

“Pregnancy Chic” The Marketing of Maternity Wear

Through Mary Russo’s (1995) “female grotesque” and Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory of the “abject,” the pregnant body can be seen as a site of transgression because it threatens spatial and cultural boundaries. Re-contextualizing the potentially transgressive pregnant body occurs through *redressing* it. One method of diffusing this corporeal threat is through maternity wear that contains the body and often has the effect of infantilizing or matronizing pregnant women, ultimately serving to efface a pregnant woman’s sexuality. As stylized maternity wear becomes increasingly more expensive, class status is an important factor to consider in looking at who purchases maternity apparel and who finds alternatives to buying new, and temporary, clothing. This paper examines the gendered dynamics involved in marketing maternity clothes to women and the underlying social construction of the proper pregnant subject. Using clothing designs and catalogues as the site of study, maternity apparel can be read as a vehicle for containing the abject and grotesque pregnant body; a corporeality which if left unregulated, may destabilize the self/other boundary.

Mary Russo’s (1995) study of the “female grotesque” has implications for pregnancy discourse. Borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin who writes the grotesque body as an “open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change” (qtd. in Russo, 1995: 62-63), Russo re-configures the “grotesque” as “grotto-esque” which “proceeds quite swiftly to the further identification of the grotto with the womb, and with woman-as-mother” (29). The grotto is a cavernous, inhabited and subterranean spatial geography. These same tropes can be applied to the pregnant body as well, which is said to be a fetal container, appearing distended and occupied. The difference between the grotto and the pregnant body is the former is an inverted

space while the latter is convex and protrudes into public space. The distinction is important because taking up physical space is a transgressive act for women.

In Western culture, the female body is supposed to take up minimal physical space and women are admonished for being “too large.” In *The Hunger Artists*, Maud Ellman writes: “The fat woman ... has come to embody everything the prosperous must disavow: imperialism, exploitation, surplus value, maternity, morality, abjection, and unloveliness. Heavier with projections than with the flesh, she siphons off this guilt, desire, and denial, leaving her idealized counterpart behind...” (qtd. in Russo, 1995: 24). The large female body disturbs social norms in part because it refuses to concede to spatial standard—it takes up more than it has been allotted. A link can be made to pregnancy, then, because the pregnant body too violates rules of public space—both types of bodies are public spectacles. Although the pregnant body does not symbolize laziness and greed like the fat body, it does signify sexuality out of control. If fatness is oral excess, pregnancy is vaginal excess. Pregnancy can be read as a sign of failed contraception, the assumption being that if a woman is pregnant, she has had heterosexual intercourse to become so. This is problematic because not only does it reflect a heterosexist culture, it negates women who have been raped, or have chosen to be surrogates. In any event, there are links to be made between the fat and pregnant body: both are subversive forms that call into question corporeal norms.

The fat body is often understood to be pregnant. When a woman is heavier around her abdomen than anywhere else, she is assumed to be pregnant and may be asked, “when is the baby due?” However, conflating pregnancy and fat discourses is not without problems. While both bodies are large, the pregnant body is temporal and therefore accepted. As well, the end result of a pregnant body is a child, which reflects the biological imperative for women. So while pregnancy is sanctioned, fatness is not; the two states represent Julia Kristeva’s (1982) “abject” because they are bodies which provoke panic based on ambiguity.

