BODIES

Cultivate Issue 2: Bodies

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Editorial

Our issue on bodies was inspired by the increased discussion around 'body positivity' in both mainstream media and feminist discourses. However, we are thrilled with the diverse and articulate submissions we received and are extremely happy to present Cultivate's second issue. In addition to debates around breastfeeding past infancy, critiques of the representation of Polynesian women as 'mermaids', neoliberal discussions around fat bodies and transmasculinities in fan fiction, this issue includes works of poetry, fashion and sculpture.

Gemma Gibson

Cultivate

Editor-in-Chief (2019)

The Waiting Room

Victoria Bailey

Waiting to see a male specialist
For a woman's problem
The time came and went
Powerless, I sat
Waiting
Had they forgotten about me?
Wouldn't be the first
Time spent
Devouring a magazine mountain of media
Pages and pages and pages and pages of past
Passed looking for one grey hair
There was one photo
Of a middle-aged male model
With what could have been grey hair
At his temple
Could have been the light
It was hard to tell
The young woman draped over him
Was unquestionable
Where was I?
Not anywhere
Women, women everywhere, nor any grey
To see
My kind
Unseen, undocumented, unobserved, unwanted
Not undone
I discarded the magazines on the side table
They wobbled
Slipping slightly before finding their balance
In an awkward position
Disregarding surrounding prompts
I held my position and waited

Biography
Victoria Bailey has written for a variety of feminist organizations and publications. She is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing with a matricentric feminist focus specifically centred on realizations and representations of single mothers over the last century.

Introduction

I am an activist on a range of social issues and was heavily involved with the Repeal the 8th campaign for abortion rights in Ireland. I'm interested in how the personal becomes political in the context of the choices we make about our clothing and accessories. My activism focuses on issues within Ireland and the UK and I've been involved in campaigns on both sides of the border. I create pieces of wearable art to make political statements and spread awareness.

My work has various stages: the process I use to dream up an idea, the execution and the public outings, and the sharing of photos of the final product on social media. I make headpieces specifically for protests, so my work is usually seen by thousands of people and as a result it has had extensive press coverage in both Irish national and international newspapers.

My process is influenced by being a lone parent of five kids. I use inexpensive materials as I can't afford more costly items. My children are usually my photographers, so the pictures are taken quickly, with only a minute or two to capture the image. I like to play with the idea of how women 'should' be in public – quiet, composed, not taking up space – compared with how I 'am' – bold, loud, in your face, unavoidable and demanding that people pay attention to my message.

I enjoy bringing a sense of fun to whatever I do, wherever possible. I have found that people respond to creativity and colour, so I attempt to create pieces that are visually striking in order to achieve maximum impact and encourage people to engage with me and my message. Spreading a sense of joy through my clothing and headpieces is important to me as I have experienced domestic abuse, rapes and gender-based discrimination. I enjoy defying patriarchal standards by expressing myself loudly and colourfully with my clothing and headwear. The gendered violence that I experienced taught me not to take up space, and by dressing with colour and joy I feel that I'm reclaiming my right to exist in the world. When wearing the headpieces, I feel powerful; they allow me to connect with others in ways I couldn't if I dressed normally. As the outreach aspect of my outfits is important, I generally try to create messaging that people will be able to engage with. I aim to frame issues in such a way that people will feel comfortable approaching me. An example of this is how I try to be for something rather than against something. However, there were two pieces I made for Repeal the 8th where I decided that this approach was not appropriate because I felt that people needed to be confronted with the reality of Ireland's abortion laws.

The biggest challenge I have when designing my wearable art is deciding on the message. Although I try to be inclusive, there have been times when I have used "women" when I would have preferred to say: "anyone capable of getting pregnant" or "people with uteruses," but both are very long sentences to put on a headpiece. Despite this, I did once make a headpiece that said, "Trans men and Intersex people need abortions too."

Vulva

I wore this to an LGBTQ event in Derry where I was performing at the Vagina Monologues. I was told I had to wear black, a colour I very rarely wear. While wearing this piece, I encountered a few groups of teenagers in the streets. I was struck by how respectful, interested and engaged the boys were, asking me questions and telling me they liked the headpiece.

Smashing the Patriarchy

This is one of the few headpieces I have created that wasn't intended for a specific event. I often use children's toys in my headpieces and was inspired by the idea of subverting a traditionally masculine symbol. I played with the idea of a tiara-like structure while creating a message that would counter the stereotypical idea of girlishness and princesses.

Speech Bubble

In this piece, I was playing with the idea of the messages we pass on through logos on clothing. I wondered what I would say if I could stop every person I passed on the street during the Repeal the 8th campaign. The message of Repeal the 8th was controversial at that time, therefore the comic-book speech bubble and the way I dressed made it more light-hearted.

On the back of the speech bubble was a more sombre message. I wanted people to understand that women have died because of the 8th amendment. This is the one headpiece where I did not stick to my usual theme of trying to be joyful. I did not believe the women who had died because of a lack of safe abortion services were getting enough press coverage and I wanted people who planned on voting "No" to face the reality of the 8th amendment.

Speech Bubble
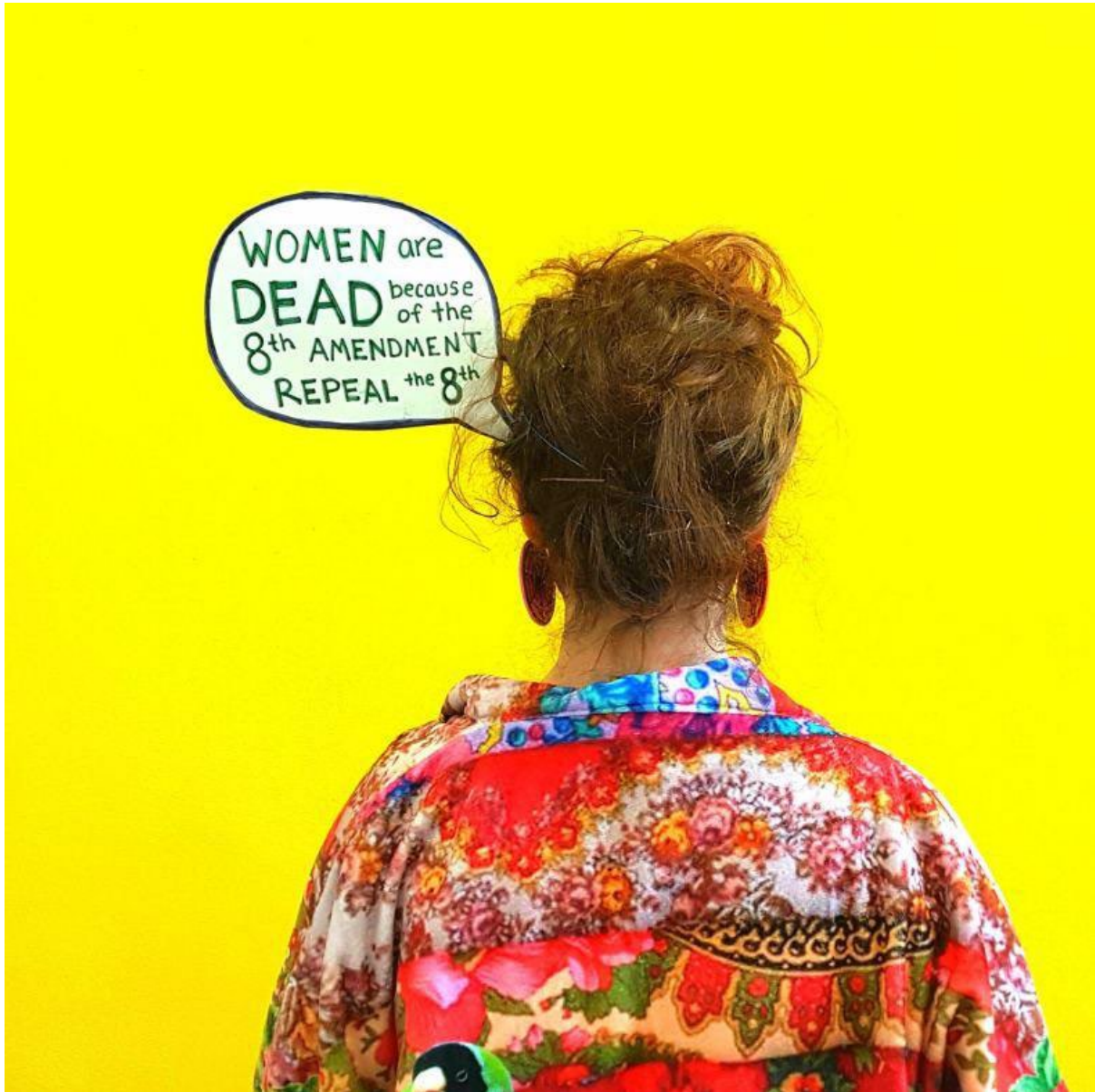
Where I live in Ireland, the population is conservative, and we were the only county that voted "no" to abortion rights in 2018. When wearing the headpiece in my own county, I knew I was promoting a controversial message. Every time I wore it, I experienced overtly negative reactions from anti-choice people I encountered. People stood in front of me, read it and sneered or said something offensive to me. Others looked angrily at me or looked as though they wanted to hurt me. Whenever I wore it, I had to prepare myself for these responses, even though it was a powerful and necessary message. I was always glad to take it off when I got home.

Who Owns Women?

During my canvassing, I met lots of older men who were "No" voters. I wanted to ask them who they thought owned women's bodies, so I decided to write it on a dress. I wanted a powerful and defiant stance for the photo, but the true power of this dress was wearing it on the streets and watching men engage with it. Men would stop in their tracks to read the question. I stood still to allow them to read it and take it in. Some of the men would give me hard stares but others gave me gentle smiles or nods.

Women Will Never Be Free Under the DUP

This headpiece was created for the Belfast Processions. Alliance for Choice, of which I am part, was marching at the back of the processions to call for abortion rights in Northern Ireland. I created this headpiece in suffragette colours to honour the processions. I made a political statement on the headpiece about how far women still have to go in Northern Ireland to achieve full equality. The DUP is a political party in Northern Ireland that is currently aligned with the right-wing Tory party. They often disagree with progressive changes to policy around reproductive rights, multiculturalism, unbiased sex education and LGBTQI+ rights.

Yes

After the repeal referendum was called, the messaging became about urging people to vote "Yes." This is one of a number of "Yes"-themed headpieces I made. While I have been making headpieces for over a decade, I had never created so many for one specific issue before the Repeal campaign. The county I live in is largely anti-choice and our "Yes" posters were being removed the same night we put them up. So I decided I would "be" the signs and I made a commitment to wear a pro-choice outfit every day until the referendum. I would post the photos on social media, where I created a special "Dress for Yes" public album on Facebook that I updated daily. I wore this to a number of events around Dublin, and then took it apart, and later used the "Yes" part in other headpieces.

Repealed

This headpiece accompanied headlines in online and print newspapers all over the world the day after we won Repeal.* I made it two days before, confident that we would win. A few months prior to the referendum, a mural designed by the artist Maser appeared on the Dublin Project Arts Centre's external wall. The mural was of a huge red heart with white lettering saying "Repeal" running across it. It became something of a pilgrimage spot for abortion rights campaigners and pictures of people posing in front of it were posted all over social media prior to the referendum. In the lead-up to the referendum, the Irish Charities Regulator informed the Project Arts Centre that they had to remove the mural, which to many people seemed like a biased act of censorship. I used the heart and font from Maser's mural as inspiration and created an outfit to match. This headpiece is now in the National Museum of Ireland's collection.

Biography

Taryn de Vere is a cis, migrant woman living in Ireland. Taryn explores political and social messaging through fashion activism, colour and social media. Her work is primarily influenced by being a lone parent of five children and the reduced finances that come with that situation. She uses recycled children's craft materials to create headpieces and other wearable art. Her work has appeared in newspapers around the world and several of her pieces are in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland.

Mermaids of the South Seas: paradisal landscapes and the Western Imagination

Anaïs Duong-Pedica

Abstract

Visual representations of Polynesia depict the region as 'paradise' and have been ripe with myths since Europeans' first contact with the islands, particularly around Polynesian women. This article considers representations of mermaids and Polynesian women in Western visual culture, specifically 'Girls of the South Seas' imagery from Tahiti. Using a postcolonial feminist perspective on representation, this essay argues that similar visual narratives are used to represent mermaids and Polynesian women in that they are both created through heterosexist and colonial understandings of the Other. This is particularly apparent in the use of visual markers of exoticism and eroticism in both types of representation. The article also explores the relationship between these images, their representational practices and tourism as a myth-making industry and urges us to place these representations in their broader historical and colonial contexts as well as problematising their social impact on the Pacific Islands and their peoples.
Keywords: Polynesia, mermaids, representation, Tahiti, women

To most people of the world, we… who are called 'Pacific Islanders'… are not real.
We are thought of as people of the past; people who come from small island states; people who live in the sun by sky blue oceans.

We are thought of romantically… by the Western world… with images of beautiful women thinly clad in cloth with hibiscus patterns, flowers in our hair, hips swaying under the coconut palm trees, beckoning the Western world into a world of magic and romance – Hinewirangi Kohu, Ngati Kahungungu Ngati Ranginui (Māori) (1994)

Introduction

 "Mermaids of the South Seas" is a play on words that connects the mermaid with another myth: the "South sea maiden" (Rothenberg 1995; Sturma 2002), one of the terms used for Western sexualised representations of Polynesian women. Scholars have attributed a variety of other names to this form of representation, such as the "Wood Nymph" (Nordström 1992), the "nubile savage" (Sturma 1995), the "Pacific Muse" (O'Brien 2006), or the "Dusky Maiden" (Taouma 1998; Pearson 2005; Smith 2008; Tamaira 2010). All of these terms reflect the concept of the dark sexual "belle". She is "dark", yet she is not Black. Being neither Black nor white, Polynesian people and women served as a "buffer race" in the Pacific region, "between the colonizing whites (and later, Japanese) and those who early on had been defined as blacks, especially Australian aboriginal peoples from neighboring island societies and New Guinea" (Gailey 1994, 35). For Western explorers, the nature of Polynesians' otherness is attributed to the noble (brown) savages who stand in opposition to the dark savages of Melanesia. This racial distinction means that Pacific island women were not represented in the same way. If, historically, the women from western Pacific Islands (e.g. Vanuatu, Kanaky New Caledonia) were depicted as "ugly, sexually unappealing and sexually sequestered 'beasts of burden,' cruelly oppressed by men", women from the eastern islands (e.g. Tahiti and Hawai'i) were represented as "beautiful, sexually alluring, 'lascivious ladies'" (Jolly 2007, 520). This racial hierarchy continues to inform the way in which Pacific islander women are imagined and represented in and by the West. On its own, the term *vahine*, which is merely the Tahitian word for 'woman', suffices to elicit exo-erotic images of Tahitian women in the contemporary French imagination. A quick search on the word 'vahine' in *Google Images* demonstrates the erotic connotations associated with the word.

