The transformation of Britney Spears’ from taut and tight to ‘fat’ and even ‘grotesque’ during pregnancy has become a key site of social discourse. For many of her fans, both male and female, Britney Spears is her body, an icon of feminine beauty and the normalized ideal of slenderness. Analyzing discussions of Britney’s personae highlights the centrality of feminine icons to the fabric of Western culture. For example, in Body Work, Debra Gimlin (2002:2) argues ‘cultural rules and trends are revealed through the body’. In this sense, Britney Spears’ pregnancy becomes a collective cultural experience illustrated by voyeuristic photographs documenting her pregnant life.

In the eyes of the public, Britney ‘let herself go’ during her pregnancy which, according to feminist scholarship, suggests that her undisciplined, ‘fat’ and metaphorically ‘leaky’ body was the antithesis of her controlled, pre-pregnancy self. [1] For example, it has been widely noted that another pop icon, Christina Aguilera, suggested that Britney ‘has let herself go’ (People, US Weekly). The Daily Star (October 3, 2005) reported Aguilera sent Spears a gift upon the birth of Sean Preston Spears in the form of a corset and diet book. Aguilera denies making comments about Spears’ pregnancy, but the suggestion that she did reflects a public ambivalence to Spears’ pregnant body. To this extent, Britney Spears is aesthetically and culturally problematic as a pregnant woman. Moreover, Spears’ pregnant body both defies the standards of the male gaze and draws critique from other women.

In this article, I want to explore the ways in which Britney Spears’ pregnant body has recoded the meaning and cultural representations of pregnancy in the West. Spears is criticized in the public for departing from normalized images of female slenderness but she also subverts the ‘monstrosity’ or boundlessness of her body by acting in ways that are normally viewed as masculine (for example, taking up space both literally and metaphorically in public). I have chosen Britney Spears for this exploration not because she is necessarily the first celebrity woman to be photographed whilst pregnant, but because she exemplifies the tension between pregnant embodiment and international celebrity, naïve rural ‘girlhood’ and female sex symbol.

In seemingly happily discarding her previously perfectly toned body and embracing her ‘abundant’ body despite criticism in the public sphere, Spears has incited a reassessment of contemporary pregnant corporeal space in for the public and feminist scholarship. In this article, I will first discuss the nature of both feminine and pregnant embodiment and the location of contemporary feminist scholarship within these discourses. Secondly, drawing on images of her pregnant body, I will analyze Spears’ pregnant personae including the ‘sexy mother’, the ‘anti-mother’ (in her allegedly poor dietary and lifestyle habits) and the ‘good mother’ (in her postpartum fitness regime and portrayal of family values in her marriage and domestic life). I will argue that Spears’ feelings about motherhood and her pregnant body both uphold and challenge the tenets of contemporary feminism. Finally, I suggest that visual representations of Britney Spears’ pregnant body have defined her maternal presence and argue that her pregnant body both recodes and reifies cultural taboos surrounding pregnant women.
Embodying M(Other)hood

Whereas the body was once considered to be fixed in 'nature', or bounded, modern scholarship represents the body as constantly in flux. Contemporary feminist theorist Donna Haraway (1991) suggests that an emphasis on the locatedness of bodies in culture is the best way to elucidate particular embodied standpoints and to account for race, class and gender positions that are often neglected in the wake of Foucauldian scholarship. According to Thomas Csordias (1994:12), as the body may be defined as material, embodiment is 'defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world'. The idea of situating embodiment has been particularly useful in feminist theorizing about the body as scholars such as Haraway (1991), Bordo (1993), Davis (1997) and Butler (1990) attempt to challenge the passivity and inaction attributed to the female body. Haraway (1991), in particular, seeks to liberate the distinction between sex and gender from a masculinist, monolithic objectivity. Given this notion of the body in corporeal 'flux', it makes sense that the boundaries of corporeality blur, as the body is a cultural phenomenon (Csordias 1994:3).