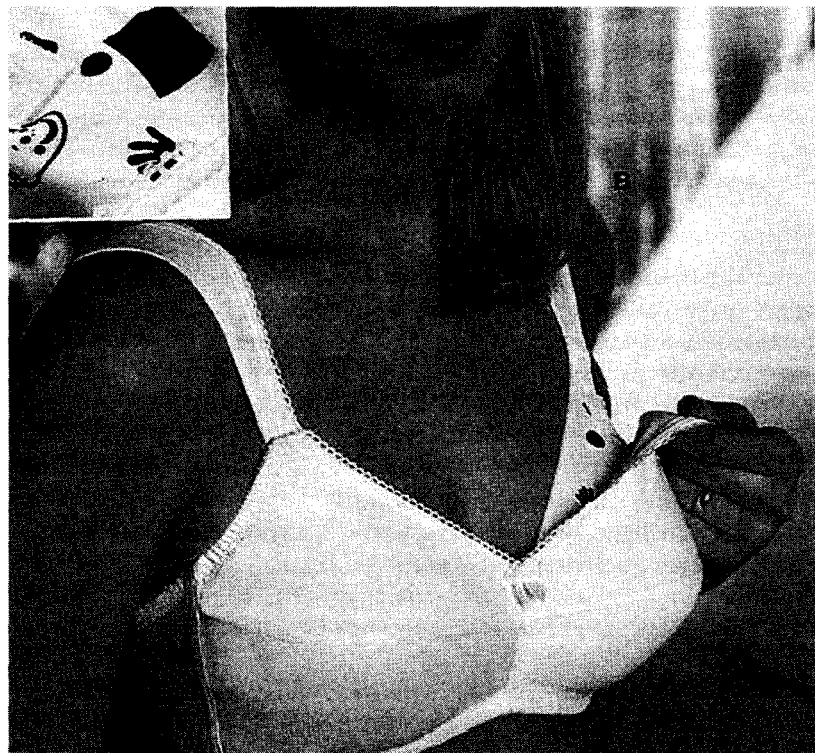
Building on Lacan’s “subject” and “object,” Kristeva adds a third term to explain another dynamic of selfhood. In defining the abject, she writes: “We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it is to be in perpetual danger” (1982: 9). Abjection is a form of liminality—it is neither subject nor object but a reminder of waste, disease and disorder. Pregnancy is a visual manifestation of this concept. A distended “belly” is a visual reminder that one “came from there”—at one point, there was a symbiotic connection to the female body. Since this association is not healthy or productive for a fully individuated person, the abject is to be renounced.

Another important way of looking at abjection refers to bodily fluids connected to the pregnant body. For Mary Douglas, “what is disturbing about the viscous or the fluid is its refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean

and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity" (qtd. in Grosz, 1994: 195) The pregnant body is one that embodies abjection because although it contains, it also threatens to release corporeal flows.

One way of looking at how the "leaky" maternal body is contained is through the representation of nursing bras, as pictured in the *JC Penney Catalogue*. Although most women do not lactate while pregnant, women who have had more than four children or those who become pregnant again shortly after giving birth may. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find nursing bras marketed in a maternity clothes catalogue. In addition to providing easy access to the breast during nursing, these bras contain taboo fluid. Public lactation is a site of embarrassment for post-partum women. Similar to the marketing of feminine hygiene products, advertisements for these nursing bras promise absorbency and padding. Just as the menstruating woman is forbidden, so is the lactating woman.

Representing the lactating woman requires recontextualization. Women in nearly every picture are shown teasing to remove the flap in the bra, but,



"Love at First Sight Bra." *JC Penney Maternity Collection Catalogue*. Spring/Summer 2001. Source: © JCP Media L.P. 2002 All Rights Reserved.

whereas the removing of a bra would be a sexualized act in another publication, here is a reminder that a woman's breasts are functional and no longer her own. The "Love at First Sight Bra" features red and black shapes that encourage a baby's focus on the breast during nursing. This product, along with other nursing bras, re-focuses the attention from breast as site of sexual pleasure to breast as nourishment. Interestingly, all the nursing bras in the *JC Penney Catalogue* are white or off-white. Here, the functionality is recalled but a look of childishness is promoted. The "Love at First Sight" bra is interesting because it features black and red, colours traditionally associated with active sexuality. However, these colours serve a function in that they are meant to act as focal points for the baby's attention, thereby promoting intellectual stimulation for the child. So, both the tantalization of bra removal and the otherwise-sexualized colours are refigured in the form of utility; again, a pregnant woman's sexuality is effaced. Denial of adult sexuality will be returned to later. However, it is important to note that the pregnant body's abjection is contained through a disciplinary apparatus, here maternity clothes. Not only does clothing work to regulate the body, but it is also corresponds to a *normalized* gender performance.

If the physical pregnant body marks the sex as female, the clothed body goes one step further to signify its gender as feminine. There are two versions of femininity manifested in representations of maternity clothes. Continually in department store catalogues, like JC Penney, women are both infantilized and matronized. Presented in this way, the pregnant woman is denied agency and mature sexuality. She is also contained within the normalized versions of femininity.