This paper is about encounters. First, it is about my regular encounters with the 'Polynesian' body – "both 'real' and 'imaginary'" (Teaiwa 1998, 250) at home, in Kanaky New Caledonia, and in other places, including Western popular culture. The second encounter is with mermaids, those who are 'imaginary', especially in folklore and popular culture, and the 'real' ones (mermaiders). Mermaiders is a term coined by Robertson (2013) and alludes to individuals who

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take part in the mermaid subculture and fandom through mermaid 'cosplaying' (costume-playing), and/or the adoption of mermaid identities, or 'mersonas'. Mermaiders are also referred to as 'real mermaids'. Some of them become professional performers and are paid to embody the mythical creature in aquariums, water parks and at special events, and for modelling. In merging these two icons, I wish to render visible the colonial contexts and legacies, as they are meant by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2012 [1997]), in which these images are produced and without which they would make little sense. I attempt to demonstrate that contemporary Western representations of 'Polynesian' women and mermaids suggest the inheritance of gendered colonial visual and representational practices when it comes to the Pacific. Mermaiders, in constructing their mermaid personas, create racialised, sexualised and gendered selves. 'Polynesian' women, in being constructed as 'South sea maidens', become racialised, colonised, sexualised and gendered objects. This paper shows how eroticised Western representations of 'vahine' are a way of crafting their difference from Western lifestyles and femininities. On the one hand, the photographs analysed here contribute to the creation and reiteration of monolithic images of Third World/Southern women (Mohanty 2003) that are created by the tourism industry. On the other hand, these visual markers of 'Pacific' or 'Polynesian' landscapes and femininity are appropriated and used by Western mermaiders and in mermaid visual culture to produce underwater and overwater fantasy identities and worlds.

I call the visual representations that I focus on in this paper 'Western' because they are created for and by the West. The way in which 'the West' and 'Western' are understood is mainly informed by Meyda Yeğenoğlu's definition of the 'Western subject' in *Colonial Fantasies* (1998, 3–4):

The operation I call 'Westernizing' consists in the fashioning of a historically specific fantasy whereby members imagine themselves as Western. The engendering and fashioning of the Western subject thus has a fictive character. But the fictive character of this position does not mean that it is not real; on the contrary, it produces material effects by constituting the very bodies of the subjects that it subjects. [...] One 'becomes' and is made Western by being subjected to a process called Westernizing and by imagining oneself in the fantasy frame of belonging to a specific culture called the 'West'

The Western subject is, by definition, positioned in opposition to the colonial subject. Western societies, as the instigators and/or benefactors of colonisation, are seen as civilised, whereas colonised lands and peoples are perceived as primitive. As Stuart Hall has argued, "'the West' is a *historical*, not a geographical, construct" and characterises societies that are "developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern" (1992, 277). In his work on orientalism, Said (1978) argued that the Western desire to represent and know the Oriental other was connected with its will to power. In the case of the Pacific Islands, the racial ordering of Oceania is organised around the Western subject and its universal norms. This failure to deal adequately with difference has generated sexist and racist attitudes towards the indigenous peoples of the Pacific. Oceanicism (Pearson 2005), the South Pacific version of orientalism, is also an ideological instrument of domination in that it is "a homogenizing project of power and discourse that has created racialized identities, essentialized mentalities, and cultural typologies" (Sissons 1998, 164). An exploration of representations of the Pacific feminine Other (in this case, the 'vahine') and mythical creatures (mermaids) seems relevant insofar as "encounters with the 'other' have always provided fuel for myths and mythical language" (Selwyn 1993, in Hall 1998, 140). In investigating the visual relationships between mermaids and 'vahine', this research reiterates the persistence of colonial narratives in twenty-first-century visual representations of the Pacific Islands and lays down the groundwork for making visible the connection between mer-visual cultures and colonialism.

I first provide some context for the images I have analysed, especially for sexualised images of 'Tahitian' women. I then briefly introduce the resurgence of the mermaid as a significant and powerful symbol in Western cultures before making some historical links between the ways in which mermaids and 'Polynesian' women have been perceived and represented. Then, I explore the similarities between them in contemporary photography and visual media and discuss the

implications of these resemblances. Whilst I focus on twenty-first-century photographs of mermaiders and 'Girls of the South Seas', I often make links with historical visual representations in order to shed light on the lineage of these images.

'Girls of the South Seas'

In this paper, I analyse twenty-first-century mermaider photographs taken by both professional and non-professional photographers, as well as broader visual representations of mermaids in Western popular culture. These representations of mermaids are then juxtaposed with visual representations of 'Polynesian women' aimed at Western audiences, especially in the context of tourism to the Pacific Islands. Specifically, I explore 'South sea maiden' imagery, in which the models are posing near or in bodies of water, with a focus on the 'Girls of the South Seas' photo collection created in Tahiti by the company *Pacific Promotion*. These photographs are a continuation of the phenomenon of 'exotic' and eroto-ethnographic photography, intended for foreign audiences, that flourished during the period of imperial expansion in the Pacific during the nineteenth century (Nordström 1991). They are part of a broad pattern in Western culture of representing the Pacific Islands through photography (Waldroup 2010). 'Girls of the South Seas' is a translation from the French "Filles des Mers du Sud". It consists of a collection of photographs started by French-Tahitian photographer Teva Sylvain in the 1970s. Teva Sylvain was continuing the work of his French father, Adolphe Sylvain, who arrived in Tahiti in 1946. Adolphe Sylvain's photographic work in Tahiti is essentially constituted of images of "Polynesian nature, girls or landscapes" (Charnay 1981, as cited on Pacific Promotion n.d.a, *my translation*). At the time of his arrival on the island, Tahiti had been a French colony for 66 years. In an interview, he recalled that there were already a few professional photographers based on the island and that they all specialised in portrait photography. According to him, there were two Americans, a Czech and a French photographer whose photographic work, much like the work of nineteenth-century French painter Paul Gauguin before them, represented the island and its peoples through a Western lens (Charnay 1981, as cited on Pacific Promotion n.d.a). In fact, European and American itinerant photographers and travellers were already taking pictures of French Polynesia in the 1850s (Waldroup 2010) and a commercial photography industry was first set up in Pape'ete, the capital of the island, in 1868 (O'Reilly 1969, in Waldroup 2010). Adolphe Sylvain is most well-known for his portrait photography, especially black-and-white portraits of thin, young, bare-breasted Tahitian women posing among Polynesian nature. A selection of these photographs can be found in *Tahiti: Sylvain*[1], a book dedicated to his work. The back cover of the book states that "between 1974 and 1980, [Adolphe Sylvain] contributed to the creation of the Polynesian myth by taking many photos of vahine" (Barbieri and Lacouture 2001). Like Gauguin, while in Tahiti, Adolphe Sylvain married a Tahitian woman, with whom he had five children, including Teva, who established himself as a photographer in Pape'ete in the 1970s. Through the creation of his company, *Pacific Promotion Tahiti*, Teva Sylvain produced a series of postcards that can now be found in Vanuatu, New Caledonia, American Samoa, Hawaii, Cooper Mountain, in the (mostly French) Caribbean, and Paris (Pacific Promotion n.d.b.), as well as in other European countries and the USA (Poirier 2012). The company's website further states that "millions of the photographs were edited into various forms: postcards, calendars, posters, books, lighters, table sets, coasters, mugs, writing sets, envelopes…" (Pacific Promotion n.d.b, *my translation*).

It is through these postcards, calendars and posters that I first encountered Teva Sylvain's photography as a local of Kanaky New Caledonia. In fact, in Kanaky New Caledonia, one can find bare-breasted 'Polynesian' women on these items in shops selling tourist curios but also in supermarkets. Lighters decorated with pictures of 'vahine' striking erotic poses can be found in 'Tabac Presse' and convenience stores. Exo-erotic visual representations of 'Tahitian' and other 'Polynesian' women have a (colonial) history and, in Tahiti, they are not limited to the work Adolphe and Teva Sylvain. Many photographers specialise in this type of photography, which can then be used and marketed by other companies. The erotic character of the photos varies and depends on the context in which they are used. For example, the popular Tahitian beer brand *Hinano Tahiti*[2] capitalises on this type of imagery by each year releasing a calendar which the brand describes as "paying tribute to the Vahine and her power of seduction" (Hinano

Tahiti 2018). Although the models' breasts are concealed in the pictures, the emphasis on seduction appears clear in a two-minute video showing the making of the 2017 *Hinano* Calendar (Hinano Tahiti 2016). The *Hinano* website also points out that the launching of a new calendar is an event that many fans of the brand look forward to in French Polynesia and all over the world and that it has become a collector's item. This seems to be a continuation of the nineteenth-century trend of creating collectable postcards and stereographs of the Pacific Islands. As Teva Sylvain himself says, "the vahine is a product that is exported/exportable to the entire world" (Poirier

Throughout this paper, I use inverted commas when referring to 'Polynesian' and 'Tahitian' bodies. This is because, while the models in the photos are meant to represent Tahitian and Polynesian women, not all of them are in fact Tahitian or Polynesian, nor do they all come from the Pacific Islands. In the documentary *La vahiné: entre mythe et réalité* (*Vahine: between myth and reality*) (Poirier 2012), Teva Sylvain, called "the king of postcards" by the presenter, mentions that some of the models who pose for his 'Girls of the South Seas' collection come from many other places, such as Argentina and France. The explanation provided by the documentary for the use of non-Tahitian women is the disapproval of this type of photography in Polynesian culture. This echoes Samoan Reverend Mua Strickson-Pua's claim in the documentary *Velvet Dreams* (Urale 1997) that topless Polynesian women are usually perceived as a *palagi[3]* sexual fantasy about Polynesian people, which clashes with the conservatism of some Polynesian communities. This was especially true during the 1950s. Indeed, Pritchard and Morgan point out that, for visual image-makers and foreign consumers of these visuals, "it is the aestheticized, imagined island woman who is desired, not the reality of contemporary Tahitian women" (2007, 175). Despite this, the pictures are used and marketed as 'authentic' representations of Polynesian women. On the *Hinano Tahiti* website, where the Hinano Calendar 2018 is downloadable for free, the calendar is promoted as follows: "exuding both authenticity and glamour, it treasures the Vahine pictured in spectacular surroundings that reflect the Polynesian women and Polynesia" (Hinano Tahiti 2018). This is why it is particularly significant to emphasise the fact that 'South Sea maidens' are representations rather than realities (Sturma 2002). In fact, by now, it should be clear that this paper is about fantasies: "imagined places rather than loci on the map" (Jolly 1997, 99) as well as imagined women, be they mermaids or 'Girls of the South Seas'[4].

Visual representations of women contribute to the social, sexual and psychological constructions of femininity (Pritchard and Morgan 2007). A visual approach to representation is particularly relevant in the study of Pacific peoples because the tourist industry produces highly gendered images of 'paradise'. These images assume an important role in the cultivation of the geographical imagination (Staszak 2006). Hall argues that "such images are an inherent part of the tourism phenomenon which, perhaps more than any other business, is based on the production, reproduction and reinforcement of images" (1998, 140). Fashion photographers[5] play a similarly significant role in the creation of visual meanings and individualities, especially with regard to femininity. In both cases, photography is a method by which myths about places and peoples can be created and reinforced. In the context of representations of Polynesian women, images of Pacific peoples and women in early professional photography have been qualified as "stereographic" (Nordström 1991, 275) in that they create the illusion of reality. Throughout this paper, I argue that some contemporary photographs of Polynesian women are not only stereographic but also mythographic in their similitude with mermaid photography and imagery more generally. In other words, these images are not only creating an illusion of reality, they are also using creatures and stories already present in the Western imagination, such as mermaids, in order to craft and reiterate myths about the Pacific.

The (hyper)sexual and exotic mermaid
Mermaids have been a popular European figure since the Middle Ages (Weinbaum 1999) and are commonly associated with Greek sirens. Today, sirens and mermaids are perceived as an incarnation of the femme fatale. This is notably symbolised by the popular perception of

mermaids as dangerous seductresses who can be sources of both pleasure and lust (Di Biase 2012). Thus, although mermaids are nearly always female (Kokai 2011), they are not historically seen as representing traditional passive femininity. On the contrary, in paintings from the late nineteenth century, mermaids are represented as dangerous temptresses who lure men to their deaths. The mermaid's hypersexuality can be interpreted as a signifier of (her) exotic femininity. Nonetheless, her sexual appetite does not prevent her from being objectified. This is particularly illustrated by her beautiful female torso (Mealing 2013) and the range of seductive poses that her kin strikes in visual imagery, from classical paintings[6] to the more contemporary mermaider photography. Additionally, as a temptress, the mermaid is an evocation of the pagan world (Sylvestre 1890, as cited in Dijkstra 1986). Indeed, in the Christian bestiaries, the mermaid represents a warning against sin (White 1993), a connotation that highlights her exotic status. The hybridity of the mermaid in being 'half woman', 'half animal' locates her in the world of monsters and animals, along with lycanthropes, cyclopses, centaurs and other races found in medieval bestiaries. Her monstrosity places her at the boundaries of the civilised world, "where nature becomes unfamiliar" (Steel 2012, 261). In fact, the mermaid's literal animality (her fish-tail) and symbolic animality (her primal sexuality) indicate her nonhuman otherness and are also signs of exoticism. Studying mermaids is important today because of their ongoing relevance in the contemporary world. As Pearson (2009, 105) notes:

The mermaid is the sole survivor in popular culture of the great menagerie of hybrid creatures that inhabit the margins of the medieval world picture. We may recognize centaurs and satyrs, but only the mermaid can claim an ongoing life in the popular imagination – as witness her role in films, in advertising, an in the plethora of Internet sites devoted to her…

The Western fascination with the figure of the mermaid is notably illustrated in the USA, where the 'family friendly' Weeki Wachee's underwater theatre and show opened for the first time in Florida in 1947. The show displayed water-based performances capitalising on the exhibition of white, heterosexual female bodies dressed up as mermaids for a presumed heterosexual male audience (Kokai 2011). In 2013, Robertson identified three sites of mermaid performance in the Western, and particularly North American, landscape: the Weeki Wachee theme-park, the Coney Island Mermaid Parade of New York, and the "burgeoning global mermaiding subculture" (2013, 309). These sites are now spreading across the Atlantic. For example, the British seaside town of Brighton held its fifth 'March of the Mermaids' in July 2017. If the Mermaid Parade of Coney Island is a homage to the former tradition of the Coney Island Mardi Gras since 1983 (Faratin 2014), the 'March of the Mermaids' is promoted as "a celebration of the sea, mermaids and sea creatures of all kinds" and aims to raise awareness of marine conservation (VisitBrighton 2014). Robertson suggests that the resurgence of mermaids could lead to a "reawakening of the kinship between humans and the natural world", especially since mermaids are seen as an "emblem for the majesty of nature, and the ocean in particular" (2013, 308–309)[7]. What is more, 2017 saw the organisation of the first 'Bexhill Festival of the Sea', also in the United Kingdom, which featured a mermaid gathering where "mermaids and mermen of all ages are welcome" in order to attempt the Guinness World Record for largest gathering of mermaids (Bexhill Festival of the Sea 2017) and France's first 'Festival des Sirènes' (Mermaid Festival) (Le Festival des Sirènes 2017). These events testify to the re-emergence and significance of mermaids as cultural symbols in the West. While, for the purpose of this paper, I focus on 'the West' and not necessarily on whiteness, it is also worth noting than the vast majority of the pictures of mermaids I have analysed were of white women, which is representative of the whiteness of Western mercultures. Indeed, the most popular 'mersonas' and professional mermaids are white, the audience at mermaid festivals is overwhelmingly white and mermaid schools are attended mostly by white women. In an interview with *The Guardian* (Glenza 2015), Jennifer Kokai explains the whiteness of the mer-phenomenon as follows:

The deal is that culturally mermaids have been a safe way for white women to express sexuality because while the top half of the mermaid might be really pretty and attractive, the bottom half is a fish, so it's the ultimate kind of look and don't touch (…) I think it's a way for women to play around with sexuality without being seen as impure or slutty.