The proliferation of feminist scholarship on the relationship between woman and body image reveals historical commonalities among Western women. Particularly, the notion that slenderness symbolizes self-containment, control of impulse and status for women places both a moral and emotional coding on a woman's internal state or (dis)order (Bordo 1993:193; Wolf 1990; Bartky 1988). Whilst the slender body is culturally constructed as the ideal expression of femininity for women in the West, the pregnant body challenges this paradigm of female embodiment. The pregnant subject is a key site of corporeality in feminist theorizing for the reason that it implicates not only the identity of a woman but also that of a woman's internal state or (dis)order (Bordo 1993:193; Wolf 1990; Bartky 1988). Whilst the slender body is culturally constructed as the ideal expression of femininity for women in the West, the pregnant body challenges this paradigm of female embodiment. The pregnant subject is a key site of corporeality in feminist theorizing for the reason that it implicates not only the identity of a woman but also that of a developing fetus, both of which are scrutinized culturally and medically. According to Iris Marion Young (1990:160) in her examination of subjectivity and alienation in pregnancy, the pregnant body is inherently interesting because as a lived experience it undermines Cartesian dualism. [3] Culturally constructed categories of the body have historically centered on nature/culture, public/private/ and mind/body dualisms. These dualisms describe gendered essentialisms of embodiment where the male body is rational, stable and active in the public sphere. The feminine ‘Other’ or the irrational, leaky, emotional and domestic body contrasts this masculinist paradigm of embodiment. As the pregnant body requires the state of having two bodies in one, this positions the pregnant woman as both herself and not herself. Since pregnancy requires a pregnant woman to 'live' or 'be' her body, Jan Draper (2003:747) contends that pregnant bodies are ‘privileged bodies’ that make visible or objective the usually invisible or subjective body.

As the ‘body’ in history has been presented as ostensibly male, feminist theorists such as Susan Bordo (1993), Evelyn Fox Keller (1985), Catherine MacKinnon (1987), Moira Gatens (1992; 2001), Iris Marion Young (1990), and Kathy Davis (1997) have analysed the neglect of the female body in scientific thought as well as the role of the female body in power relations. [4] By eliminating the female body from discussions in biomedicine, the ‘unruly’ or chaotic female body presents a threat to a pervasive ‘rational’ masculinity. By unpacking the specificity of gendered embodiment, it is possible to reveal the specific nature of women’s embodied experiences, particularly those related to reproduction (for example, pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation and menopause). By referring back to the discourses in which subjectivity is produced, feminist scholars are able to look at science and technology and recognize ambiguities and contradictions in traditional Western thought that have historically neglected the positions of women, especially mothers.

Western devaluation of women and positioning of women as different from the rational male is a historically powerful and ideologically gendered duality. Whereas ‘he’ is associated with civilization and
Britney Spears represents a distinctly contemporary form of motherhood in the bodies of other pregnant women. It is not surprising that feminist theorists, particularly in the last thirty years, have shifted their focus to deconstructing dualistic representations of the body which disadvantage or ‘Other’ the bodies of women, mothers especially. As the body has become a symbolic representation of the women’s socio-cultural ‘oppression’, rather than looking at the body as an object of domination (as in the work of Foucault) it seems to be more relevant for feminists to explore the lived experiences of women’s bodies in the world, or embodiment. Furthermore, study of the ways in which women objectify and ‘oppress’ other women’s bodies (particularly within the context of race, class and sexuality) has been an important advancement for feminist studies.

The ‘sexy’ mother

The construction of women’s self-identity through the gaze of others is a recurring theme in feminist scholarship with regard to sexuality, beauty, body image and appearance and the suppression of bodily functions such as menstruation or appetite (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1990; Bailey 1999; Bartky 1988; Draper 2003; Martin 2001; Weiss 1994; Ortner 1996). Feminists generally agree that the notion of fragmentation or the splitting of the subject is useful for explaining the feelings of alienation women feel toward their objectified bodies. Conscious of their bodies being on display, Sandra Lee Bartky (1988:23) contends that women are ‘reduced’ in a ‘degrading identification’ with their bodies, where being associated with ‘mere body’ is inherently alienating. As women see their own bodies as others see them, through an ostensibly ‘male gaze,’ the body experienced by women (regardless of race, class or sexuality) is a body ‘mediated by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature’ (Bordo 1993:35).

