That, along with other textual evidence, suggested that the women looking at the site tend to identify with the bodies shown there and that they may even feel a sense of belonging or kinship with the contributors.

Something that is notable in its absence on "The Shape of a Mother" is the inclusion of non-white bodies. Crowder clearly states on the FAQ and the "About This Site" pages that "The Shape of a Mother" is for all women who have experienced pregnancy, as she wants the site to represent all kinds of postpartum bodies (theshapeofamother.com). Despite Crowder's best intentions, the majority of photographs on the site depict the bodies of white women. This suggests that blogging as a practice might still be one that is accessible mainly to white middle class individuals. Though the Internet in general and blogging in particular are much more accessible to the masses than they were ten or even five years ago (Keren 2004, 7), not everyone has the time create a blog or even to participate and not everyone has an Internet connection. The narrowness of the bodies represented at "The Shape of a Mother" reaffirms the young, white, middle-class woman as the universal and ideal standard for motherhood - something we see all too often in dominant media representations.

The Good Mother

On "The Shape of a Mother" the ("good") mothers are often discursively constructed using the language of war. Many of the women hold up (the severity and/or number of) their "battle scars" as proof of "good" mother status. It is as though they equate this physical "evidence" of pregnancy (stretch marks, weight gain) and delivery (C-section and episiotomy scars) with good mothering. Similarly, this suggests that those women with more "battle scars" are better mothers than those whose bodies remain less visibly changed by pregnancy. What is the significance of this language and who are their bodies at war with? Some of the most common phrases I found repeated are the following: "badges of honour," "medals," "war wounds," and "battle scars."⁵ This discourse appears to heroize those women who have more "battle scars," as though their "suffering" is connected to some higher power or greater good.

Before telling her own cancer story in her book, *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*, Jackie Stacey unpacks some of the hero mythologies found in popular cancer narratives. She warns, "[the hero mythologies] encourage us to believe that suffering makes us wiser and serve to heroize those who suffer the most....They offer fantasies of power and control through the narrative rationalisations of progress and improvement" (Stacey 1997, 15). Because of the clinical gaze and the use of damaging medical metaphors, the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth can leave women feeling as though they are outside their own bodies and that they are not in control (Martin 1987). In the context of "The Shape of a Mother," perhaps we can interpret the use of military vocabulary as an effort to take back some of the power and control women relinquish during their experiences of pregnancy and childbirth.

There is at least one other possible interpretation of the use of military language on "The Shape of a Mother." Donna Haraway has written about the influence of war cultures on biomedicine (Haraway 1992, 320-22) as has anthropologist Emily Martin. In Martin's

work on how scientific information is conveyed to the public, she has argued that scientific language uses metaphors that rely on cultural stereotypes. Martin found that military language was routinely invoked in descriptions of the body's reaction to illness in popular scientific materials and training materials like medical textbooks. Similarly, and more pertinent to my analysis, Martin reveals that generally, in descriptions of the meeting between sperm and egg, the sperm is represented as "strong," "streamlined" and "active" while the ovum is "seen as large and passive" (Martin 1992, 412). These representations conform to cultural stereotypes about men and women or masculinity and femininity: "In our cultural tradition, passivity is a quintessential female attribute, activity a male one" (412). In this context, the use of military language in "The Shape of a Mother" may be interpreted as evidence that these women have bought into stereotypical gender roles for men and women where men are the active doers and women are the passive recipients.