The Pacific Islands and Polynesian women

Western popular knowledge about the Pacific is mainly constituted of clichés about the islands, their peoples and the history of Western colonisation (O'Brien 2006). These clichés are partly informed by the journals of eighteenth-century voyagers such as James Cook or Louis Antoine de Bougainville, who told stories of "beautiful and uninhibited women" (Kahn 2003, 310) and created the Polynesia of sexual freedom that still exists today. Voyagers' perceptions of Polynesian women played a major role in the romanticisation of the Pacific. They reported that Polynesian girls and women would publicly offer themselves to members of the crews. However, Tcherkézoff claims that European voyagers experienced a false sense of sexual hospitality (2004, 2005, 2009). In fact, misunderstandings were common as the interpretation of women and culture was conducted solely through a masculine, heterosexual lens and colonial narratives (Pritchard and Morgan 2007). Amongst the consequences of this false sense of sexual openness was the portrayal South Pacific women as temptresses. Indeed, to make sense of their experiences in the Pacific Islands, European voyagers compared the beauty of the islands and their peoples, especially women, to Greek Gods and Goddesses. Polynesian women were compared to Venus[8] rising from the waves (Sturma 2002) and Bougainville named Tahiti 'Nouvelle Cythère' (New Cytheria) after the birthplace of Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of Love (Tcherkézoff 2005; O'Brien 2006; Pritchard and Morgan 2007). The use of mythology to make sense of difference is evident in a black-and-white photograph taken by Lucien Gauthier entitled 'Tahitian Beauties' dating from the early twentieth century. The picture features a Brown Tahitian woman in a studio mirroring the pose of Venus in Sandro Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus' (1485). Apart from shell necklaces in her hair and around her neck, and hiding her pubis with flowers, she is nude. Similarly, the pictures taken for LIFE magazine by American photographer Eliot Elisofon of a Tahitian woman bathing in a river (1954–1955) bears a close resemblance to the 'Aphrodite of Rhodes' (especially her back) from the Hellenistic period. The comparison of Tahiti to the realm of Greek Gods and Goddesses can be related to the perception that 'native subjects' operate in an unchanging, mythic past that is unrelated to Western realities (Nordström 1992). By portraying Tahiti as an 'Island of Love' and linking Polynesian people to nature, Westerners imagined Polynesia as being at an earlier stage of development than Europe. This also contributed to the infantilisation of Pacific peoples, who were seen as "childlike, libidinous, free and natural people" (Pritchard and Morgan 2007, 164), a perception that facilitated the connection with Antiquity's early civilisations (Taouma 2007). What is more, scholars such as Sturma (2002) and O'Brien (2006) have demonstrated that *The Odyssey* inspired the tales that voyagers and wanderers used in order to incorporate Pacific people into Western culture:

A central theme of the Odyssean myth, which became core to Occidental colonization, is the travelling man's exposure to sexual danger. Odysseus' sexual adventures are telling tales that elucidate the persistent dualisms outlined above and that are axiomatic to understanding the construction of female primitivism. (O'Brien 2006, 41)

Amongst the tropes of primitive and supernatural women in *The Odyssey* were the enchantress Circe, the beautiful nymph-goddess Calypso, and the sirens. Their primitiveness was characterised by their erotic dangerousness, notably in their attempts to lure men to their deaths. In fact, O'Brien argues that "extravagant, dangerous sexuality and beauty were hallmarks of exotic femininity from this seminal story on" (2006, 42). She goes on to note that the primitivism and exoticism of these Odyssean temptresses (and specifically those of the sirens) were deployed in order to introduce Polynesian women to European audiences. The fact that beauty, childishness and aggressive sexual desire are common characteristics of mermaids[9] made them symbolically compatible with Polynesian women. The association of Polynesian women with mythical water creatures was present, for example, in the writing of voyagers such as Forster (1777), who accompanied Cook on his voyage around the world: "The view of these nymphs[10] swimming nimbly all around the sloop, such as nature had formed them was perhaps more than sufficient entirely to subvert the little reason which a mariner might have left to govern his passions" (as cited in Jolly 1997, 101). Moreover, supernatural

women were also used to describe nature in the Pacific. For example, in Rarotonga, Beatrice Grimshaw (1907), an Irish 'lady traveler', writes about a "drooping of leafage fine as mermaid's hair" and "that lovely ironwood, a tree with leaves like maiden's locks, and the voice of a mermaid's song in the whispering boughs" (ibid., 106). Thus, these allegories emphasised the connection between women, nature and divinities, especially those associated with water.

The late nineteenth century observed a proliferation of representations of 'nymphs', 'sirens' and 'maenads' in art. According to Dijkstra:

[These female figures were] the visual expression of a heady mixture of wish-fulfillment fantasies, fear, horror, hope, and revulsion crowding the nineteenth-century male mind. This melange of elements also spoke loudly through bio- sexists' disquisitions upon the bottomless pit of woman's sexual nature. At the same time, the painters' pursuit of these mythical, sex-starved creatures legitimized the average male's fantasies about "the wild women" who assumed a masculine, aggressive sexual role. (1986, 250)

Subsequently, by being associated with sirens, Polynesian women were also related to the iconic figure of the femme fatale, which dominated nineteenth-century art (Pritchard and Morgan 2007). This is notably illustrated and emphasised by the use of the figure of Eve in images of Polynesian women (O'Brien 2006). For example, Brooks (1990) demonstrates how the figure of Eve is a focal point in Paul Gauguin's body of work. During the year following his arrival in Tahiti, Gauguin painted his 'Tahitian Eve' (1892), rendering Eve 'native' by setting her in an exotic and fantastical paradise. Tahiti was also described as a 'Garden of Eden' in the writings of various travellers (Tcherkézoff 2005; Serra Mallol 2005). Eve joins Venus and the sirens in the trope of the powerful temptresses and *femmes fatales* (Pinson 2010). O'Brien summarises the relationship between the three figures as followed:

The young beautiful Venus wringing water from her tresses was a configuration of exotic femininity that was absorbed into the Christian tradition in a number of forms, as sirens and also as Eve, the paramount encapsulation of Christian fears of female sexuality. (2006, 49)

O'Brien (2006) further explains that Eve and Aphrodite are related because they were both created in Paradise as women and that Eve is also related to the iconography of mermaids by being connected to the satanic serpent. The threads that connect these female characters are their exotic femininity and sexuality. These features subsequently become representative of all Polynesian women during the process of the incorporation of Pacific peoples into the American and European imagination, and act as a way to mark difference between colonised Pacific peoples and Western subjects. In contemporary Western representations, the visual markers of the South sea maiden are long black hair, "a skin that is dark, but not too dark" (Ganser 2017, 158), dark eyes (Beets 1997), an alluring pose (Kahn 2003), and *hei*[11]-bedecked hair (Tamaira 2010) or a hibiscus blossom behind her ear (Khan 2003)[12].

Mermaids of the South Seas
Western visual representations of mermaids and 'Girls of the South Seas' imagery clearly had similar themes and "their own visual vocabulary and grammar" (Mulvey 2009 [1989], 7). For example, images of 'Tahitian' women and mermaiders share narratives such as bathing scenes, underwater and swimming scenes, narratives of beached bodies, women and mermaids sitting on rocks or being caught in fishermen's nets. Representing mermaids in the nets of fishermen or on rocky cliffs along the ocean was a common narrative amongst painters of the nineteenth century (Dijkstra 1986). These are clearly themes that have not only transcended history but have also been re-used to represent Polynesian women. For example, there is much resemblance between William Hodges' 'Tahiti Revisited' or 'Vaitepiha Bay' (1776), a painting representing a group of 'Tahitian' women, one bathing in the lagoon and two others lying naked on the rocks, in front of an idyllic background of mountains and palm trees, and the mermaids of *Peter Pan* (1953), two centuries later, bathing in a lagoon and sitting on rocks in the midst of verdant hills and tropical trees. The same can be noted of the still of 'Samoan' children in Flaherty's silent documentary *Moana: A Story of the South Seas*[13] (1926), sitting on rocks, in front

of a waterfall that a Disney mermaid could have used as a natural shower thirty years later. One wonders: do they have fish-tails, or do they have legs?

Osborne notes that "the mythology of 'the South with paradisal meanings" (2000, 107–108). This is effectively the case for the pictures of 'Polynesian' women in the 'Girls of the South Seas' collection as many of them are taken in front of a waterfall, by a river, at the beach, or in the sea, and the backgrounds contain luxuriant vegetation and notably palm trees. This is also the case for images of mermaiders and mermaids more generally. In both cases, nature is a dominant key. The use of blue and green backgrounds and the mix of water and vegetation without buildings or men contribute to the impression of remote desert islands only populated by 'Polynesian' women and/or visited by mermaids. The close relationship between women, mermaids and water is emphasised by the aquamarine colours, the use of fishing nets and the direct contact between women's bodies and water. Additionally, the shades of blues and greens, along with the bright colours of their fish-tails, bras, necklaces, flowers and hair accessories contribute to the colour saturation of the images. The utopian brightness and intense colour saturation of these photos promise a positive tourist experience and therefore contribute to the making of an effective tourist promotion (Osborne 2000). These islands of mermaids and women become paradisal utopian places into which the viewer can project himself. If the places in the backgrounds of the pictures of 'Polynesian' women are supposedly in Polynesia, when juxtaposed with images of mermaids, the similarity of backgrounds blurs the boundary between the 'reality' of geographical places (South Pacific Islands) and the fantasy of imagined places, such as the mermaids' lagoon in Disney's *Peter Pan* (1953). In addition, the lack of markers of contemporary Western life, such as buildings, technology, or Western clothing, creates a gap between the feminine island/ocean world of 'the South' and the more civilised, masculine world of the West. This mise-en-scène, in the cases of both 'Girls of the South Seas' imagery and mermaid visuals, acts to confine these bodies to the realm of the natural rather than the cultural. In the context of images of Hawai'i, Borgerson and Schroeder (2003) have argued that paradise is packaged as 'retropia': a place that is stuck in the past. They write that the retropian representation of Hawai'i, along with its seductive premodern women, depicts the archipelago as arising "from oceanic depths as a Garden of Eden variety paradise offering premoral, before the all, guiltless existence" (ibid., 219). By appealing to ideas of fantasy, escape, primitivism and exoticism, these pictures are often nostalgic in nature. Given the histories of European and American colonisation of Polynesia, and the continuing occupation of Hawai'i by the USA and of Te Aho Maohi (Land of the Maohi)/Tahiti–Polynesia by the French, it is a specifically colonial nostalgia that is at the heart of these images and that is, more generally, used by the tourism industry to feed the Western imagination about the Pacific Islands and their women.

This divide between the worlds of the sea and land is made obvious in Murphy's ecofeminist critique of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Murphy notes a distinction between the surface world and the world of merpeople. In effect, the fact that "merpeople just sing and dance, while humans work" (1995, 132) establishes the aquatic world as underdeveloped. Moreover, Sells adds that the underwater scenes in *The Little Mermaid* resemble Georgia O'Keeffe paintings, colourful and "rich with the female imagery of sea shells and cave openings" (1995, 178). According to Murphy, this creates a racist and colonialist first-world/third-world relationship between the humans and the sea, and reinforces

the human/nonhuman and culture/nature dichotomies by associating the merpeople [...] with a closer-to-nature, live-off-the-
*land indigenous lifestyle inferior to the industrial lifestyle – because advanced humans make things, i.e
., they transform nature to serve them rather than adapt themselves to cohabitate with the rest of their environment.* (1995, 132).

The assumed adaptation of 'Polynesian' women to their environment is particularly striking in photographs taken underwater by Téva Sylvain and other photographers. Effectively, the women do not need any diving equipment; they seem to be able to breathe underwater and to be

comfortable around sea flora and fauna, swimming among the fish and coral, much like mermaids. Sells goes further in her analysis and argues that "the human world can be aligned with the white male system and the water world situated outside this system" (ibid., 177). As a consequence, the visual resemblance between representations of mermaids and 'Girls of the South Seas', particularly in the depictions of women embedded in mysterious and vibrant nature, accentuates the primitiveness of the feminine, but also of the 'Polynesian' body. The use of exotic and romantic landscapes as backgrounds to evoke the primitive life of these women and half-women reflects the idea of the fantasy land or utopia particularly used in tourist promotions. Thus, the display of 'Polynesian' nature and women "does not connote the *realism* of the image but rather its *difference*, its distance from European everyday life" as "exoticism is not a geographical phenomenon or one of a foreign body but, rather, a phenomenon of *décor*" (Yee 2000, 44, emphasis in original, *my translation*). Nevertheless, these women and mermaids are never completely bound to the ocean. In many instances, 'Tahitian' women's bodies are not completely underwater and, when they are, their legs act as a reminder of their connection to the land. Coincidentally, Mealing states that the mermaid "perpetually gestures toward possibility and change, positioned as she is between the oceanic dream world and land" (2013, 6). The emphasis on showing 'Tahitian' women as comfortable in the water, and almost intimate with it, suggests that they, too, are living and evolving between the oceanic dream world and the land. They are comfortable in both and can morph into water beings when necessary. Much like mermaids, the 'Tahitian' women in the 'Girls of the South Seas' collection live at the boundaries of the civilised world. Their legs and human form are reminders of their (half-)humanity, subjecthood, and capacity for civilisation, while the ease with which they swim underwater, the visual markers of exoticism with which they are presented, and their tanned skin and long dark hair, suggest an attachment to the natural and animal world.