The publicly pregnant body resists or denies the monolithic and homogeneous images of impossibly slender women. According to Rosemary Betteron (2006), representations of ‘sexy’ mothers or ‘yummy mummies’ construct the maternal body as impossible. For instance, by priding herself on her looks, sex appeal and slim body shape whilst pregnant, the ‘yummy mummy’ is culturally a woman who cannot be a ‘mother’ based on traditional constructions of mothers and particularly the pregnant body as abject and asexual. Betteron (2006) suggests pregnant women who dress in tightly fitting clothing or who perform activities in public are women who culturally are not ‘mothers’ but who, in a sense, create their own personal meaning of pregnancy, rewriting its traditionally defined social meanings by defying pregnancy norms. By transforming the meaning of her public representation, Spears’ pregnant body redefines her social and bodily identity.

To illustrate, I will analyze a portrait of Spears as a ‘sexy mother’ in Elle magazine (October 2005) featuring an article entitled, ‘Oh Baby: Britney Spears on Motherhood, Marriage and Her Sex Drive’. The title of this feature article suggests that Britney Spears is not going to fade away from the spotlight of her enormously successful career simply because she is on the brink of motherhood. Rather, Spears embraces her role as a married woman and as the title of the article implies, she is certainly having sex.

A lifestyle magazine targeted at women in their mid to late 20s, much like In Style and People, Elle ‘pays fawning tribute to the charming idiosyncrasies and lifestyle choices of our nation’s celebrities’ (Douglas and Michaels 2004:111). Since the 1990s, celebrity mom profiles in lifestyle magazines have had the effect of explaining to the ‘average’ mother how celebrity supermoms (overwhelmingly white) ‘have it all’ and sharing an overly romantic view of motherhood with which most women managing their careers and families can hardly identify. As much as feminists have critiqued this resurgence of ‘the tenets of new momism’ and ‘intensive mothering’, this type of magazine seems to fly off the shelf, ironically during a decade when more American women than ever are working outside of the home (Douglas and Michaels 2004:113). An important point to make in this context is that despite the overwhelming assumption that men ‘oppress’ women’s bodies, Spears and female viewers of her image are not passive victims of culture. Pregnant women commodify and objectify themselves and ‘oppress’ the bodies of other pregnant women.

Britney Spears represents a distinctly contemporary form of motherhood in the Elle (October 2005)
The characterization of Spears as a sexy mother with a hot sex life is incongruous with the images of a sacred and maternal Virgin mother often associated with pregnant bodies. Similar to Demi Moore’s Vanity Fair cover, Spears’ glowing white purity has an ambivalent relationship to the sexuality her pregnant body simultaneously exudes (Tyler 2001:75). Dressed in white and pink, symbols of innocence, purity and girlhood, Spears exudes the sexuality of a ‘woman’ as her pregnancy clearly sexes her body. Spears wears a sheer white minidress, baby bump fully on display as she poses from the side, aware that she is being looked at. [7] Spears subverts a masculinist sense of looking to imply ‘...there is nothing that should not be seen...’ (Sontag 1977:177). This feature exposes Spears’ pregnancy (literally), her fetus, and her private life for public consumption.

Drawing on the work of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1989), the notion of the male ‘gaze’ in cinema may be used to structure dialogues about pregnant women. Mulvey juxtaposes structuralist and psychoanalytic theories with visuality and ‘looking’. She argues that women have historiographically been ‘looked at’ as passive objects whilst men are the voyeuristic, active subjects (Mulvey 1989). Spears does not appear to be a passive subject as she looks directly into the camera and appears to enjoy the position of being looked at. However, her glamorous appearance perhaps suggests remnants of an internalized male gaze that dictates how women should ‘appear’. Additionally, it is also possible that Spears’ glamorous images reflect an internalized female gaze as women scrutinize her body equally or even more so than men. One of the most interesting features of the Elle portrait is that despite the emphasis on her marital bliss, Spears does not wear a recognizable wedding band nor is her husband, Kevin Federline, featured in any of the photographs. [8] In this sense, it seems that Spears’ fantasy photo spread, with her (un)maternal, polished and contained body, would not be as appealing if her husband was included in the pictures. In her resemblance to her pre-pregnancy self, Britney Spears is appealing and sexualized in a recoding of her previous image as the virginal global pop phenomenon. Spears performs her pregnancy in the Elle feature by reifying how a ‘good mother’ behaves whilst dressing like a ‘sexy mother’.