Popular representations of maternity clothes in store catalogues depict women as juvenile and "girlish." Infantilization is achieved through both the design of the clothes and representations of the models. Often, maternity clothes have childish patterns on them such as bows, polka dots or flowers and are frequently only available in pastel colours. This makes sense in light of the fact that recently the maternity buyer at Sears "was promoted from the junior department to draw from the youthful fashion sensibility." (Steinhauer, 1997: 34). There are rarely bold, dark-coloured clothing except in business attire where power-dressing is appropriate. Maternity patterns reinforce femininity because they are light, airy and unobtrusive—as women are supposed to be, according to the beauty myth. It is not surprising that the most popular cut for a maternity dress is an A-Line, commonly referred to as a "baby doll" dress. This style de-emphasizes the protruding tummy while re-emphasizing childishness.

Infantilization appears not only in the styles and patterns of clothing, but also in the representations of the pregnant models. Often, the women are shown to feature a child resting her head on a woman's pregnant belly. All but one of the other images with children in the *JC Penney Catalogue* depict women touching the child in nurturing or guiding manner. This representation



*"Front Cover."
JC Penney Maternity
Collection Catalogue.
Spring/Summer 2001
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normalizes the ideology that women possess an “innate” maternal instinct to “mother.”

If pregnant women are not infantilized through representations of maternity clothes, they are matronized instead. The message to pregnant women is that they should begin to “look the part” and “dress appropriately.” Many women report “feeling old” when they become pregnant. In this way, the clothes marketed to pregnant women reinforce pregnancy as a temporal period of maturation—such clothing marks a new stage in life when a woman is assumed to go from being independent and childless to enacting her role as mother. These two stages are generally mutually exclusive.

The matronly look is still present in contemporary clothing designs. A recent visit to the maternity store in Toledo’s Franklin Park Mall revealed the majority of mannequins sporting pearl necklaces and scarves, which have come to signify motherhood or grandmotherhood. It is not unusual to find maternity clothes manuals featuring dowdy and frumpy patterns. These types of outfits, or accessories, reflect a pregnant woman’s impending “status” as mother-to-be. Some women choose to find alternatives to maternity clothing stores. If the designs do not detract consumers, the prices may.

Often, pregnant women look to plus size clothing as an alternative to designated maternity clothes. This is another way of connecting fat and pregnancy discourses because both types of women shop at similar stores. In fact, Lane Bryant began as a maternity store. Unfortunately, the matronly look is marketed to large woman as well; but, according to magazine *Entertainment Weekly*, plus-size stores are re-vamping their clothing lines. In “Frump Change,” Clarissa Cruz writes: “They’re not your mother’s fashion lines anymore. Matronly brands like Lane Bryant, Naturalizer, and Easy Spirit are revamping their images with trendier fashions and eye-catching ads” (2000: 22). The article goes on to quote Naturalizer’s Maggie Laver who says, “We need to ditch the old-lady stuff [to appeal to] a younger audience” (qtd. in Cruz, 2000: 22). It is as if the large body, whether fat or pregnant, signifies motherhood. In a return to Mary Russo’s (1995) “grotto-esque,” the large body is always a return to the maternal. Ultimately, the matron look functions as a reminder this body is “off-limits.” Whether the woman is fat or pregnant, her body is *not* to be read as sexually attractive.

Female sexuality is denied to the pregnant woman as she is no longer a sexy, but instead sexed body—one which is inscribed as female by pregnancy. Woman must renounce her sexual desire while pregnant or risk social vilification as her own needs are to be secondary to that of the fetus. Instead, the pregnant body is a chaste one despite the mark of sex since it is assumed that pregnancy is the result of sexual intercourse. If cultural discourse constructs pregnant women as “mothers-to-be,” sexual activity with a man recalls the Oedipal complex of attraction to the maternal which is to be sublimated. Therefore, pregnant women are seen as asexual beings.

One explanation of infantilization of pregnant women relates directly to sexuality. By appearing youthful and innocent, the pregnant body is *desexualized*. Since it is assumed that a woman has been sexually active to become pregnant, making her look like a child erases adult female sexuality—a sexuality that is threatening in Western culture. A pregnant woman is further thought of as asexual because there is the assumption her body has now become that of a mother’s. Her body is claimed by the fetus she carries and in a form of projection, the pregnant woman’s body becomes that of “her” child.