Another trait that is shared between images of mermaids and 'Girls of the South Seas' is the relationship between bodies and their environments, or rather, the environments and the bodies within them. I have mentioned earlier that bodies in themselves are not exotic, but act as a way to *stage* the exotic (Yee 2000): they are used as props, along with palm trees, fish, and waterfalls. In his study of two utopian texts published in England in 1741, Lewes underlines the intersection of pornography, imperialism and utopia. He particularly remarks that "the origin of females is never discussed: they are just *there* – like the earth itself" (1993, 68). This is the case in these visual representations of Polynesian women and mermaids. In fact, the viewer has no information about the women: we do not know who they are, where exactly they come from or what they do. If anything, these women and half-women are part of the fauna and flora: they are caught in nets and swim like fish, they are beached as though they were sea mammals, and they are perched on rocks like sea birds. The naturalisation of the 'Polynesian' body is a particularity when it comes to the broader repertoire of Western exotic representations, as the women are not required to wear attire that is deemed 'traditional' to their culture, nor are they displayed with 'exotic' objects. Brooks suggests that this is what sets these representations apart from orientalist representations:

The Club Med vision of paradise of course includes a warm brown body without much in the way of clothing. The 'primitivist' version of exoticism that so attracted Gauguin differs from 'orientalism' in its preference for simplicity, including a sensuality that is not alluringly hidden within seraglios but, with another kind of allure, placed in the open, naturalized. (Brooks 1990, 53 in Teaiwa 1998, 254)

The viewing of bodies as a part of the landscape is especially evident in the bathing scene. Indeed, the angle used by the photographers or painters places the viewer in a gazing and voyeuristic position. We are watching groups of women and mermaids bathing and interacting. We can see them, but they cannot see us, or, if they can, they are letting themselves be watched. This spatial imagery is reminiscent of orientalist nineteenth-century images of harems[14], "the sexual habitat of the dark woman", which established the Orient as a place where Westerners could look for "sexual experiences unobtainable in Europe" (Said 1979, in Taouma 2004, 38). Drawing on the work of Lewes (2000), Pritchard and Morgan thus determine that such representations "map the sensual topography of land and skin so that the women and the

landscapes of the South Pacific become analogous" (2007, 168). The analogy between women and the land and the visual absence of men allows anyone to take on this role (Yee 2000) and, consequently, the urges for sexual and imperial conquest. Indeed:

In this male tale, mysterious females and remote lands are alluring and sexual, offering men riches and pleasures but also unpredictable dangers. Men who are brave, strong, and smart enough to tame and control them can remove much of the threat and extract much of their seductive wealth. (Rothenberg 1994, 157)

This echoes the Odyssean myth and the tale of the hero overcoming wild temptresses, such as the sirens, in order to conquer. The sexualised conquest of women and mermaids is notably made obvious in the pictures in which they are shown being caught in the nets of fishermen. Indeed, if the ship can be seen as exclusively male territory (Stanley 2003), then nets act as the only signifiers of a male presence. This Western analogy between Indigenous women's bodies and the land has notably been alluded to by Haunani-Kay Trask (2008 [1991]) in the case of Hawai'i in her essay 'Lovely Hula Hands':

Hawai'i – the word, the vision, the sound in the mind – is the fragrance and feel of soft kindness. Above all, Hawai'i is 'she,' the Western image of the Native 'female' in her magical allure. And if luck prevails, some of 'her' will rub off on you, the visitor.

Likewise, in 'Girls of the South Seas' imagery, Tahiti, too, becomes 'she'. 'She', the 'Tahitian' woman's body that is one with the land and water, 'she', the fauna and flora that take the shape of a woman or a mermaid, 'she', imbued with magical and mysterious powers that draw the heterosexual male tourist to the islands and inspire Western women to play the savage in mermaider photography. The relationship between mermaids, 'Girls of the South Seas' and tourism is evident in the fact that 'Girls of the South Seas' imagery tells stories about the Pacific, and so do mermaids. In her study of aquatic spectacles in the USA, Jennifer Kokai (2017) writes that:

Weeki Wachee is part of a longer story of water spectacles. It is a story built on fairy tales: fairy tales humans first told themselves to make sense of the mysterious underwater world, and fairy tales we later introduced to re-create some of that lost mystery. It is story of an improbable but real and direct line from a Hollywood mermaid swimming against the currents of war and the looming possibility of planetary destruction, to a killer whale drowning a female trainer with a long golden braid. It is a story about 'nature', of its destructive and redemptive forces, as packaged and commodified for human consumption. It is a story of tourism, which is also a story of when and how water is worth seeing. (2017, 3)

It is not so surprising then, to see the recent emergence of mermaiding as a tourism activity, in which "tourists don tails and 'become' mermaids either on the beach as a photographic opportunity or by partaking in in-water swims" (Porter and Lück 2018, 232). While images of the mermaid and 'Polynesian' women, as well as experiences *as* and *with* mermaids and 'Polynesian' women, are commercialised by the tourist industry, the power dynamics at play are different.

The objectification of women's and mermaids' bodies in these images and their link to nature and water as a marker of inferiority can be contrasted with the view of water as feminine power. In her analysis of mermaids in nineteenth-century paintings, Dijkstra (1989) argues that these women represented symbols of independence and freedom that men of the epoch feared. The elemental sense of freedom experienced by women and their connection to water is reflective of the classical idea that water compounds the power of women by accentuating the sexual difference between the two sexes (O'Brien 2006). For example, Hippocrates claimed that "the female flourishes more in an environment of water, from things cold and wet and soft, whether food or drink or activities" (as cited in O'Brien 2006, 46). Moreover, the link between 'Polynesian' women and nature could signify the resurgence of an ecological view of the globe, which

appreciates nature as "something to understand, to value, to conserve for its own sake – something to enjoy" (Osborne 2000, 110). This is emphasised by the fact that, in the Western imagination, it is not only nature that needs to be conserved but also cultures and peoples. In the October 1919 issue of *National Geographic* magazine, readers could find an article entitled 'A vanishing people of the south seas' which featured a full-page photo portrait of a topless young woman holding a bouquet of flowers and wearing a long necklace of seashells over her breasts with the caption:

A daughter of a dying race – Beautiful, luxuriant hair, fine eyes, perfect teeth, a slender, graceful form, a skin of velvet texture and unblemished figure – these are attributes of the few Marquesannes who survive as worthy representatives of a people seared by the sins of the white man. (as cited in Rothenberg 1994, 166)

This idea of natural and racial conservation fits particularly well with the use of the mermaid figure as an emblem for marine conservation. In fact, some professional mermaids describe themselves as activists who are raising awareness of ocean pollution and encouraging the protection of cetaceans and sea mammals (Robertson 2013). As one mermaider says, mermaids "serve as a translator between the inhabitants of both sides; aquatic and land" (Turgeon 2011, as cited in Robertson 2013, 314). The use of 'Polynesian' women as objects to promote cultural and racial conservation and mermaiders' activism go hand in hand with the ecofeminist idea that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are intricately connected in the history of Western civilisation (Murphy 1995; Gaard 2001).

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the irony that lies behind mermaiders' environmental activism while using visual signifiers of 'exoticism' and 'paradise' in how they present themselves. This is notably evident in *Project Mermaids*, a social media campaign that aims to promote ocean and beach conservation. The campaign frequently shares photoshoots of mermaiders that not only draw on the tropes of sexually available island beauties as well as naturalised femininity, but that are also taken underwater and on occupied islands such as Hawai'i. In this equation, Western mermaiders have opportunities to be agents of change, whereas Polynesian women are sexually and ecologically objectified. Indeed, if women are prone to be related to nature (Gaard 2001), in the Western imagination, indigeneity exaggerates this connection and confines Polynesian women to their primal state. Contrastingly, mermaiders, who are mostly white Western women, are offered more choices in the ways in which they can engage and play around with the relationship between the feminine and nature.

In promoting an exoticised and naturalised version of femininity, mermaiders also participate in the tourist promotion of the Pacific Islands, something Indigenous anti-colonial activists have opposed, and environmentalists have warned against:

Tourism is not here to sell haole (white) culture. It is here because we are the native people of this aina (land). It is our culture the tourists come to see. It is our land the tourists come to pollute. Without beautiful Hawaiian women dancing, there would be no tourism. (Trask 1992)

The irony lies in the Western representation of 'Polynesian' bodies as closely connected to nature and the romanticisation of the primal state of humanity, while participating in the de-naturalisation and industrialisation of islands through tourism. This observation has also been made in the case of aquatic spectacles in the USA. Kokai (2017, 15) writes:

In every case study, the aquatic spectacles described have traded on ideas of exoticism and the other that often are concomitant with tourism. In performance, this means that many of the spectacles draw on aspects of the Polynesian, Asian, or South Seas cultures to dress their sets, design their costumes, or name their orcas.

It is worth noting that, as suggested earlier, the appeal to Polynesian cultures and bodies is based on the racial division of the Pacific Islands. It is not merely a coincidence that it is specifically Polynesian women's bodies that are commercialised in such a sexualised way, nor is it a coincidence that there are many similarities between mermaiding visual culture and the way in which 'Polynesian' women are represented in the West. As Taouma (2004, 40) explains:

The Polynesian body was an easy target for exotic representation in many ways because not fitting into the 'racial' categories of white, black or yellow, the Pacific 'belle' especially could be manifested as being a 'spiced up' version of the white woman – close enough to be made familiar but distanced enough to be sexualised as an available exotic (see bell hooks, 1992). The lighter skinned accessibility of the Polynesian 'belle', as opposed say to her Melanesian or African counterpart, has signification for the different nuances of the colonial agenda when approaching these different areas.

Polynesian women are dark enough and distant enough from whiteness to be exotic (therefore desirable), but they are also distant enough from whiteness and fair enough not to be 'ugly' (and undesirable), according to racist colonial European beauty standards. This significantly determines the appeal that anything perceived as being 'Polynesian' has for Western women and people more generally.

In the context of the Pacific Islands, it is not only tourism but also militarism that need to be problematised. Teresia Teaiwa's concept of militourism explains: "the phenomenon by which military or paramilitary force ensure the smooth running of the tourist industry, and that same tourist industry masks the military force behind it" (1998, 251). Teaiwa also highlights an irony in that "the power of the 'Polynesian' body owes much to the militourist complex even as that same complex disempowers Polynesian bodies" (1998, 250). In fact, the significance of markers of exoticism in the mermaiding subculture and, more generally, in mermaid Western visual culture, becomes problematic in that it both directly and indirectly participates in the marketing of the Pacific Islands in the context of militourism. A direct participation would be advertising that a mermaid photoshoot took place on one of the Pacific Islands. Teaiwa (1998) adds that the tourist industry in the Pacific often capitalises on the area's military history and, therefore, the colonial history of the islands. Moreover, while the tourist industry uses the feminised, exotic, and natural body as well as romantic images of the Pacific, Teaiwa observes that this iconography also figures in some Western antimilitourist propaganda. This highlights the fact that antimilitourist and environmental activists, including mermaiders, may not necessarily be critical about their own complicity in the systems they advocate against and do not necessarily problematise the use of racist and colonialist (visual) narratives about the Pacific. As Lou Cornum (2018) suggests in her essay on nostalgia and white (North American) women's obsession with witchcraft, "white women who take up the mantle of white magic rarely understand themselves to be engaging in Indian or savage play". The same could be said of mermaiders recycling Western colonial and racial visual markers about the Pacific Islands and its peoples to create their mersonas. Given the effects of tourism on the physical, mental and emotional health of island bodies (dé Ishtar 1994; Teaiwa 1998), it is necessary to challenge the gendered, racialised and colonial stories that mermaiders tell about themselves and about the Pacific.

Conclusion

Visual representations of mermaids and 'Girls of the South Seas' reveal similarities in the ways in which they are presented to foreign, mainly Western, audiences. In some instances, the same iconography is used for the mythical fish women and in representations of Tahitian women. In that sense, mermaids and 'Girls of the South Seas' are part of the same repertoire of representation (Hall 1997). The use of similar representational practices and figures repeated with variations serves to reinforce (colonial) patriarchal, taken-for-granted assumptions about the connection between nature and (Indigenous) women in the Pacific. Combined with race and indigeneity, femininity and nature work as a way to confine Polynesian women to their primal, pre-modern state. In contrast, mermaiders, who are mostly white Western women, are offered

more choices in the ways in which they can engage and play around with the relationship between the feminine and nature and fashion their identity. While 'Girls of the South Seas' are as mythical as mermaids in that they are colonial heteropatriarchal inventions used to tell stories about the unknown and the Other, the material bodies of 'vahine' on postcards, calendars, and adverts make them 'real' in the Western imagination, whereas mermaids are understood as myths. This was made particularly obvious to me when, the few times that I have presented this work at conferences in Europe, white European audience members enquire about and, sometimes, vouch for the authenticity of these representations of Polynesian women, something they would not do for representations of mermaids.

One of the most significant traits that is shared between representations of mermaids and 'Girls of the South Seas' is their emphasis on exotic, erotic and, thus, primitive characteristics. The fact that Polynesian women are still represented as sexual objects for the West suggests that historical perceptions of Polynesian peoples continue to shape the ways in which they are imagined and, thus, integrated into contemporary society (Pritchard and Morgan 2007), especially since "bodies are seen by tourists as repositories of real truth by virtue of their materiality" (Desmond 1999, xiv). Some have taken on the metaphor of *haunting* to explain contemporary Western representations of the South Seas as an exo-erotic space (Pearson 2005; Brawley and Dixon 2012). This understanding suggests that visual makers and industries are *haunted* by colonial and earlier representations of the South Seas. However, a haunting suggests the presence of a ghost or spirit, and therefore necessitates a death. There is little evidence to suggest that earlier representations of the South Seas have 'died'. If these early representations of the South Seas are colonial, then contemporary (Western) representations are postcolonial. Since Tahiti–Polynesia is still 'French Polynesia' and Hawai'i is the fiftieth and most recent state of the United States of America, it is worth asking whether spectral metaphors are relevant to the Tahitian and Hawai'ian contexts, where colonialism is not yet (un)dead. This highlights the need to adopt postcolonial and Indigenous feminist perspectives when studying not only images of and about the Pacific but also Western images where the colonial may not be as obvious. Here, the use of 'Polynesian' nature and visual markers in mermaider photography, the romanticisation of Polynesia by essentially presenting it as 'paradise', along with the mythologisation of Polynesian peoples, particularly women, distracts and diverts the Western viewer's attention from "the violence of colonial occupation and realities of Islanders' resistance" (Jolly 1997, 117). In fact, the islands are reduced to imaginary places where beautiful mythic women live in harmony with nature. This narrative is a colonial inheritance that does not seem to be vanishing. On the contrary, the similarities between mermaider imagery and exo-erotic images of 'Polynesian' women, as well as the resurgence of mermaids as popular Western cultural symbols, reveal new manifestations of this colonial legacy.

Footnotes
[1] The book is published by 'Taschen', which also published a book on Paul Gauguin's work in the Pacific, advertising its exotic character.
[2] The logo of the brand itself is a 'vahine' sitting cross-legged on the floor, wearing a red dress with a hibiscus pattern, her long dark hair falling over her bare back. She is wearing a crown of *tiare* flowers or *lei* in her hair, as well as a red hibiscus behind her ear. Both flowers are Tahitian symbols. The 'vahine' logo can be found on all of Hinano's primary and derived products, from beer cans and bottles to keyrings and clothing.
[3] 'Non-Samoan' or 'Westerner' in Samoan.
[4] In other words, this paper is not about Tahitian or Polynesian women and it does not aim to address the various and complex ways in which they see or fashion themselves. Instead, it is about the fantasy that the West has created about women from the Pacific.
[5] Pritchard and Morgan (2007: 162) note that fashion and travel photographers are often the same individuals.
[6] For a selection of nineteenth-century paintings of mermaids and sirens see Dijkstra (1986).

[7] For a discussion of the links between mermaiders and marine conservation activism, see Robertson (2013).

[8] The Roman equivalent of the Greek Goddess of Love, Aphrodite.

[9] This is made particularly clear in Essig's analysis (2005) of the character of Madison, the mermaid in the film *Splash* (1988).

[10] According to O'Brien, nymphs were other classical figures which were commonly referred to in images of Pacific women. They frequently appear in myths which have an erotic dimension and generally personify the fecundity and gracefulness of nature. Although they are seen as less dangerous than sirens, when associated with water they are ascribed a predatory character (2006, 46).

[11] A *hei* is a garland of flowers in Tahitian.