By demonstrating pregnancy as a sexy and effortless experience, Britney Spears reaffirms her status as a major international celebrity but also as a mother that perhaps is not as interested in fame and fortune since her pregnancy. In a hint at her more ‘domestic’ lifestyle, Spears states, ‘I love what I do, but I can’t go at the same pace’ (Elle 2005:394). Furthermore, when asked about turning down the role of Daisy Duke in the film, The Dukes of Hazzard, Spears defends her decision by arguing, ‘That wasn’t my time. I’m supposed to be pregnant now’ (Elle 2005:394). As Spears emphasizes her marital bliss, despite the negative press surrounding her allegedly ‘lazy’ husband, she positions herself as wanting more than one child in a happy heterosexual relationship. [9] In this interview, Spears celebrates motherhood as the culmination of a woman’s life. Yet, it is hard for me to think about this ‘new momism’ without referring back to Betty Friedan’s ‘problem with no name’ in the Feminine Mystique (1963) describing the dissatisfaction women felt as homemakers and their sheer boredom with the monotony of the domestic life that celebrity mothers rave about in their magazine profiles. Celebrating a motherhood facilitated by the hidden support of nannies, cooks, drivers and personal assistants, Spears characterization of celebrity maternity ‘both draws from and repudiates feminism’ Douglas and Michaels (2004:5).

Spears’ comments suggest that motherhood and her pregnant body are unproblematically ‘natural.’ As Spears describes how she loves being pregnant, like many other profiles of celebrity mothers, the message to the average woman is that if your life does not change dramatically during pregnancy, there must be something wrong with you. [10] Ironically, this contrasts with her fear of the pain of ‘natural’ childbirth, and her decision to opt for a caesarean section. [11] Feminist scholar Robbie Davis-Floyd (1992:102) argues that the reason Western biomedicine encourages pain avoidance during childbirth is because pain is perceived to be a sign of weakness. According to the traditionally androcentric biomedical model, the pain of childbirth is perceived as being too intense for women’s inadequately equipped bodies. As such, birth is a process that is analogous to that of a machine. [12] Caesarian sections especially enforce Cartesian dualism where the body can function without the use of the mind. As Spears recounts, ‘My mom said childbirth was the most excruciating thing she had ever gone through in her life’ (Elle 2005:394), it is not surprising that she fears a similar experience.
In another example of Britney Spears’ image as a ‘sexy mother’, I would like to examine a moment when at eight months pregnant, Spears generated enormous controversy by wearing a pink bikini. In order to explain the effect of Britney’s swimwear, it is useful to locate this discussion within Judith Butler’s (1990) conception of performativity. In discussing the performatve, Butler (1990:136) argues, ‘...acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means’. As such, society expects that pregnant bodies ‘perform’ in certain ways in public and remain hidden. Pregnant bodies are not often discussed with regard to performativity and spatiality. The images of Britney Spears in her bikini, swollen belly exposed, challenge the active/passive binaries that code women’s bodily movement and use of corporeal space in the public. This challenge raises interesting questions: Why is it that the pregnant body ‘matters’ in the West? How do women ‘perform’ their pregnancies?

Feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst (2000) directs attention to the spaces that the pregnant body constitutes in culture, both public and private in her study of a pregnant bikini contest in New Zealand. Longhurst (2000:455) argues that pregnant women wearing bikinis ‘dissolves the clear-cut notion of public and private.’ As pregnancy is traditionally veiled in secrecy, the exposure of the belly is an increasingly public event. [13] Britney Spears’ exposure of her belly marks her as a sexed body. It seems ironic that as pregnant women are encouraged to be modest and invisible to the public eye; pregnant bodies are clearly the bodies of women who have engaged in sex. As Longhurst (2000:456) describes the pregnant ‘bikini babies’ in New Zealand as causing ‘pregnancy trouble’, Britney Spears also resists the societal regulation that pregnant women act demurely. [14] As pregnant women are encouraged to focus on themselves and their unborn fetus, the fact that Britney Spears maintains such an immensely public identity contradicts these tenets of female bodily comportment. Spears challenges conventional boundaries between the feminine body and the external world by wearing a bikini in a culture where the male gaze dictates the norms for feminine beauty, body shape and comportment.

Following the publication of the bikini photograph, I found a website that invites viewers to comment on various photographs of Spears during her pregnancy. [15] The bikini photograph provoked a number of both positive and negative responses, many of which were from women. The responses to the pregnant bikini photo of Spears ranged from ‘I hope I look better than she does when I am [pregnant]’ to ‘Britney is hot pregnant or not. I think she’s beautiful’. A female respondent writes, ‘I know how much fun it is to pick on Britney, I’ve been doing it too, but I’m with you - sure glad the press wasn’t following me around documenting everything I drank and ate’. [16]

As a remarkably visible figure in the public sphere, Spears challenges the norms of femininity and motherhood with her choice of swimwear particularly by having a body that is expanding and ‘leaky’. Paradoxically, in some sense, Spears’ image as a ‘sexy mother’ also suggests the ‘anti-mother’, in her physical subversion of cultural mores that make women sexless ‘good mothers’ who are completely focused on the well being of the fetus. To illustrate, in a range of in-depth interviews with pregnant women about their bodily experiences, Lucy Bailey (1999:340) found that pregnant women described their bodies as being ‘invaded’ not only by a growing fetus but also by the cultural gaze. As Spears’ pre-pregnancy body is a symbol of the changing social and political climate in Western popular culture, her pregnant body takes on a similar meaning where it is really not her own anymore (due to the gaze of the public, the male gaze, or the inhabitance of the fetus in her womb).

The word ‘grotesque’ is often associated with pregnancy as a state of being where the boundaries between internal and external blur. In Rabelais and his World, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984:317) defines the grotesque body as a ‘body in the act of becoming’. Bakhtin (1984:317) argues, ‘...the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world’. Following this contention, if we think of the pregnant body as the ‘Female Grotesque’ or the body expanding outside of it boundaries, we can ask: how has Britney Spears subverted her grotesque body by wearing a bikini? In a sense, by subverting the marker of ‘grotesque,’ Spears attains the ability to act in ways normally viewed as masculine. Is Spears pregnancy thus an act of ‘drag’? As Spears appears in her tight maternity clothing or skimpy bikini, she mediates her potentially threatening image with her use of a feminine masquerade or overtly ‘sexy’ motherhood (emphasizing her primary role as mother and nurturer). As Michelle Boulous-Walker (1998:146) suggests, it would seem that the focus on the mother-child bond ‘seems to foreclose upon the freewheeling independence ideologically associated with [women’s] autonomy’. As feminine autonomy is the antithesis of maternity, Britney Spears shows that her pregnant body in a bikini is not necessarily a disruption to her sexuality, femininity, or her ability to be a ‘good mother’.

‘Good mother’ v. ‘Anti-mother’