Lingerie marketed to pregnant woman similarly infantilizes the wearer. LSR Maternity sells “sleepwear with sass” to women who “don’t abstain from intimacy during pregnancy” (Rudolph, 2001). According to Laura S. Rudolph, designer and founder of LSR Maternity, the company recognizes that although “maternity clothes in general has seen a major shift in design during recent years from dowdy to chic, maternity sleepwear of other manufacturers has not followed that trend,” so LSR Maternity offers “true negligees in styles that range from conservative to alluring to ‘shagadellic” (Rudolph, 2001).

The representation of the clothing follows the same format—pregnant women looking juvenile. The “Shagadellic” outfit is a baby doll negligee available in pastel blue only. It is sported by a woman who looks like a 1960s



*From left to right, LSR Maternity, "Shagadellic," www.lsrmaternity.com
www.lsrmaternity.com. LSR Maternity, "Flirty." Source: All photographs on the LSR
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"flower child," quite literally since she has a flower in her hair. The "Flirty" outfit is only available in white, ironically recalling images of virginity. It is as if the Virgin Mary is remembered—a woman who is pregnant without sexual intercourse. The same model is pictured here also in a very girlish pose.

While such representations lend themselves to an analysis of gender, there is also much to be said about class biases. The decision to purchase maternity clothes, especially speciality apparel such as the aforementioned LSR Maternity sleepwear, is a "choice" only available to certain groups of women. According to maternity clothes manuals, and other clothing advice texts, what is most important for a pregnant woman in choosing clothing is to maintain her sense of "style." "Style" often comes with a hefty price tag, which many cannot afford. Upper class women can afford to be "pregnancy chic" and fashion designers are branching out into the maternity clothes market.

Pumpkin Maternity is one such company that markets designer maternity clothes. Created by Pumpkin Wentzel, Pumpkin Maternity was conceived in the fall of 1996 as [Wentzel] toured Europe with her rock band in a converted fish truck. She thought of her sister and her best friend back home, both

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Pumpkin Maternity Catalogue. Fall 2000. Source: © Pumpkin Maternity.

pregnant and complaining that they had nothing to wear. She knew exactly what was needed—a fresh, simple line of maternity clothes for the practical as well as fashion-savvy woman. (Pumpkin Maternity, 2001)

According to Wentzel, “Pregnancy should not require a radical break from personal style” (Pumpkin Maternity, 2001). Located in New York’s bohemian Soho district, Pumpkin Maternity sells clothing aimed at “chic” women with money to spend.

What is interesting about Pumpkin Maternity is the representation of the pregnant women in both its advertising and website. The models pictured here are neither infantilized nor matronized, as in other publications. The model in this image is especially subversive as she assumes a seated posture associated with masculinity, legs spread and arm between her legs. The picture is recuperated, though, with the attention paid to her high heels—a reminder of her femininity. Perhaps these advertisements assert that only upper class women can afford to be transgressive.

Catalogues, such as *JC Penney*, market maternity clothes to target audiences as well—in this case middle to upper class women. Through these publications, and the products sold, consumers can buy into a manufactured lifestyle. Catalogue shopping is a class signifier because it represents a leisure activity *afforded* to those who have time to browse through the pages. Class status is also represented in these catalogues because some must be purchased, such as those produced by Abercrombie and Fitch. It is an interesting double consumption—one must buy the catalogue in order to purchase the merchandise advertised. The aforementioned department store JC Penney targets a middle-class consumer because the clothes are “reasonably priced” and reflect imitation designer styles that are somewhat conservative in appearance. However, catalogue shopping targets an upper class consumer who can afford the inflated prices caused by shipping and other related charges. In addition to the ideology tacit in catalogue shopping is the class discourse found in the catalogue’s visual representations.

In the *JC Penney Catalogue*, of the ten pregnant women used as models, only one model is not wearing a wedding ring in any of her pictures. The ideology maintained in these representations is a heteronormative discourse as the wedding ring signifies a heterosexual coupling sanctioned by religion and/or state. The wedding ring combined with the presence of young children in the *JC Penney Catalogue* also maintains the “ideal” of a nuclear family.