[12] These stereotypes are not left unchallenged but it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore postcolonial responses and Indigenous resistance. For some examples and discussions of Pacific resistance to stereotypes see Smith (2017), Vercoe (2013), Fresno-Calleja (2010) and Teaiwa (1998).

[13] John Grierson (1972) claims that the Hollywood studio that produced *Moana* first issued the film with the subtitle 'The Love Life of a South Seas Siren' (as cited in Jolly 1997b).

[14] For an analysis of Orientalist images see Alloula (2008).

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Breastfeeding Beyond Infancy: An Autoethnographic Dialogue Between Two Women

Adele Jarrett-Kerr and Bethan Michael-Fox

Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyrhJfioYpM

Critical commentary

Abstract
Our filmed dialogue and critical commentary provide a parent-centred interjection into the fraught and moralising discourses that surround breastfeeding, in particular what we term breastfeeding beyond infancy. We take an autoethnographic approach to our own experiences of breastfeeding beyond infancy in a sociocultural context where this is not the 'norm'. We argue that breastfeeding beyond infancy offers an important example of the second wave feminist argument that the 'personal is political' and insist that breastfeeding, as a diverse practice and a reproductive right, is and should be a feminist concern. Discussions about breastfeeding often centre on scrutinising women's bodies and practices rather than engaging with their experiences. By sharing our experiences, we hope to contribute our voices as breastfeeding women and to encourage other women to share their own narratives. We assert that structural changes and cultural shifts in knowledge and understanding are needed for feminist aims relating to breastfeeding, infant feeding and parenting practices to be achieved, rather than changes in what women and families do.

Why we are talking about breastfeeding beyond infancy.
Breastfeeding in Britain is a controversial practice, particularly if it extends beyond the early months or first year of a child's life. Breastfeeding beyond infancy is often constructed as both

spectre and spectacle in cultural contexts in which breastfeeding older children is seen as wrong or even perverse. This can be seen in the media coverage surrounding actor Sharon Spink, who has garnered attention across print, television and radio outlets over the past several years for speaking out about breastfeeding an older child, most recently when she talked about her daughter weaning at age nine. Media coverage of Spink and her daughter frequently references critics raising accusations of child abuse of a sexual nature (Mann, 2018: Roberts, 2018; Smith, 2014). Such accusations arguably emerge because women's breasts are highly sexualised in European and North American contexts. The sexualisation of breasts has significant consequences for both breastfeeding parents and children. For example, Broers et al. (2017, p.33) have noted that, when women are accustomed to having their breasts 'assessed as sexual objects', they can then find it difficult to mentally reframe them into an infant feeding role.

By stepping outside of the cultural norm, mothers who breastfeed older babies and children risk having their breasts uniquely labelled as transgressive and their parenting practices labelled as irresponsible and extreme. By sharing this autoethnographic research, we seek to insert our own voices into dominant discourses around breastfeeding beyond infancy. Whilst we examine how these discourses have shaped our experiences of breastfeeding beyond infancy, we also seek to disrupt them by making our voices heard on a topic that is often dominated by discussions about women rather than discussions between them.

We are not seeking to promote breastfeeding beyond infancy, but rather to highlight the value of offering opportunities to engage with diverse experiences and to understand the very varied experiences of women in relation to infant feeding and parenting practices. We want to offer our own experiences and think critically about how they relate to the sociocultural contexts in which we lead our lives and raise our children. Traditionally, breastfeeding research has focused on the child rather than the mother and has been centred on medical and public health concerns, rather than on subjective experiences of breastfeeding (Wall, 2001; Shaw, 2004). Recently, however, qualitative studies addressing the experiences of breastfeeding parents have begun to emerge (Crossley, 2009; Faircloth, 2013; Cassidy and El Tom, 2015; Amsterdam, 2015; Haugh, 2016).

It is important to note here that we experience multiple privileges as cis women, with socioeconomic security, in heterosexual relationships with our children's fathers, and not living with disability, and to acknowledge that these privileges shape and inform our experiences. Our stories are not the only stories and we offer ours with this in mind, whilst believing that stories are important (Riessman, 2002; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992). The different stories that we hear, read and share about breastfeeding shape and contribute to our views, just as they contribute to wider discourses about breastfeeding in society. Bartle and Harvey (2017) have focused on this, examining how vicarious experiences of infant feeding shape attitudes towards breastfeeding. Similarly, researchers have drawn attention to the importance and potentially empowering effects of sharing personal stories. Símonardóttir and Gíslason (2018), in their research questioning dominant discourses around breastfeeding, interviewed women in Iceland who had struggled to breastfeed. They found that their participants were sharing their experiences of infant feeding for the first time and valued the opportunity. We offer our experiences of breastfeeding, not as an attempt to add to the mire of moralistic discourses that position breastfeeding as either 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong', but in order to resist this kind of reductive framing and share an understanding of breastfeeding as an 'infinitely variable and changeable' practice (Bartlett, 2002, p.373).

How we approached our autoethnographic dialogue and why we filmed it
We chose an autoethnographic method of reflecting critically on our own experiences because we believe this is particularly pertinent to both breastfeeding and to our aims as feminists. Ettorre (2017) has situated autoethnography within the tradition of feminist narrative writing and echoes Holman-Jones (2015) in making the connection between autoethnography and the

second wave feminist slogan 'the personal is political'. There is a general consensus that autoethnography is concerned with the ways in which the personal relates to the social, cultural and political (Ellis, 2004; Amsterdam, 2015). Breastfeeding is an everyday practice for many women the world over. It is also a highly political and politicised act, as Palmer (2009) makes clear in her influential text The Politics of Breastfeeding, in which she examines the global consequences of the marketisation of infant feeding. However, as Shaw (2004) has argued, breastfeeding has also been understood in relation to the body as a somatic rather than a social practice. As such, breastfeeding has been positioned in hegemonic patriarchal discourses as politically insignificant, despite being 'subject to the most relentless moral scrutiny' (Shaw, 2004, p.101).

Model Mara Martin inadvertently drew attention to debates around the simultaneously political and everyday dimensions of breastfeeding in 2018 when media headlines included photographs showing her breastfeeding her five-month-old daughter on the catwalk of the Sports Illustrated annual swimsuit show. Martin wrote on her Instagram feed (BBC, 2018): 'I can't believe I am waking up to headlines with me and my daughter in them for doing something I do every day.' The photographs were met with a wide range of responses in different media, many of them negative and implying that Martin's behaviour blurred the boundaries between maternal and sexual, and public and private. For example, one Tweet picked up by the Daily Mail (2018) stated: 'There is a time and place for things – a runway is for a hot model not a breastfeeding mother.' The implication of this comment is that a woman cannot simultaneously be both, whilst also implying a particular and constructed idea of what a 'hot' woman is. As we will go on to discuss in relation to our own experiences, breastfeeding in public also becomes more controversial and fraught the older the child being breastfed is perceived to be. Through critical reflection on our own experiences, we want to engage in 'complicating mundane everyday life' (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014, p.21) and to show that, although rarely represented in these terms, for many women breastfeeding a child of any age is a quotidian practice that can be pleasurable, fun, boring, sensual, awkward, annoying, practical, impractical, intimate, embarrassing, painful, relaxing, and an important part of a mother's identity (or not), as well as being highly politicised.

We chose to talk about this on film rather than solely in a written narrative because we think that women should be seen and heard in conversations about breastfeeding. We in no way mean to question the value of written work on women's experiences of breastfeeding (Crossley, 2009; Faircloth, 2013; Cassidy and El Tom, 2015; Amsterdam, 2015; Haugh, 2016), or to undermine established traditions and definitions of ethnography that emphasise its literary conventions (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Ellis and Bochner, 2016; Tilley-Lubbs and Calva, 2016; Ettorre, 2017). However, we do think that the opportunity to see and hear a woman's experience in an audio-visual format can help to humanise and give a unique face and voice to experiences that are often framed in popular discourses as transgressive and 'weird', or as extreme and 'other'. Another key reason to film us talking to each other is that the media coverage of women who breastfeed beyond infancy consistently positions the mother as inseparable from her breastfeeding child or children. In part, and among a range of reasons we will go on to discuss, we think this relates to cultural and social, and to some extent feminist, concerns about women's independence and the high cultural value placed on children's early independence in many European and North American contexts. By filming ourselves in conversation without our children, we seek to resist the positioning of mothers who breastfeed beyond infancy as 'unhealthily attached'.

To see and hear people sharing and discussing stories can also act as a reminder that we each have our own distinct narratives. This is the case even if our relationality to family, friends, others and the cultural stories around us means that we are 'filled with the voices of other people' (Church, 1995, p.5). We decided to present this as a conversation because we think that women talking to each other and communicating about their differences and commonality of experience is a central practice in how feminist gains are made. In speaking, we prompt each

other to question, to think more deeply and to develop new ways of understanding. As Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013, p.28) have suggested, collaborative autoethnography can 'engender a deeper understanding of self and others' because the dialogic process of engaging with each other's stories leads collaborators to interrogate their experiences more rigorously. This can be seen in our dialogue when we utter phrases like 'I hadn't thought of it like that…' or 'I hadn't remembered that until now…', or when we prompt each other to consider a different viewpoint. We know that anyone who takes the time to watch our discussion will have their own unique response to what we say, and we welcome this. We are not seeking agreement; rather, we hope for engagement and to encourage other women to share their experiences too.

In our first draft of this paper, we were focused on ideas around breastfeeding and our bodies, breastfeeding and feminism and breastfeeding and sexuality because these broad themes seemed to fit best with the aims of this journal's issue on bodies and in terms of popular discourses about breastfeeding. While completing our first draft, however, we often found ourselves talking about our experiences of breastfeeding beyond infancy. We noticed that we do not see, hear or read much about women's experiences of breastfeeding beyond infancy as a daily practice unless we very actively seek them out. Instead, in portrayals, stories and discussions, breastfeeding beyond infancy is framed as controversial and wrapped up in sensationalist, stigmatising and moralising discourses. In an attempt to challenge this, in our second draft we focused more explicitly on our experiences of breastfeeding beyond infancy. We drafted a list of broad questions that we wanted to ask each other about this as a guide and recorded for about an hour. When editing, we prioritised the inclusion of material that communicated where our experiences diverged, how our decisions and perceptions may have been informed and influenced by those around us, and where we see our experiences sitting in the wider context of other women's stories and the culture at large.

What is 'breastfeeding beyond infancy'?
The term 'extended breastfeeding' is commonly used to denote the practice of breastfeeding beyond infancy. We choose not to adopt this term because it implies that there is a 'normal' time to stop breastfeeding, and that extending breastfeeding beyond an unspecified and socially constructed point is unnecessary and/or abnormal. The World Health Organisation (2019) recommends exclusively breastfeeding up to six months of age and 'continued breastfeeding along with appropriate complementary foods up to two years of age or beyond'. The NHS (2019) states that 'you and your baby can carry on enjoying the benefits of breastfeeding for as long as you like. Breastfeeding into your baby's second year or beyond alongside other foods is ideal.' However, despite this guidance, breastfeeding beyond a year is often portrayed, constructed and understood as nutritionally unnecessary at best and abnormal or damaging to the breastfed child at worst. In part, this is probably because it is not a particularly common practice in Britain. The last infant feeding survey in the UK conducted in 2010 (the survey has now been discontinued) found that by six months only 34% of mothers in the survey were still breastfeeding. The most commonly cited statistic from the survey suggests that only 1% of mothers were still exclusively breastfeeding at six months. However, while 1% of mothers were exclusively breastfeeding, other mothers may have continued to breastfeed while supplementing with formula or introducing solids early and therefore would not have been counted within that 1%. Those who introduced solids earlier than six months could have been doing so in line with much of the current guidance on baby-led weaning that suggests solids should be introduced when a series of indicators imply that the child is ready for them, rather than on a specific date (note that in the UK weaning typically means introducing solids whereas in the USA weaning typically means ceasing breastfeeding). Brown (2016) discusses the idea that the emphasis on exclusive breastfeeding for six months along with the suggestion to breastfeed for up to two years and beyond might actually be off-putting or seem unachievable for some women.

The phrases 'full-term breastfeeding' or 'biological breastfeeding' are also used to describe breastfeeding into the years of toddlerhood and childhood. These terms tend to refer to

breastfeeding until the child wants to stop, until a mutually agreeable time for mother and child or when the child has 'naturally' weaned from the breast. When a mother and child who engage in breastfeeding beyond infancy might stop is highly variable. Dettwyler's (1995) anthropological research suggests that modern children are biologically likely to stop breastfeeding between the ages of two-and-a-half and seven years. She states that 4.2 years is often cited as the average age of weaning globally but points out that this figure is 'neither accurate nor meaningful', as the average is derived by considering women at either end of the spectrum, from those who go on to breastfeed the oldest children recorded to those who do not initiate at all. However, she states that: 'it is true that there are still many societies in the world where children are routinely breastfed until the age of four or five years or older' and that: 'in societies where children are allowed to nurse "as long as they want" they usually self-wean, with no arguments or emotional trauma, between 3 and 4 years of age' (Dettwyler, 1995). As we discuss in the film, we are both breastfeeding beyond infancy. Beth is breastfeeding a two-year-old and Adele breastfed her two older children until they were four years old and is currently breastfeeding her two-year-old. We are aware of friends and acquaintances breastfeeding children aged between four and eight. Beth is not sure when she will stop breastfeeding her daughter and is staying open-minded about it. Adele expects to continue breastfeeding her youngest daughter until she self-weans and is open to the possibility that she may carry on beyond the age when her older siblings stopped.

What is 'wrong' with breastfeeding beyond infancy?

When breastfeeding takes place in sociocultural contexts in which breasts are first and foremost valued for their aesthetic and sexual functions, people might find breastfeeding beyond infancy, or breastfeeding at all, uncomfortable, unpleasant or perverse. Images that overtly sexualise breasts dominate popular culture, whereas images of breastfeeding have suffered erasure and criticism. Carathers (2017) discusses the contradictory distaste for public breastfeeding that exists alongside an acceptance of revealed cleavage in a non-breastfeeding context. Certainly, this attitude is evident in Facebook's sanctioning of breastfeeding selfies up until recently (Moss, 2015). It can also be seen in the viral effect of public breastfeeding photos covertly shot by onlookers and maliciously shared by strangers online as something to be ashamed of (Beyer, 2014). Even if women do not personally experience open hostility for breastfeeding in public, media stories about the subject contribute to a general feeling that the right to breastfeed in public is under constant threat of sanction (Stearns, 1999). Wall (2001) found that educational material about breastfeeding in Canada attempts to counteract this by insisting to mothers and the public that breasts are not sexual in the context of breastfeeding. However, in cultures where breasts are valued as markers of female sexuality, to ignore this fact dismisses women's experiences of their breasts (Wall, 2001). By covering up breasts in breastfeeding literature, the message remains that breasts are sexual and should not be seen when breastfeeding lest they offend or lead to arousal.

