

## Book Review: Making 'Postmodern' Mothers: Pregnant Embodiment, Baby Bumps and Body Image

by Blog Admin

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*This book aims to provide a multi-disciplinary, empirical account of pregnant embodiment and how it fits into wider sociological and feminist discourses about gender, bodies, 'fat', feminism, and motherhood. The study draws on original qualitative data based on interviews with pregnant women, their partners, and maternity industry professionals. 'Postmodern' pregnancy features as an ambivalent and uncertain experience, with women negotiating the boundaries of femininity and motherhood in a socio-political and economic context that both promotes and constrains their 'choices'. An excellent addition to any feminist's book shelf, finds **Megan O'Branski**.*

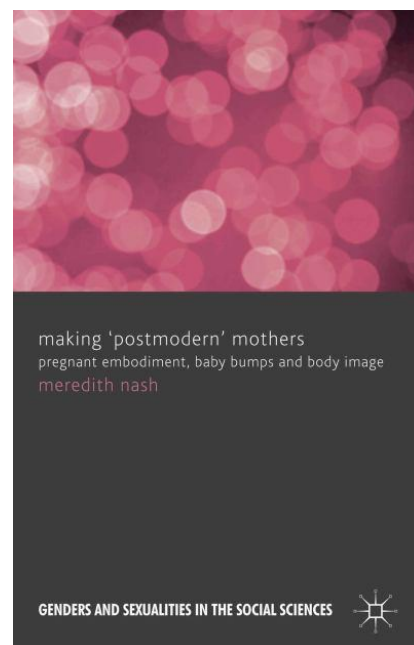


**Making Postmodern Mothers: Pregnant Embodiment, Baby Bumps and Body Image. Meredith Nash. Palgrave Macmillan. November 2012.**

### Find this book:

The body represents the boundary between the public and the private, and it is a continuously shifting, porous membrane. Our bodies are the means by which we experience the world (to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty), but it is also through our bodies that we may come to harm. We conceptualize our bodies as our own, as private, but there is an undeniably social dimension to our bodies as well that limits the extent to which they are within our control. This precarity becomes much more salient during pregnancy, when a woman's body begins to occupy more public space as the private space of her own body becomes occupied, and is explored in Meredith Nash's *Making 'Postmodern' Mothers*.

Part of the *Gender and Sexualities in the Social Sciences* series, Nash's book makes an interesting and much-needed contribution to current literature through her exploration of the embodied experience of pregnancy. Using a "feminist phenomenological interviewing style... meaning that the interview is guided by the participant as opposed to the researcher" (p.15), her intention is to read pregnancy as performance, "with the aim of provoking productive tensions within... understandings of western women's bodies" (p.2). Nash situates her discussion of pregnant embodiment within a postmodernist framework, in order to problematize competing interpretations of the pregnant woman's body. The majority experience this bifurcation with a sense that "their bodies were out of control" (p.40).



*Making 'Postmodern' Mothers* is divided into seven substantive chapters, organized around Nash's three intersectional understandings of the pregnant body: "the individual body", "the social body", "and the body politic" (p.8), which she understands as the different levels on which the pregnant body is read. The body of a woman in pregnancy becomes a site of multiple, contested, and often competing subjectivities that she must continuously negotiate. In situating her book in the wider literature on pregnancy and the pregnant body, Nash finds existing research into pregnancy and the pregnant body to be "contradictory, particularly with regard to how pregnant women cope with weight gain" (p.35). Previous accounts, she argues, "have largely failed to account for women's pre-pregnancy body image(s), which I argue are essential in understanding why women fear gaining weight in pregnancy" (p.40). This theme of preoccupation with the physical boundaries of the body continues throughout the book, and is the backbone of the majority of Nash's contentions.

Repeatedly, Nash finds that there is an increased and unyielding awareness of the size of the pregnant woman's body. This awareness most often carries a negative connotation for the woman herself, irrespective of how her pregnant body may be perceived by, for instance, her partner or her family. Throughout Nash's study, it appears that pregnant women are no more exempt from the normative constraints of the bio-political than women who are not. In her fourth chapter, Nash explores the experience of "showing", at which point many of Nash's interviewees expressed feelings of relief at appearing pregnant, rather "than just chubby" (p.62). Yet although these women now had a readily legible reason for their larger bodies, Nash reports that the presence of the baby bump "was psychologically uncomfortable, but also familiar to women used to monitoring their bellies" (p.65), and that "[w]omen reported feeling anxious that their pregnant bodies could be 'mistaken' for 'fat'" (p.69).

In her fifth chapter, Nash begins to examine the day-to-day management of pregnancy and the pregnant body, and she opens this exploration by focusing upon dress and maternity fashion. This particular empirical chapter has been chosen for this review because of what it reveals about the productive nature of pregnancy, i.e. that women are both "'producers' and 'consumers' of popular discursive representations of pregnancy" (p.13), and because the dress and display of the pregnant body is located within a complex web of subject positions that arguably go unnoticed by a majority of people who are not and have not been pregnant. In interviewing pregnant women in search of maternity clothing, as well as designers producing and distributing maternity wear, Nash highlights the pregnant body as spectacle, and as wedged between two uncomfortable norms of femininity as simultaneously desexualized and an object of desire. That women who are visibly pregnant should be in any way desexualized is, as Nash points out, very strange, as surely pregnancy is a quite visible expression of sexuality, yet Nash reveals that maternity fashion persistently refers to its consumers as "girls", which she suggests in an uncomfortable legacy of second-wave feminism.

Even as pregnant women are discursively de-sexed, they are still expected to remain objects of sexual desire, which is the impetus behind the somewhat distressing expectation of the "yummy mummy". While being discursively desexualized as "girls", pregnant women are at the same time offered an array of maternity fashions that are "'sexy', 'fun' and 'glamorous' clothing for the mother-to-be" (p.86), all the while insisting (occasionally quite literally through printed slogans and phrases) that the women who wear such clothes are certainly not fat, but expecting (p.89). These glamorous maternity fashions required that the women who wore them be comfortable with or at least permissive of exposing their pregnant bodies in public space, as many of the women interviewed complained of their being excessively tight or low-cut. Through her discussion of maternity fashion, Nash reveals that "pregnant women are not only enticed to preserve their 'girliness', they are encouraged to maintain bodies that are thin, proudly displayed and in control" (p.127).

What makes this book so compelling is the clarity with which Nash brings to light the tensions within not only the embodiment of pregnancy but the embodiment of femininity more broadly. That the body is always a constellation of competing and concentric identities is what makes political embodiment such a fascinating field, but for this reason it is also often a nebulous one. In this piece, Nash is able to peel apart these layers enough to shed light on the bifurcated and overlapping experiences of pregnancy as simultaneously private/public, Self/Other, thin/large. This book would be an excellent choice not only for those interested in exploring the embodied experience of pregnancy, but is also more broadly for anyone interested in questions of feminism and the embodied experience of women.

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