This "military language" starkly contrasts to the other kind of language used repeatedly on "The Shape of a Mother." Some examples of this language are the following: stretch marks described as "tiger stripes," "silver squiggles" or "flames of motherhood" and mid-sections as a "kangaroo pouch," "muffin top," or "jiggly belly pooch." This language is characterized by "cutesy" euphemisms for some of the visible effects of pregnancy on the body. To me, it was reminiscent of the "pink sticky sentiment" (Ehrenreich 2001, 44) embodied in the pink ribbons and teddy bears of breast cancer culture, which Barbara Ehrenreich powerfully exposed in a 2001 essay in *Harper's Magazine*. Ehrenreich complained about the "relentless brightsiding" (49), "perkiness" (48) and cheerfulness of "pink ribbon culture" and argued that it infantilizes women suffering from the disease; encouraging them to become "good little girls" rather than to express their feelings about their experiences of breast cancer. Soon after her own diagnosis, Ehrenreich posted a message on

the Komen.org message board (a popular breast cancer Web site) describing her feelings of anger and complaining about the "sappy pink ribbons." Rather than provoking support, Ehrenreich's sentiments yielded a "chorus of rebukes" (2001, 50).

Does the use of "cutesy" language on "The Shape of the Mother" pose a similar kind of danger? Women have different feelings about their bodies, especially during and immediately after pregnancy. While some may feel pride, poke fun at or feel affectionate toward their bulging mid sections and stretch marks, others will feel quite differently. I question whether participants at "The Shape of a Mother," when confronted by the "cutesy" language used by others, will feel free to express their true feelings about their postpartum bodies or whether they may instead get the feeling that "cheerfulness is more or less mandatory, dissent a kind of treason" (Ehrenreich 2001, 50).

Women's Bodies, Women's Voices

An argument could be made that women who are or who have been pregnant may be missing their own vocabulary to accurately describe their feelings and experiences. What is required is a language that would be unlike the medical/scientific language most often used to talk about the pregnant body - a language that would effectively communicate the perspective of the embodied subject and avoid the pitfalls of erasure and "brightsiding." The blog may be the perfect medium for thinking through this. Though the blog is a virtual environment, which suggests simulation, making the assumption that all Internet media privilege artifice is a mistake. Kitzmann argues convincingly for the existence of "genuine value" in certain types of Web-based self-documentation and describes Web-based self-documentation as a "returned emphasis on embodied existence" that can generate "modes of intimacy, emotion, community, and insight" (Kitzmann 2004, 117).

In studying the content of "The Shape of a Mother" it is clear that participants are eager to share their feelings about their bodily

experiences of pregnancy and motherhood in order to work toward their own peace and to contribute toward a more inclusive, positive and realistic understanding of the maternal body. Hegemonic representations promoting pregnant perfection are rejected as harmful to women's self-esteem and self-acceptance is encouraged. Though "The Shape of the Mother" is unable to avoid reproducing some of the dominant discourses of visual culture, I put forth that it does successfully negotiate and contest popular cultural understandings of the pregnant and postpartum body. The stories told there reflect the mixed feelings the pregnant and postpartum body inspires both among those who embody it and those who look at it. In its emphasis on the embodied experience of pregnancy and post pregnancy, "The Shape of a Mother" re-subjectifies pregnancy, allowing the woman in the body to speak and to be heard as well as seen.

Endnotes

1. bloggingbaby.com/2005/12/09/donald-trump-declares-his-pregnant-wife-a-monster
2. A notable exception is this article: Gillett, James. "Internet Web Logs as Cultural Resistance: A Study of the SARS Arts Project," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 31.1, pp. 28-43.
3. BlogHer.org lists nearly 2,500 blogs in its "Mommy and Family Blogs" category: blogher.org/blogroll/mommy-and-family-blogs.
4. Crowder's blog was originally found here: shapeofamother.blogspot.com. In November 2006, the site moved: theshapeofamother.com because of technical problems Crowder was experiencing with Blogger. The newer site is hosted on a server that is able to support more traffic and is powered by Movable Type. It contains enhancements such as logos and links to other blog services not found on the original site.
5. The term "boot camp," which to my knowledge is not used on the site, is nonetheless worth mentioning because of its current cultural connection to the postpartum body. The growing popularity of "mommy boot

camps" - classes for women to get their bodies back in shape after they have given birth - testifies to the societal emphasis on the beautiful (external) postpartum body and reinforces the idea that women's bodies need to be disciplined by experts. At the time of writing, a local "boot camp" class was being offered at the YMCA in the Mile End district of Montreal.

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