The need to desexualise breasts in the context of breastfeeding is understandable, as 'fears of embarrassment and censure that come from defining breasts as only sexual and the act of breastfeeding as private behavior' can impact upon whether women decide to breastfeed (Stearns, 1999, p.323). Stearns (1999, p.317) notes that women sometimes use the sexually-charged word 'flashing' to describe indiscreet breastfeeding in public. The need to desexualise breasts in the context of breastfeeding may be a greater priority for mothers who do so beyond infancy because of cultural anxieties that suggest they are doing it for their own sexual gratification. One famous case that emphasises this anxiety and its potentially highly detrimental impact on families is that of Karen Carter, a woman whose two-year-old was removed from her care for more than a year after she called a crisis line with concerns about feelings of sexual arousal while breastfeeding, feelings that those sufficiently informed about breastfeeding would know are, although not necessarily common, not abnormal (see Stearns, 1999, for a discussion on this widely reported case). Breastfeeding is uniquely an ongoing act between two bodies, that of the child as well as the mother. As the younger body grows, perhaps it becomes more obvious that not only is the mother breastfeeding but the child is also an

active participant. In a culture where breasts are designated for 'the other' (Stearns, 1999, p.323), an older child may be perceived as unnecessarily taking a place that is normally reserved for a sexual partner. Perhaps the experience of breastfeeding beyond infancy uniquely highlights the complicated relationship that many cultures in Europe and North America seem to have with women's bodies in general and women's breasts in particular. Women's breasts have been so routinely and consistently portrayed and interpreted as solely sexual that the notion of them also having a non-sexual purpose in mothering in and beyond infancy seems to raise difficulties.

As we explain in our filmed dialogue, we have encountered a range of responses when telling people that we are still breastfeeding, including interest, curiosity, confusion, shock, admiration, horror, disgust, respect, pride and disdain. Faircloth's (2013, p.73) ethnographic research emphasises that the accounts she gathered from mothers about the 'day-to-day realities of full-term breastfeeding' were 'far removed from the way the practice is generally portrayed in public outlets' and points out that when explaining her research to others she often encounters 'surprise, if not disgust' at the prospect of women breastfeeding five-year-olds. She writes that 'the majority of people […] do not know that a woman can lactate for such an extended period of time, let alone that so many of them would want to' (Faircloth, 2013, p.73). Faircloth (2013) explains that there is a general sense that breastfeeding beyond infancy is strange or perverse and that the woman is breastfeeding in order to keep the child dependent on her or to satisfy some need of her own. Stearns (1999) has similarly emphasised the tendency for disturbing questions to arise about whether mothers are using breastfeeding in order to meet their own emotional or sexual needs when they breastfeed beyond infancy.

Although neither of us have been directly challenged for breastfeeding beyond infancy, we often get the feeling from others' body language and questioning that it might be being interpreted as weird, perhaps lazy (as though we have not done the 'hard work' of 'making' a child more independent), co-dependent, indulgent and 'only for comfort', and of no nutritional or health benefit for either child or mother. At times, the perceived criticism takes place in public. At other times, it has come from well-meaning people in our lives, whose questioning tends to be centred on our deviation from what is 'normal' or on concerns about our children's dependency. Dettwyler (2013) points out that there is a wide range of reasons why a woman might not want or be able to breastfeed at all, let alone beyond infancy, but she also emphasises that, no matter the age of the child, breastmilk does provide an excellent source of nutrition. There is no point at which breastmilk loses either its nutritional value or 'immune factors that help build and augment the child's own developing immune system' (Dettwyler, 2013). She also emphasises that the act of breastfeeding, the close proximity to the mother and the act of suckling can relieve pain and stress, provide comfort and lower the heart rate and blood pressure of the nursing child. Breastfeeding also boosts the mother's oxytocin levels, aiding her attachment to her child as well as supporting her own psychological wellbeing. This evidence challenges some of the criticisms of breastfeeding beyond infancy. However, many of the reasons that are cited as criticisms of breastfeeding beyond infancy are also problematic in that they tend to situate breastfeeding solely as an infant feeding practice, rather than a parenting practice more broadly.

La Leche League (2010), the most prominent international breastfeeding support organisation, uses the term 'mothering through breastfeeding' to reflect the breadth of ways in which breastfeeding plays a part in parenting for breastfeeding families. For us, breastfeeding is an important part of parenting in relation to sleep, comfort, nutrition, convenience and general wellbeing, to name just a few. We personally prefer the term 'parenting through breastfeeding' as this recognises the importance that the father, partner or someone else may have in the breastfeeding family and appreciates that not all people who breastfeed identify as mothers. Neither of us feels that we are breastfeeding to satisfy our own emotional or sexual needs, both criticisms that breastfeeding parents often face, according to Stearns (1999). Nor are we attempting to keep our (very independent) children reliant on us. We find these assumptions

both alarming and quite amusing, given how dissonant they are with our own experiences. These attitudes also seem to us to be an example of the ways in which women are made to feel shame and guilt in relation to both their bodies and their parenting, which is a key reason why we see breastfeeding beyond infancy as a feminist concern. As Murphy (1999) has written, women experience criticism both when they choose not to breastfeed and when they choose to breastfeed in ways that deviate from what is deemed socially acceptable or 'normal', such as choosing to breastfeed for 'too long'.

Popular cultural representations of breastfeeding beyond infancy both reflect and inform negative attitudes towards the practice. The image of the mother breastfeeding for 'too long' is often held up as a spectacle to be laughed at or as an example of mental instability. In the US sitcom Two Broke Girls, the second season's 2012 season premiere opens with a woman breastfeeding a walking, talking child under an enormous breastfeeding cover for comedic effect. This mother is positioned as transgressing social norms for breastfeeding an older child. Similarly, in the fifth episode of the fifth season of Game of Thrones, breastfeeding her prepubescent child is a symbol of Lisa Arryn's obsessive attachment to her son. In 2014, David Walliams tweeted an image in The Sun of a mother breastfeeding her five-year-old daughter, referencing his 'Bitty' sketch in Little Britain in which his adult character publicly demands to be breastfed. Jamie Grumet similarly garnered public criticism and sparked widespread debate when she appeared on a now infamous 2012 TIME magazine cover breastfeeding her four-year-old son, both standing, with the provocative headline 'Are you mom enough?' In this cultural climate, mothers who breastfeed older babies, toddlers and older children are inevitably resisting 'cultural norms about the appropriate duration of breastfeeding' (Stearns, 1999, p.317). Consequently, they often employ masking tactics, such as using code names for breastfeeding so they can continue to breastfeed without public reaction (Stearns, 1999). In our filmed dialogue, we discuss the idea that women might avoid breastfeeding in public for fear of criticism. Beth, not wanting to attract negative attention, avoided breastfeeding in public once she began to notice that some people around her seemed to find it uncomfortable by the time her daughter was about 18 months old. Although Adele also feels this social pressure, she still breastfeeds in public, feeling that, with three children, it is often easier to breastfeed an unhappy toddler than seek an alternative. Her family has adopted a code name, mentioned in the video, to avoid openly discussing breastfeeding with her children in contexts that are uncomfortable. Kleinman (2003, p.230) draws attention to the importance of attending to moments when feminist researchers might 'live out sexist programming', and we have reflected on the extent to which we are at times complicit in acting out the scripts of socially acceptable breastfeeding by seeking to breastfeed discreetly or by wanting our bodies to appear or be interpreted in a way that adheres to patriarchal standards of beauty and femininity, or indeed by avoiding breastfeeding in public. Yet, at other times, we seem to resist the accepted standards of 'good mothering' merely by breastfeeding beyond infancy in a culture where this is not the norm.

Is breastfeeding beyond infancy a feminist concern?
Carter (1995) argues that breastfeeding in general has traditionally held little interest for feminists. Certainly, although feminist support for breastfeeding has emerged in recent years, typically focused on the right to breastfeed in public, breastfeeding has not traditionally received attention from feminists as a reproductive right. Allers (2017) has accused mainstream feminism of resisting breastfeeding as a rights issue and suggests that feminist discourses often promulgate the notion of breastfeeding as a confining and restrictive practice, and an obligation that ties women to their babies and to the home, and as such something that is antithetical to feminist aims. This is a viewpoint that remains evident in popular discourses around breastfeeding. Because breastfeeding involves a woman's body, it surfaces in both debates about equality and tensions over whether it should be the aim of feminism to 'minimize gender differences as the path to liberation' or 'embrace and enhance gender difference through fighting to remove the constraints placed on [women] by patriarchy and capitalism' (Carter, 1995, p.14). Although it might be possible to do both, breastfeeding in

any case brings to the fore the ways in which women's biology has historically been used as 'a primary mechanism of women's subordination' (Hausman, 2013, p.338). We argue that the stigma associated with breastfeeding beyond infancy and with breastfeeding a child of any age publicly can lead women to experience shame and guilt about their bodies and their parenting practices. Similarly, women who choose not to breastfeed or are unable to breastfeed can also experience stigma and criticism. The shaming of women's bodies and parenting practices perpetuated in patriarchal societies is both personal and political and should be a concern for feminists.

The fact that health-promotion initiatives encourage women to breastfeed, whilst at the same time breastfeeding is made extremely difficult for women both socially and economically, is worrying and should be a priority for feminists. Brown (2016, p.57) puts the proportion of women who want to breastfeed in the UK at 90%. However, as we discussed earlier, according to the most commonly cited data, only 1% of women are breastfeeding in any capacity by the time their babies are six months old. Hausman (2013, p.337) has argued that the discrepancy between encouragement to breastfeed and breastfeeding support is 'a major problem with breastfeeding promotion'. Breastfeeding can pose significant challenges, exacerbated by the inflexibility of many workplaces and the competing demands placed on women and families. Many households are reliant on two incomes and around a third of women are the main wage-earner in the UK, so it is vital that parental leave, pay conditions and support for breastfeeding in the workplace become a priority (Brown, 2016). Allers (2017) and Hausman (2013) have both argued that there has been a tendency within feminism to seek to remove the barriers to women taking part in the labour market in the same way that men do. Yet, as Hausman (2004, p.281) writes, 'proclaiming an equality with men that mandates the ability to act as men in the social sphere (that is, to be autonomous individuals without physiologically dependent others) is to impoverish our expectation of what sexual equality should be'. We contend, like many others, that feminist aims should continue to be refocused on seeking a re-evaluation of the labour traditionally undertaken by women and challenging the economic and social structures which mean that much of the labour market continues to privilege those of all genders who do not have caring responsibilities and whose bodies adhere to an idealised and masculine form of independence and autonomy.

Better understanding and more balanced information-sharing about breastfeeding beyond infancy would be likely to help to reduce the stigma of this parenting practice. Similarly, more research like Faircloth's (2013) with mothers who breastfeed beyond infancy would support an understanding of how common the practice is and the ways in which it is played out and experienced differently by different women and families. Yet, as Van Esterik (1989) has argued, the 'breast-bottle controversy' continues to dominate infant feeding debates and frame them in relation to individual mothers, whilst engendering guilt and blame. This debate should be rejected in favour of a focus on the social and economic contexts within which infant feeding practices operate and on the experiences of mothers in all their variety. Improved conditions for maternity leave and pay across sectors and countries, improved support for women who are not working, and more inclusive workplaces are also all obvious places to focus attention in terms of enhancing the experiences of all families. Brown (2016) and Allers (2017) offer outlines of the actions that might be taken to support breastfeeding families in the UK and USA respectively (with the USA significantly behind the UK in terms of paid maternity leave for women, affecting all families with children). However, breastfeeding and parenting are global practices and there is much that might be learned from sharing the stories of parents from the widest possible breadth of contexts and geographies.

Conclusion
In our filmed autoethnographic dialogue and this critical commentary, we have explored how and why breastfeeding beyond infancy is constructed as transgressive and is tied up in fraught and moralising discourses about 'good' and 'bad' parenting. We have argued that breastfeeding in general should be a concern for feminists, both as a reproductive right and in terms of

bringing about a society in which diverse parenting practices might be better understood and valued and in which all families might have the opportunity for greater time and economic security if and when they become parents. Breastfeeding practices are highly variable, and women's experiences of breastfeeding are as varied and diverse as any other aspect of women's lives. Breastfeeding, and in particular breastfeeding beyond infancy, is tied up with patriarchal ideas about women's bodies, sexuality and independence. We have sought through our autoethnographic dialogue, and through critical engagement with the experiences and ideas raised within it, to resist the reductive categories of 'good' or 'bad' infant feeding choices and parenting practices that often arise, in order to explore some of these ideas. In positioning breastfeeding beyond infancy as an everyday experience and by exploring those experiences, we have also sought to resist the stereotype of breastfeeding beyond infancy as transgressive and to add our own voices as women who are breastfeeding beyond infancy into debates that so often seem to focus on criticising women's parenting practices rather than engaging with them.

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Fat Shaming vs Fat Empowerment: The Construction of Fat Bodies in Neoliberal Discourse

Hannah Knox

Abstract
This paper discusses the current political conceptualisation of fat bodies in neoliberal society, focusing on two prominent opposing discourses surrounding fatness that are shaped by neoliberal discourse: fat shaming and fat empowerment. Through the synthesis of several factors, including the increased medicalisation of fatness, the shift to viewing bodies as autonomous economic actors, and the construction of health as a commodified moral choice and responsibility, I demonstrate the fat-shaming narrative of today: the view that fat is a failed, unhealthy, immoral and irresponsible body type. Contrastingly, the movement of fat empowerment aspires to promote fat acceptance, aiming to construct fat bodies as agentic in their own empowerment. As argued in this paper, the progressive aims of these movements have become co-opted by neoliberal principles, which severely limits their endeavours to challenge the status quo. Drawing on parallels with feminist critiques of neoliberal sexual agency, I explore how neoliberalism encourages an individualised form of empowerment via body positivity, which has depoliticised the concept of empowerment, removing its capacity to abolish social injustice. I further expose how this conception of empowerment as an individual choice and responsibility is twisted into a narrative of self-improvement, which can be achieved through the purchasing of commodities; a phenomenon that corporations have embraced in recent years in their marketing of products to women. It is concluded that a reconceptualisation of fatness is needed outside of the body-positivity narrative, centring on the social construction of fatness, in order to encourage more political forms of empowerment that aim to attack neoliberal fat shaming.

Introduction
"Body type, citizenship, and moral type have long been linked: 'beautiful' and 'healthy' cluster to connote a good citizen, while 'ill' and 'ugly' put one in the citizenship doghouse."
Kathleen LeBesco (2004: 55)

"In a context in which fake 'empowerment' is everywhere and in which feminist notions of it have been taken up and sold back to us emptied of their political force, how can we identify what true empowerment would look like, would feel like?"
Rosalind Gill (2012: 743)

In 2018, the October issue of the British women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* famously featured 'plus-size'[1] model and body-positive advocate Tess Holliday on its cover. The image of the model wearing green lingerie on the front page caused an uproar on social media, dividing opinions across the country. Many spectators[2] voiced highly negative reactions which personally attacked Holliday, accusing the model and the magazine of promoting obesity and endorsing an unhealthy lifestyle for the population. Other commentators[3], however, made the case that Holliday's presence on the front cover was empowering for women's bodies, expressing admiration of her body confidence as well as excitement at the visibility of a different body type on a mainstream platform (*BBC Newsbeat*, 2018; Scott, 2018).