Another lifestyle discourse is presented in catalogues selling specific maternity items. One example is Mothers in Motion—a company that markets exercise clothing to pregnant women. Their catalogue reads:

Mothers in Motion is driven and inspired by the internal strength that is evident in all women by the magic of the birth process, and the indomitable human spirit. We honor that strength with a patented line of performance-driven maternity athletic apparel that supports a

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woman during the most important time in her life; the anticipation of the birth of her child. (Hilpert, 2001)

Despite the essentialist tone of the introduction, Mothers in Motion is both a progressive and regressive company. The catalogue is one of the few that depict the naked pregnant belly. The front cover presents two obviously pregnant women enjoying the sight of their own and each other's distended bodies. However, as with the *JC Penney Catalogue*, the majority of women are pictured wearing wedding bands signifying heteronormativity.



"Front Cover." Mothers in Motion Catalogue 2000. Source: Mothers In Motion®

Clothing manuals point out that a woman should not lose her fashion sense while pregnant; she should maintain her pre-pregnancy identity as signified through clothing. Cherie Serota and Jody Kozlow Gardner write in *Pregnancy Chic: The Fashion Survival Guide*:

The main point we stress day in and day out is, at all costs, hold on to your style. Maintain it during your pregnancy. Your style before you became pregnant should continue to be your style during your pregnancy. You are still the same person.... It's probably taken you many years, possibly decades, to perfect your look. (1998: 12-13)

It is not a coincidence that this book points to a sense of "chic" when referring to style. Written by two young urban professionals, these people present themselves as informative—these women are "in the know." There is a perisocial relationship with the reader because both texts address the reader directly. Serota and Gardner (1998) appear as women who have "learned the hard way" how to dress fashionably while pregnant, and they are willing to impart this information to "you," the reader. But again, the "you" interpolated is a class specific one.

Women who cannot afford to purchase new articles of clothing do find alternate sources of maternity wear. One common alternative is sewing and there are many pattern books available at local libraries or fabric stores. Interestingly, these sources, though reinforcing a need for style, promote body image in a different way. For example, *Great Expectations* (Adams and Madaras, 1980) claims to come from the "if you've got it, flaunt it" school. It is one of the only books to include pictures of the naked pregnant body delighting in being nude. Patterns found in *Great Expectations* are "not little-girlish or belly-hiding" and the designers "wanted clothes that would hang well on pregnant bodies ... [and] could be personalized to suit any woman's lifestyle, whether it was urban career woman, suburban housewife, or rural earth mama" (Adams and Madaras, 1980: 5) Patterns in this book are aimed at women with minimal sewing skills so that anyone wanting to could create their own maternity clothes.

Lynn Sutherland's *Pregnant and Chic* (1989), in addition to being a guide to purchasing maternity clothes, offers various alternatives as well. Sutherland suggests visiting thrift and second-hand stores to find clothes that can be modified to suit one's style. A tip Sutherland offers is to "find a good store located near your home or office and stop by often. Because the inventory is one-of-a-kind, you either hit the jackpot or you don't. A perfectly wonderful outfit that's on the racks one day may be gone the next" (1989: 45). In addition to buying clothes to modify, some maternity companies will re-shape current clothes to fit properly. L'Attesa is one such company that offers to "maternalize" Levi 501 jeans. For \$19.00, L'Attesa (2001) will insert into a cotton lycra panel with an adjustable elastic waist band and button into a woman's pair of jeans or

trousers. This cost efficient process allows a pregnant woman to wear her current clothing for the duration of her pregnancy.

A final alternative to purchasing new maternity apparel is to borrow clothing from another person. Drop-in centres and social service organizations that help young and low-income pregnant women often collect clothing for redistribution. Similarly, some will often lend maternity clothes to family members and friends. The passing on of clothing creates a female-centred community. It is in this space that women offer advice to each other on pregnancy, birthing and parenthood. This female-centred activity subverts materialism because by borrowing maternity wear, a pregnant woman opts out of the market.

Maternity clothes are a problematic contestation where women must negotiate both infantilization and matronization, and “style” and budget. In addition, pregnant women contend with the beauty myth that contributes to negative self-image. Adams and Madaras write: “Most of us have enough vanity to enjoy the way we look dressed up in clothing we like. It’s especially important to support your vanity when you’re pregnant. Our self-images depend at least in part on the messages we get from those around us” (1980: 4). Since the marketing of maternity clothes is a \$1.5 billion industry (Murphy, 2000), it is crucial to reinforce positive representations of pregnant women and create mature, and affordable, apparel to clothe them.

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