As discussed by a number of feminist scholars of childbirth (Rothman 1988; 1989; Longhurst 2000; 2001; Rich 1976; Davis-Floyd 1992; 1998; Corea 1985; Oakley 1979) there is increasing pressure on expectant mothers to monitor their pregnancy weight very closely and adhere to a disciplined diet and fitness plan. To illustrate, on Conan O’Brien’s Late Night television show (September 20, 2005), on the
With the announcement of her son's birth on September 20, 2005, Jay Leno joked ‘Britney Spears told Elle (October 2005) depicting her as a ‘sexy mom’ with a fabulous family life. She has turned to drinking wine to relax, washing away her stress’. With her body image and lifestyle habits under fire, Spears' fantasy of a perfect family is incongruous with the celebrity mom profile in the Internet and in tabloid publications suggest that Spears lacks will power and discipline. This 'lack of restraint' on Spears' part as an expectant mother foreshadows her experience in the media when the baby weight postpartum (Earle 2003:248). This is mark of a 'good mother', who can juggle a career, healthy lifestyle, happy marriage and childcare effortlessly. As lifestyle magazines have increasingly focused on the celebrity pregnancy or the 'hottest' celebrity mothers, the taut and disciplined body is more important than ever before. It is clear that photographs of tight and polished postpartum celebrity bodies influence the diet and fitness regimes of the average woman. As part of the Hollywoodization of American culture, Spears is subject to the same pressures to achieve a slender body. Therefore, Spears is categorized as the ‘anti-mother’ for gaining weight on parts of her body other than her ‘bump’, eating unhealthy foods, having a husband that supposedly is not involved, and for wearing tightly fitting maternity clothing that exposes her belly. In addition to her pregnancy weight woes in the press, Spears is accused of drinking and smoking both during and after the birth. In People (August 29, 2005), Spears' baby shower is featured on the cover with a headline stating 'My Baby Shower' where readers are invited into Britney's 'exclusive photo album' from this event. Within these pages, everything from the food served at the party to the shower gifts she receives are detailed and there is a picture of Spears consuming what appears to be a fruit drink. In following editions of tabloid magazines such as US Weekly and New Weekly (Australia), articles suggest that Spears is drinking a 'cocktail' and has been drinking alcohol throughout her pregnancy. Whereas the baby shower feature in People emphasizes happy motherhood, articles on the Internet and in tabloid publications suggest that Spears lacks will power and discipline. This 'lack of restraint' on Spears' part as an expectant mother foreshadows her experience in the media when the National Enquirer (October 26, 2005) reports three weeks after the birth of Sean Preston, 'She hasn't lost the pregnancy weight and she's desperate to get back in superstar shape and resume her career. She has turned to drinking wine to relax, washing away her stress'. With her body image and lifestyle habits under fire, Spears' fantasy of a perfect family is incongruous with the celebrity mom profile in Elle (October 2005) depicting her as a 'sexy mom' with a fabulous family life. With the announcement of her son's birth on September 20, 2005, Jay Leno joked 'Britney Spears told Elle magazine she thinks she's going to have a boy. That's what she needs around the house—another guy sleeping all day with no job'. Clearly, her husband, Kevin Federline, is perceived to be a wayward, unemployed father who does little to support his family financially or emotionally. Depictions...
matter. Pregnant women have been defined as a ‘socially abjected group’ (Young 1990: 142).

The work of Kristeva and her conception of ‘abjection’ or the disgust in encountering certain types of the body nor separate from it’. The notion of ‘messiness’ in women’s reproductive bodies draws on when she breastfeeds. According to Longhurst (2001:29), ‘ingested or expelled objects are neither part pregnant body threatens to expel fluid at any moment, either when her ‘water breaks’ or postpartum blood, urine, vomit, or other fluids expelled from the body. Like many pregnant women, Spears’ heavily For many feminist scholars, the reference to pregnant bodies as ‘leaky’ often refers to breast milk, increasing landscape of celebrity bodies have mattered so much to popular culture is a neglected insight changing pregnancy. Longhurst (2001) contends that the depths and ‘messiness’ of human bodies tends not to be discussed. However, I have argued that the pregnant body of Britney Spears truly resolves the virgin/whore, public/private, nature/culture binaries that seem to plague pregnant women in the social world.

As the idealized realization of femininity in the modern world, m(otherhood), in its leakiness and abundance, and subjection to social taboos and regulations, is structured largely by the production of a gendered, pregnant body. Robyn Longhurst (2001) argues that public pregnant corporeal space is problematic in that it blurs boundaries and meets with ambivalent acceptance in the social world. The pregnant body of Britney Spears represents a simultaneous site of abjection, and monstrosity, sexuality and spectacle. Like many other pregnant celebrities, Britney Spears is not as much ‘othered’ as she is enveloped within culture. As visibly pregnant bodies invite discussion and speculation, the fact that the changing landscape of celebrity bodies have mattered so much to popular culture is a neglected insight in feminist scholarship of pregnancy. Longhurst (2001) contends that the depths and ‘messiness’ of human bodies tends not to be discussed. However, I have argued that the pregnant body of Britney Spears has been dissected in fine detail and culturally located within Western ideologies of motherhood (as the ‘sexy mother’, ‘anti-mother’ or the ‘good mother’).