The fat body has become a point of increasing political interest and debate in recent years.[4] The above example highlights two of the dominant opposing discourses which exist in today's mainstream culture surrounding the fat body. The first serves to shame fat bodies in society through a discourse that strongly emphasises notions of bodily health and lifestyle choices (Cairns and Johnston, 2015). Owing their credibility to the support of scientific 'knowledge', these discourses construct fat bodies as a critical public concern through the rhetoric of the obesity 'epidemic' (Boero, 2007). As Pieterman (2007: 309) argues, fat bodies are "now not only culturally condemned, but also medically and politically defined as a major public health threat." The opposing discourse aims to promote the acceptance[5] and empowerment

of fat bodies. Arguments attempt to challenge the cultural devaluation of fat bodies, endorsing a more accepting politics of the body (Donaghue and Clemitshaw, 2012). In recent years, this fat-acceptance discourse has been eclipsed by a wider body-positivity narrative in mainstream media, which encourages individuals to perform personal embodiments of empowerment by celebrating their bodies (Tovar, 2018). These messages can now be observed throughout the beauty industry, with more and more companies promoting body-positive messages in order to sell their products (Johnston and Taylor, 2008).

In this paper, I aim to unpick the current political terrain of fatness, exploring how the two opposing discourses outlined above are both shaped and produced by the all-encompassing structures of neoliberalism. Starting with fat shaming, I argue that neoliberal structures have facilitated a culture of fat shaming, whereby fatness is constructed as a failed, unhealthy, immoral and irresponsible citizenship and body type, and that these structures serve as a form of social control. Following this, I explore the opposing discourse, which aims to position fat bodies as agents of their own empowerment. I argue that endeavours at fat empowerment have become distorted by neoliberal messages of body positivity which have been co-opted by capitalism, turning rhetoric that might initially be considered progressive and empowering into something far more limiting. Importantly, I do not aim to determine the 'truth' about whether or not fatness is a matter of health risk or to deny that the body-positivity discourse is empowering for some bodies. Rather, this piece will serve to contextualise these discourses within neoliberal structures in order to highlight their restrictions. I argue that neoliberalism has had such a profound impact on the conception of fat bodies that the opposing discourses in fact harbour many of the same themes, which all have extremely limiting effects.

It is important to acknowledge that discourses around fat bodies are of course intersectional, with body size intersecting with numerous other aspects of inequality (Van Amsterdam, 2013). This article aims to explore the fatness discourse that is prevalent in UK and US mainstream media; a context in which narrow beauty ideals privilege the thin, white, straight, young, able-bodied and cis-gendered (Sastre, 2014). The constructions of fat bodies mentioned in this article will revolve around women's bodies, as women are often held to the most extreme body-size standards (Saguy and Gruys, 2010).

FAT SHAMING

- **Fatness and failure: Conceptualising bodies and fatness within neoliberalism**

Firstly, I argue that, in order to fully understand the prevailing discourse around fat bodies, it is necessary to contextualise this debate within the current social, political and economic atmosphere. The dominant wave of neoliberal thinking has had a dramatic influence on the conceptualisation of bodies through the prominent discourses of consumerism, individualism and personal choice (Brown, 2006; Phipps, 2014). Deconstructing how bodies themselves are imagined in neoliberalism enables us to comprehend the present landscape of fat-shaming discourse.

Neoliberalism as an economic and political concept, originally prevailing in the USA before spreading to Europe, has been interpreted differently in various analyses. In this paper, I comprehend the concept using Wendy Brown's (2006) view of neoliberalism as a political rationality. Incorporating a Foucauldian concept of power, Brown identifies neoliberalism as a "specific form of normative political reason organising the political sphere, governance practices and citizenship" which "governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria of these domains" (2006: 693). In economic terms, neoliberalism is premised on the liberalisation of capitalist markets (Phipps, 2014), such that control of economic factors is transferred from the public to the private sector; neoliberal rationality thus supports economic moves such as deregulation, privatisation, fiscal austerity and reduced government spending (Larner, 2000). Brown notes that, while neoliberal rationality is based on a conception of the market, these

same rationales are imposed on all other spheres of society; "more than simply facilitating the economy the state itself must construct and construe itself in market terms" (2006: 694).

Under neoliberalism, citizens are constructed as rational, self-interested economic actors with agency and control over their lives (Brown, 2006). The body in neoliberal culture thus exists as an autonomous, consuming and self-governing entity, which must perform desirable individual citizenship through the making of 'correct' consumer choices (Guthman, 2009a; Stuart and Donaghue, 2012). The ideal neoliberal body thus becomes one that performs and maintains a productive economic and social citizenship whilst expressing a desirable self-image via the purchase and consumption of appropriate products.

This neoliberal conception of bodies informs the way in which fatness is shamed in society. Since successful citizenship is assessed by an individual's capacity for self-care, those bodies that do not construct themselves 'appropriately' in neoliberal terms, such as the fat body, are constructed as evident failures (Phipps, 2014; Wright, 2009). Furthermore, neoliberal governance functions through pathways of responsibility (Cairns and Johnston, 2011): since neoliberalism dictates a regime of self-governance, responsibility for failing as an appropriate neoliberal 'citizen' is placed solely with the individual. Social issues become viewed as results of incompetence and individual failings rather than being due to oppressive societal structures (Larner, 2000; Phipps, 2014). Fatness, therefore, is not only visualised as a failure, but is also considered the fault of the individuals themselves.

- **Fatness and health: The obesity 'epidemic' and the medicalisation of fatness**

In the media today it is not uncommon for emotive, fearmongering language such as 'crisis' or 'epidemic' to accompany discussions of fatness. Such hyperbole has led to a moral panic surrounding fatness, positioning the issue as a significant threat to societal values and interests (Campos et al., 2006; Stanley, 1972). It is now widely accepted that obesity is increasing at a threatening rate, and that it is causally associated with an increased risk of early mortality and chronic illness (Guthman, 2009b).

Since the early 2000s, the obesity epidemic discourse has dominated media platforms, enabled by the exaggerated medicalisation of fatness; a point which is highlighted by the shift towards using more medicalised terminologies, such as obese, to describe body types (Boero, 2007; Guthman, 2009b). Medicalisation is a process informed by the current societal and cultural context by which issues previously considered non-medical are reconstructed as medical problems, typically in terms of a disorder, and often for purposes of control (Conrad, 1992: 209). As Sobal (1995: 69) writes, "medicalisation of obesity occurred as medical people and their allies made increasingly frequent, powerful and persuasive claims that they should exercise social control over fatness in contemporary society." Together with the push to define obesity as a disease and the popularisation of the term (Sobal, 1995), this shift positioned health and medical interventions at the centre of discussions surrounding fat bodies.

It is important to note, however, that, within the neoliberal context, fatness has experienced a rather unique process of medicalisation. The construction of fatness as a condition, disease or disorder has not designated it as a medical responsibility. Drawing a comparison between obesity and disability, Guthman and DuPuis (2006) observe that fat bodies are viewed as failing bodies in a capitalist neoliberal society, yet unlike (other) disabled bodies, the fat body is burdened with the sole responsibility for its 'failure'. This point is evidenced through reports on health care access for obese individuals that have revealed medical help is often denied for problems relating to obesity. In a synthesis of current research on health care delivery for obese patients, Mold and Forbes (2013) examined 30 studies from the USA, UK, Australia and Canada, finding that health professionals often actively denied obese patients medical care, or were less likely to suggest care options to obese patients, thus perpetuating the idea that fatness is a self-inflicted problem and not a state or medical responsibility. Far from being viewed as

sufferers of a condition beyond their control, fat individuals are stigmatised as 'irresponsible' and 'lazy', and thus undeserving of medical intervention (Harjunen, 2016; Tischner and Malson, 2012).

- **Fatness and morality: Neoliberal healthism and health as an embodied moral responsibility**

Neoliberal reforms have had a huge impact on the conceptualisation of health in society, and in turn this has strongly influenced how fatness is viewed. Health and healthcare in the UK and USA have been reformed via neoliberalism through the ideologies of individualisation, privatisation and deregulation (McGregor, 2001). The restructuring of healthcare as a private scheme for sale rather than a public system paid for by taxes is a notable reform of healthcare taking place under the neoliberal agenda (McDaniel and Chappell, 1999). As opposed to an entitlement view of health, which aims to make health and welfare a fundamental right for the population, healthcare systems in today's neoliberal economies promote an obligation view of health; a principal which constructs health as a personal obligation that one must maintain so as not to become a drain on state resources (Fraser, 1993). This approach links health to morality through the employment of a neoliberal politics of personal responsibility; as health has become individualised, being healthy is now a matter of individual moral responsibility.

Another effect of these neoliberal reforms involves a shift to viewing health as an embodied phenomenon, whereby health is located within our bodies. Embodied health is coupled with the enforced connection between health and fatness, which has strong implications for how fat bodies are viewed: as Boero (2007) notes, there has been a problematic enforcement in mainstream discourse of the idea that body size is straightforwardly associated with health. This emphasis constructs the fat body (or anything that deviates too far from the ideal of thinness) as unmistakably unhealthy. Likewise, being physically fit and having a thin body is interpreted as 'proof' of health (Kirk and Colquhoun, 1989). As illustrated in my earlier example, many critics cited concerns over health as a reason to shame Holliday's body, despite the audience having no information about the model's state of health. It is clear that body size alone has become a signal of both our health and our way of life. Fatness, therefore, is viewed as an immediate indication of ill-health and a deviant and immoral way of living.

There has also been an emergence in the public domain of what has been termed "healthism"; a middle-class obsession with achieving and maintaining ideal states of health (Crawford, 1980). Since neoliberal reforms have closely linked health to consumerism, ideal health is often sought through the pursuit of consumerist solutions (Cheek, 2008; Greenhalgh and Wessely, 2004). The new healthism discourse thus perpetuates the idea that good health can be simply achieved through individual choice, effort and discipline. As a consequence, failing to reach one's health potential is seen as the result of a lack of effort and self-discipline and the wrong lifestyle choices. Within these structures, fatness is viewed as a choice, not a condition, and thus as the result of a failure to consume and discipline oneself and one's body appropriately within neoliberal culture.

Fat shaming: The fat body as failed, unhealthy, immoral and irresponsible

I contend that the synthesis of all three constructions of fatness as outlined above enables the current culture of fat shaming. The medicalisation of fatness and the neoliberalised view of health combine to create the current construction of fat as a failure. Fat is unequivocally indicative of ill-health, a matter which is first and foremost seen as an individual problem, as a result of the (wrong) individual lifestyle choices. Health concerns are a tool that is often used to legitimise fat shaming, rather than a genuine concern about bigger bodies and health. By failing to engage in the new commodified health regime, the fat body is deemed immoral for neglecting its obligation to avoid becoming a drain on state healthcare resources. Lastly, because in a neoliberal context we are responsible for our own states of citizenship (particularly

our own states of health), the fat body is thus responsible for its own fate, even deserving of its shame.

One of the most damaging consequences of this discourse is that it denies any analysis of the structural proponents of fatness. As numerous studies have illustrated, obesity rates in both Europe and the USA are highest amongst the most socio-economically deprived groups in society (Drewnowski, Moudon, Jiao, Aggarwal, Charriere and Chaix, 2014; Knai, Lobstein, Darmon, Rutter and McKee, 2012; Schienkiewitz, Brettschneider, Damerow and Schaffrath Rosario, 2018). Despite these clear findings, there is a failure to view fatness as a resource- and class-based inequality, leading instead to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of these groups. Saguy and Gruys (2010) exemplified this effect through a media analysis of obesity discourse, in which they found that articles reporting on obesity most often featured poor minority groups, and would frequently frame obesity amongst these individuals as a result of bad life choices. It was also found that many news articles would explicitly blame ethnic communities for contributing to higher national rates of obesity (2010: 244). Reporting obesity in this way serves to reproduce classist and racist stereotypes of minorities and underprivileged groups, which frame these individuals as lazy, irresponsible and out of control, distorting the real issues of inequality in the debate.

Fat shaming thus becomes a regulatory discourse of social control. Drawing upon Foucault's (1984) notion of 'biopower' – the governance of individuals through body-related practices and 'regimes of truth' – fat-shaming rhetoric helps to shape fatness as a social problem and thus reproduces social inequality in the process (Wright, 2009). These effects regulate and normalise commodified practices of weight and health management, urging people to work on themselves rather than look to the surrounding social structures as being the problem. In turn, this has created a culture of exclusion in which bodily difference has become central to notions of citizenship, as well as the denial of human rights (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006: 436). As a result, fat bodies are shamed for being failing citizens, or even undeserving of citizenship.

FAT EMPOWERMENT

Fat activism and empowerment
In opposition to the punishing anti-obesity discourse stands a movement that aims to promote fat acceptance and empowerment for all bodies. As an official political endeavour, fat activism aims to reject the social and cultural devaluation of fat bodies, promoting respect and empowerment for individuals with fat bodies (Donaghue and Clemitshaw, 2012).

Fat activism can be dated back to the establishment of the small civil rights group, the National Association to Advance Fat Activism (NAAFA) in the USA in 1969 (NAAFA Inc., 2016). Following this, subsequent radical fat liberation groups emerged in the USA and Europe, heavily influenced by the growing radical therapy movement; a movement that criticised mainstream psychotherapy, viewing it as a tool of social control that maintains oppressive social conditions by persuading individuals that they themselves are the problem in need of a 'cure' (Hill, 2009). These movements were originally considered fringe groups, who engaged in small-time grassroots activism in their pursuit of fat acceptance (Kwan, 2009). Within the last two decades, however, fat empowerment discourse has infiltrated into mainstream media discourse, gaining public attention through the rise of the "Fat-o-sphere" (Harding and Kirby, 2009); an online domain consisting of blogs and discussions in which fat activists "confront the personal and political elements of the pathologisation and demonisation of fat bodies by sharing their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and personal practices as they pursue fat acceptance" (Donaghue and Clemitshaw, 2012: 417).

Fat liberation discourse confronts the oppressive anti-obesity discourse through critiques of the dominant narrative from a range of perspectives (Wright and Harwood, 2012), and aims to

construct fat bodies as agentic in their own empowerment (Dickins, Thomas, King, Lewis and Holland, 2011). Recently, however, the creation of Instagram has aided the development of a wider movement of body positivity, which has somewhat replaced fat activism with a more generalised discourse of self-love (Tovar, 2018). Along with the hashtags #bodypositive and #effyourbeautystandards (the latter of which was started by Tess Holliday in 2003), participators use social media platforms to promote bodily empowerment. These empowerment discourses are shaped by a neoliberal sensibility that emphasises individual agency as the prominent means of enhancing women's bodily empowerment. The concept of empowerment, and whether or not this has a positive outcome for women's bodies in a neoliberal context, has become an important focus of feminist analyses on sexual agency in the climate of Postfeminism[6] in recent decades (Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Gill, 2012). I contend that these arguments are also relevant to the concepts of empowerment pushed by current body-positivity discourse. I argue that body positivity is a neoliberal co-optation of fat activism. In the following section, I include my own theorisations of how fat activism has been co-opted by neoliberal notions of body-positive empowerment in three ways.

- **From political to personal empowerment**

Firstly, the notions of empowerment that are promoted by body-positive discourse are predominantly focused on the individual level. Media and marketing messages that instruct consumers to love themselves and their bodies encourage individualised acts of empowerment (Johnston and Taylor, 2008); for example, posting a photograph on social media with the #bodypositive hashtag can be seen as a highly individual act of self-empowerment.