From the Spears example, it is evident that pregnancy is a culturally relevant bodily experience. Being outside the boundaries of normalized appearance for women presents challenges for pregnant women to perform femininity successfully. Spears’ various characterizations as good/bad, sexy/modest, glamorous/grotesque, fit/fat locate her within larger discourses surrounding the corporeal tensions faced by all pregnant women, not just celebrities. As Dworkin and Wachs (2004:611) suggest, ‘Exactly at the moment when a woman’s body is accomplishing a highly valued route to femininity, she is least likely to be viewed as aesthetically ideal’. Pregnant women are inscribed with the values of culture in increasingly complex and contradictory ways. It would seem that by performing various iterations of motherhood against a backdrop of embedded gender distinctions and cultural imagery, Spears can be the ‘sexy mom’ or the ‘anti-mom’ simply by changing her outfit. Whether she is objectifying her own pregnant body, being objectified by other women, or being objectified by men, Britney Spears has never been a poster girl for independence or ‘girl power’. However, as her cultural and commercial fame positions her as a global brand and identity, the discourses surrounding Spears’ pregnant body are useful in questioning monolithic definitions of female beauty and comportment, sexuality and gender.

Notes

1. For many feminist scholars, the reference to pregnant bodies as ‘leaky’ often refers to breast milk, blood, urine, vomit, or other fluids expelled from the body. Like many pregnant women, Spears’ heavily pregnant body threatens to expel fluid at any moment, either when her ‘water breaks’ or postpartum when she breastfeeds. According to Longhurst (2001:29), ‘ingested or expelled objects are neither part of the body nor separate from it’. The notion of ‘messiness’ in women’s reproductive bodies draws on the work of Kristeva and her conception of ‘abjection’ or the disgust in encountering certain types of matter. Pregnant women have been defined as a ‘socially abjected group’ (Young 1990: 142).
2. The perception of birth as a ‘dangerous’ process gave rise to the deployment of obstetrical science for ‘medical surveillance’. These disciplinary techniques that act upon women’s subjectivity and sense of embodied femininity are powerful precisely because of their anonymity and subtly invasive nature. A useful example of the medicalisation of women’s bodies is the use of reproductive technology during pregnancy such as ultrasound.

3. Iris Marion Young’s seminal piece on female embodiment and comportment, *Throwing Like a Girl* (1990), challenges the dichotomy of subject/object. For Young, girls appears to be less confident in using their public space, as in throwing a ball ‘like a girl’ such that seemingly insignificant female experiences in daily life reveal highly gendered ad significant modifications of bodily comportment. By deconstructing any notion of a ‘natural’ femininity, Young (1990:143) disavows the notion that femininity is a ‘mysterious essence’ innate to all women by virtue of biology. Rather Young (1990:14) argues femininity is a ‘set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by themselves’.


5. For example, the separation of spheres between paid and unpaid work is highly gendered where men are ‘expected’ to work outside the home whilst women are expected to fulfill their reproductive role as wives and mothers. As Emily Marin (2001:6) suggests, although these gendered categories emerged in the nineteenth century, this dualism is still adopted to explain social behaviour by many men and women in the West.

6. According the US Department of Labour, Women’s Bureau (2005), in 2004 women represented 46% of the total US labour force. This percentage translates to approximately 64.7 million women in 2004 as compared to only 30 million women in the workforce in 1970. It is anticipated that this percentage will increase to 47% in 2012 and ‘account for 55% of the increase in total labour force growth from 2002-2012’. These statistics are accessible at http://www.dol.gov/wb/stats.main.htm


8. Spears wears multiple rings in the photographs.

9. Lisa Rinna makes similar statements in her naked pregnant photo shoot for *Playboy* magazine in September 1998. Rinna, formerly of the hit television show *Melrose Place*, chooses a pornographic magazine rather than a lifestyle magazine to make her pregnant debut. However, as Rebecca Huntley (2000:350) argues, ‘Despite assertions of sexiness, Rinna’s pictures are not constructed as masturbation material, rather maternal material.’


11. ‘Natural’ births occur without drugs, hospitalisation or doctors and instead focus on following ‘natural’ instincts during the birth that can take place in water or in a darkened room with a midwife attendant. Ann Oakley (1979; 1984; 1987) and Barbara Katz Rothman (1984; 1988; 1989; 2004) contend this reliance on women’s ‘natural’ instincts during birth only reinforces the nature/culture binary.

representation of the body as 'machine' is a consequence of industrialisation and a rising capitalist culture where consumption of goods and production began to overtake a unified mind/body.

13. Following Longhurst’s (2000) study of pregnant bikini contests, I was interested to see if there were any bikini contests for pregnant women taking place in the United States. I found a number of contests that have occurred in the last eight years. I found ‘The First Annual Buzzard Mornings Pregnant Bikini Contest at Dick’s Last Resort’ (June 1998) which Longhurst (2000) cites (www.juddhandler.com/articles/pregnantbikini.php) in which the accompanying article describes the pregnant entrants as ‘lactating lovelies’. A number of the pregnant bikini contests are sponsored by radio stations in various states across the US that appear to be used to generate ‘shock value’ and enormous publicity for the stations. Some of these include, ‘Giovanni and Kim’s Pregnant Bikini Contest’ in Rhode Island in 2003 (www.92profm.com/gallery/pregnantbikini), ‘KLUC 98.5 Las Vegas Morning Zoo Pregnant Bikini Contest’ (May 16, 2002) www.kluc.com/zoo-photos.asp, ‘Dudley and Bob’s 2005 Preggo Bikini Contest’ in Austin, TX (www.klbjfm.com/gallery/index_0805_pregnant.asp). I also found a link to a Welsh bikini contest (November 19, 2005 which only displayed a picture and no accompanying information on the contest (xo.typepad.com/blog/2005/11/pregnant-bikini.html). The majority of sites I derived from an internet search of ‘Pregnant bikini contests’ were generally pornographic.

14. Longhurst (2000:454) suggests the term ‘babes’ infantilises the pregnant women despite their having sexed bodies.

15. See www.3daddict.org

16. There are a number of websites showing various photographs of Britney Spears’ pregnant body and invite online viewers to rate or comment on the photograph in a sort of online forum (for example, www.addict3d.com). A number of viewers commented that Spears’ body had become ‘massive’ and scrutinise the amount of weight she gained during the pregnancy. A Google search of ‘Britney Spears pregnant body’ returned nearly 4 million sites with related images. Britney Spears also has a number of fan sites devoted to the minitiae of her daily life including www.britneyzone.com, www.britneyspy.com, www.britneysource.com, www.bspars.org, www.totallybritney.com and www.britneynews.com. A number of viewers commented that Spears’ body had become ‘massive’ and scrutinise the amount of weight she gained during the pregnancy.

17. See www.abstracts.net

18. The Australian publication New Weekly (June-October 2005) covered Spears’ pregnancy in detail, particularly with regard to her intake of fatty or unhealthy food during her pregnancy.

19. See www.britneyzone.com

20. People (May 26, 1997) was one of the first magazines to cover the ‘hottest’ celebrity mothers (Cunningham 2002:432). However, the celebrity mother profile in lifestyle magazines really began with singer Debby Boone in Good Housekeeping (January 1981) with the headline, ‘He Lights Up My Life’ in reference to her newborn son (Douglas and Michaels 2004:110)

21. See www.britneyzone.com

22. See the September 5, 2005 editions of both publications.

23. See www.abstracts.net

24. Spears’ transformation is unsurprising given her access to the best trainers, nannies, personal chefs and nutritionists.

Bibliography