These individualised acts illustrate how conceptions of empowerment have changed within neoliberal culture: Bay-Cheng (2011) notes that contemporary ideas of empowerment have shifted to a subjective and individualised type of personal empowerment at the expense of more social and systemic forms. Many suggest that this turn to personal empowerment has depoliticised the concept, removing its power to abolish social injustice (Peterson and Lamb, 2012). In this way, neoliberal empowerment exists as a matter of superficial acts performed by the individual rather than an acknowledgement of and challenge to oppressive social structures as a whole (Bay-Cheng, 2011; Pease, 2002; Peterson and Lamb, 2012). Miriam (2012) highlights this point in a discussion of the SlutWalk – the media-famous transnational protest against rape culture – arguing that, whilst the message might be positive, this attempt at protest exemplifies a type of movement that "has effectively supplanted a collective world-changing project with individualised empowerment" (262).

In a similar way, I argue that neoliberalism co-opts these elements of fat empowerment discourses and replaces them with an individualised and depoliticised movement of body positivity, through which the notion of empowerment becomes distorted. Rather than critically challenging why fatness is constructed negatively in the way that fat activism does, body positivity encourages fat bodies to simply rise above fat shame through individualistic and often superficial acts of embodied 'empowerment', such that empowerment becomes simply loving one's own body. This individualised notion of empowerment denotes a personal conception of power, obscuring the real power relations in society, and thus making empowerment a matter of individual choice and responsibility (Pease, 2002); an effect that is comparative to the notion of health being a matter of choice and responsibility. Through this neoliberal body-positivity discourse, fat bodies are thus instructed to take agency to empower themselves, to choose empowerment over shame, which wilfully ignores the impact of the damaging power structures at play within fat-shaming discourse.

- **From personal empowerment to self-improvement**

Moreover, the individualisation and depoliticisation of empowerment as seen in body-positive discourse can easily transform the concept into an endeavour of self-improvement. Bay-Cheng (2011: 714) argues: "When stripped of critical consciousness and social action to correct system injustices, empowerment is quickly distorted into a self-improvement discourse that instructs

individuals: to identify themselves, rather than surrounding social conditions, as the problem to be fixed; and to compete against others rather than join with them." In this way, body positivity encourages fat bodies to recognise themselves (their 'mindset' or 'lack of confidence'), rather than the encompassing social and political devaluation of fatness informed by neoliberalism, as the issue in need of changing.

This discourse of individual change can quickly be distorted even further by capitalism: as Phipps notes, "the drive to consume in order to both express and 'add value' to oneself is a key aspect of contemporary consumer culture" (2014: 10). In relation to fat bodies, this might involve changing eating habits or losing weight as a path to empowerment (Dickins, Thomas, King, Lewis and Holland, 2011). Advertisements for weight-loss products frequently use body-positivity discourse in this way to encourage sales: Kellogg's, for example, famously markets Special K cereal to women as promoting weight loss through the use of empowerment language, instructing consumers to love their bodies whilst simultaneously encouraging weight loss (see Advertising Archives, 2019). Similarly, Tschinkel (2018) notes how the #bodypositive hashtag has frequently been used by corporations alongside thin, white women with the hashtag #fitspo to promote their brand of body-altering exercise and fitness. Empowerment thus becomes a burden for individuals to endure, rather than achieve (Bay-Cheng, 2011: 714). Moreover, a type of empowerment that focuses on self-improvement leads directly to a path of consumerism.

- ● **Commodified empowerment**

As Gill writes, "another reason 'empowerment' is so problematic, it seems to me, is because the notion has become commodified – used to sell everything from washing powder to cosmetic surgery" (2012: 743). Within neoliberalism, the body is a symbol of value and identity which is enacted via the purchasing of products; political and social issues surrounding the body are thus converted into market terms with consumption-based solutions (Phipps, 2014). In light of these rationalities, I argue that the neoliberalised concept of empowerment championed by body-positivity discourse problematically links empowerment to consumerism, creating an environment in which notions of empowerment can simply be bought via the correct consumer choices.

Utilising body-positive messages and attempts to include more diverse and realistic body types in marketing illustrate the current pursuits of beauty and fashion companies. One of the best-known is Dove's 2003 'Real Beauty' campaign, which included "women who were wrinkled, freckled, pregnant, had stretch marks, or might be seen as fat" (Johnston and Taylor, 2008: 942) in their advertisements in an apparent attempt to critique mainstream beauty standards. Body-positive rhetoric is frequently used as a marketing tool today, with adverts suggesting that, by simply buying the product on sale, consumers can empower their bodies. Ironically, this branding is often used to sell body-altering or body-modifying products and merchandise, reinforcing the link between neoliberal notions of empowerment and self-improvement. For example, Spanx 'control' undergarments are specifically marketed towards fat bodies and utilise bodily empowerment rhetoric as an advertising tool: Spanx states its mission as being "to help women feel great about themselves and their potential" (Spanx, 2019), whilst the company simultaneously capitalises on women's insecurities by selling a product that contorts fat bodies into more normatively beautiful and acceptable shapes. In addition, Avon recently came under scrutiny for attempting to market anti-cellulite cream to women (another product which fundamentally contradicts fat acceptance) using an obvious body-positive empowerment discourse, with the conflicting straplines "every body is beautiful" and "dimples are cute on your face (not on your thighs)" (Greenspan, 2019). It is evident that the concept of empowerment pushed by body-positive rhetoric can easily become confused under neoliberal capitalism, whereby empowerment becomes an outcome achieved by the purchasing of body-modifying products.

These examples of corporations using emancipatory ideals to market their products not only confuse notions of bodily empowerment, they also lead to limited transformative outcomes for the social movement in question. In a comparative analysis of grassroots fat activism and the bodily empowerment pushed by Dove's campaign, Johnston and Taylor argue that the latter is a corporate appropriation of the fat-acceptance movement's ideals that only partially disrupts the narrowness of contemporary beauty codes, and still "systematically reproduces and legitimizes the hegemony of beauty ideology in women's personal lives in the service of expanding sales and corporate growth" (2008: 961). Indeed, the misuse of empowerment discourse by corporations illustrates perhaps the biggest issue with the replacement of fat activism by the neoliberalised, easily-commodified body-positivity movement: little advancement for the most marginalised bodies. The appropriation of fat empowerment discourse has caused the movement to become 'watered down': as activist Stephanie Yeboah notes, "[today] to be body positive, you have to be acceptably fat – size 16 or less – or white, or very pretty", which alienates the very people the fat empowerment movement set out to represent (see Kessel, 2018). Whilst all bodies might experience body shaming, it is integral that the bodies facing the most structural discrimination are kept central in the debate; an objective that the body-positive movement often fails to achieve.

Body positivity: personally empower your own bodies (by buying this product)
In summary, we can see the exposed limits of the type of body-positive empowerment co-opted by neoliberal structures in three ways. The individualised tenets of neoliberal citizenship reshape ideas of empowerment to centre on the individual, depoliticising the concept and severely limiting the outcomes that this type of empowerment can achieve. This personalised empowerment can quickly become distorted into a discourse of self-improvement, which, when combined with the neoliberal capitalist shift to viewing bodies and citizenship as operating in market terms as expressions of each other, is further co-opted into a commodified form of empowerment, where one can simply purchase empowerment through consumption. Businesses have taken to utilising the progressive messages of bodily empowerment as a tool to market products to women: as Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead (2016) assert, "corporation[s] in feminist clothing".

The consequence of this co-optation of empowerment, which renders it a personal choice, crucially obscures the role that privilege plays in the making of this choice. This point is well illustrated through the criticism of the SlutWalk protest for its complete lack of intersectionality; a 'racial blindness' which failed to consider "the differential resonance of the term 'slut' for Black women" (Bilge, 2013: 406). Black Women's Blueprint (2011) asserted that, "as Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves 'slut' without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is", highlighting that engaging in this type of empowerment is only accessible to women with a certain (white) privilege. Similarly, body-positivity 'activism' which relies heavily on individualised performances of commodified empowerment obscures the fact that various intersections of oppression make bodily empowerment more difficult for some bodies than for others (see Hill, 2009). In the same way that neoliberalised 'health' is reserved for those with privilege, these neoliberal ideas promote a very problematic message of empowerment that only certain privileged (white, able-bodied, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual) bodies can achieve. Unfortunately, this effect can be frequently observed within the current body-positive movement via the centring of bodies that face the least structural discrimination, rather than those that are most marginalised.

Ultimately, it is important to consider whether these neoliberalised notions of empowerment pushed by the body-positive movement are enough to counter the punishing, oppressive fat-shaming discourse and fat stigma that we see in society today. Considering again the fat shaming of Tess Holliday as an example, it appears that the answer remains no.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism has had a profound effect on the way in which fat bodies are conceptualised. Neoliberal-influenced fat-shaming discourse constructs the fat body as irresponsible, unhealthy, immoral and, above all, a failure. The increased medicalisation of fatness constructs an obesity 'epidemic', creating a culture of moral panic around fatness. Due to neoliberal conceptions of health as a moral responsibility to be maintained by the individual, fat bodies are viewed as irresponsible and undeserving of state or medical consideration. These negative constructions serve as a regulatory discourse which exerts social control over individuals – often those who are most economically deprived and vulnerable in society. In addition, the political rationalities of neoliberalism also play an integral role in the shaping of fat-empowerment discourse through a distortion of the notion of empowerment. The body-positivity movement, which has eclipsed grassroots fat activism, is dominated by neoliberal principles, promoting an individualised and depoliticised version of empowerment that is extremely limited, occurring on a small personal level rather than a large political scale, and often encourages self-improvement through the purchasing of commodities as a means of empowerment. All of these effects lead to limited transformative outcomes for the fat bodies that face the most structural discrimination.

It is hoped that this analysis of the workings of neoliberal tenets in fat-shaming and fat-empowerment discourses has shed light on the large-scale influence of neoliberalism on the politicising and conceptualising of bodies in contemporary society. Future work in the area of politicised fat bodies in neoliberal discourse may do well to focus more closely on the social constructionism of obesity as a public health problem, and should challenge the 'facts' of the so-called epidemic. These efforts have already been initiated by academics in the field as well as other grassroots activists, yet so far these have failed to permeate public or media discourses of fatness. The work of the Chubsters – a fat, queer activist girl group – illustrates an example of fat activism that is trying to reconceptualise fatness outside of the neoliberal discourse; Charlotte Cooper, the founder of the group, articulates it as focused on "expand[ing] ideas about what fat identity and culture could be, and develop[ing] the ways in which people might approach fat in a critical way" (see Cooper, 2019: n.p.). Similar activism should be encouraged in order to create a critical reconceptualization of fatness that encourages a nuanced view of fat identity, rather than the individualised self-love philosophy that is often encouraged by body positivity. It is hoped that this will inspire more political forms of empowerment that aim to attack the oppressive neoliberal discourse, rather than encouraging empowerment through consumption.

Footnotes

[1] Use of the term plus-size here reflects the terminology used to describe Holliday by *Cosmopolitan* (see Capon, 2018) and the reporting of Holliday's cover by mainstream media as referenced in this article (see *BBC Newsbeat*, 2018, and Scott, 2018 for *Global News*). However, there is debate surrounding the use of this term to describe bodies; many models, including Ashley Graham, reject the label, arguing that, whilst it is often framed as a neutral descriptor, the word "plus" carries negative connotations as it implies being bigger than a 'regular' or 'normal' size, which is dictated by unrealistic standards of thinness (see Burke, 2017). This article thus uses scare quotes around the phrase to highlight the controversy of this label.

[2] *Cosmopolitan* and Holliday were heavily criticised on Twitter for the shoot, perhaps most famously by controversial journalist Piers Morgan, who called the cover "dangerous" (see Scott, 2018). Morgan later wrote an open letter to Holliday accusing the model of "glamorising morbid obesity" (see Young, 2018).

[3] The cover also received extensive online praise from supporters on Twitter (see Scott, 2018), as well as support from other models in the industry, including Felicity Hayward, who described the image as "something that plus-sized women have needed for the longest time" (see BBC Newsbeat, 2018).

[4] Whilst the term *fat* is often viewed as an offensive or derogatory expression in popular discourse, in the current article I use the word *fat* as a descriptor to respect and support the

view shared by many activists that the term should be reclaimed as a neutral description, in the same way that *tall* or *short* might be used to describe a person (see Kirkland, 2008). Many activists also feel that the terms *obese* and *overweight*, which are used overwhelmingly in mainstream media, seek to medicalise these bodies and enhance their undesirability (see Guthman, 2009b). The term *obesity* will still be used in this article, however, simply to match the nature of these discourses.

[5] This article uses the terms fat *acceptance,* fat *activism*, fat *liberation* and fat *empowerment* interchangeably to describe the movements towards creating positive constructions of fat bodies.

[6] The term Postfeminism has been used to mean contrasting phenomena: a shift within feminism, a break with (second-wave) feminism, a backlash against feminism and a cultural sensibility (see Gill, 2007). Adopting Gill and Donaghue's (2013) approach, I refer to Post*feminism* in this context as a neoliberal cultural sensibility that denies gender-based inequalities by assuming that many or all of the goals of feminism have already been achieved, and thus embraces the neoliberal principle that an individual's circumstances are a consequence of choices made by that person, for which they alone are responsible.

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Biography

I am a Psychology (BSc) and Gender Studies (MA) graduate from the University of Sussex, currently living in London. I am particularly interested in the influences of patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism on the way in which bodies are construed, and how this has implications for feminism and intersectionality. Having personally struggled with body image for as long as I can remember, and observing too many amazing women around me face the same struggles, I am especially passionate about dismantling fat-shaming narratives and promoting diversity and the representation of marginalised bodies on mainstream platforms.

CorpoREaction: The Extended Body

Anna Maria Staiano

In 2013, I created "Planet Woman: Jewels for Heroines", a series of body extensions designed to be used as tools for personal empowerment and to assist in questioning the stereotypes of gender and the body beautiful.

The collection comprises four large metal body pieces: the arm extension and the matching shield "Shattering the Glass Ceiling I and II"; the silhouette "Visible", which increases height and broadens the shoulders; and the bodyframe "Re-Model", which extends and exaggerates the curves of the female body.

I created these interactive pieces as a way to fight sexism and to express my rejection of conformity to the rules imposed by the hetero-patriarchy. In order to achieve this, I decided to take them out into the streets and invited women and queer people to use them in actions and demonstrations that reclaimed the body as a site of activism and visibility as well as a site for experimentation and pleasure. Each wearer had a chance to interact with the pieces and develop their own personal reaction to them. I have even encouraged people at exhibitions to try on the extensions and see how they could affect their perceptions.

Here, I focus on "Re-Model" (2014) and another piece, "Life-Size" (2015). Both pieces were created as a reaction to mainstream representations of the idealised "perfect body" in large parts of Europe and North America. They are both body frames, the former is hard and heavy and imposes a body shape on the wearer, whilst the latter by way of contrast is soft, light, flexible and follows the contours of the wearer´s body.

"Re-Model" is a metallic body extension of the bust and hips, whose curves increase the size of the silhouette of the female body instead of trying to make it slimmer. It is a sensory piece that gives people of all genders the opportunity to experience a different relationship with their bodies, their environment and their gender, without surgery or permanent change.
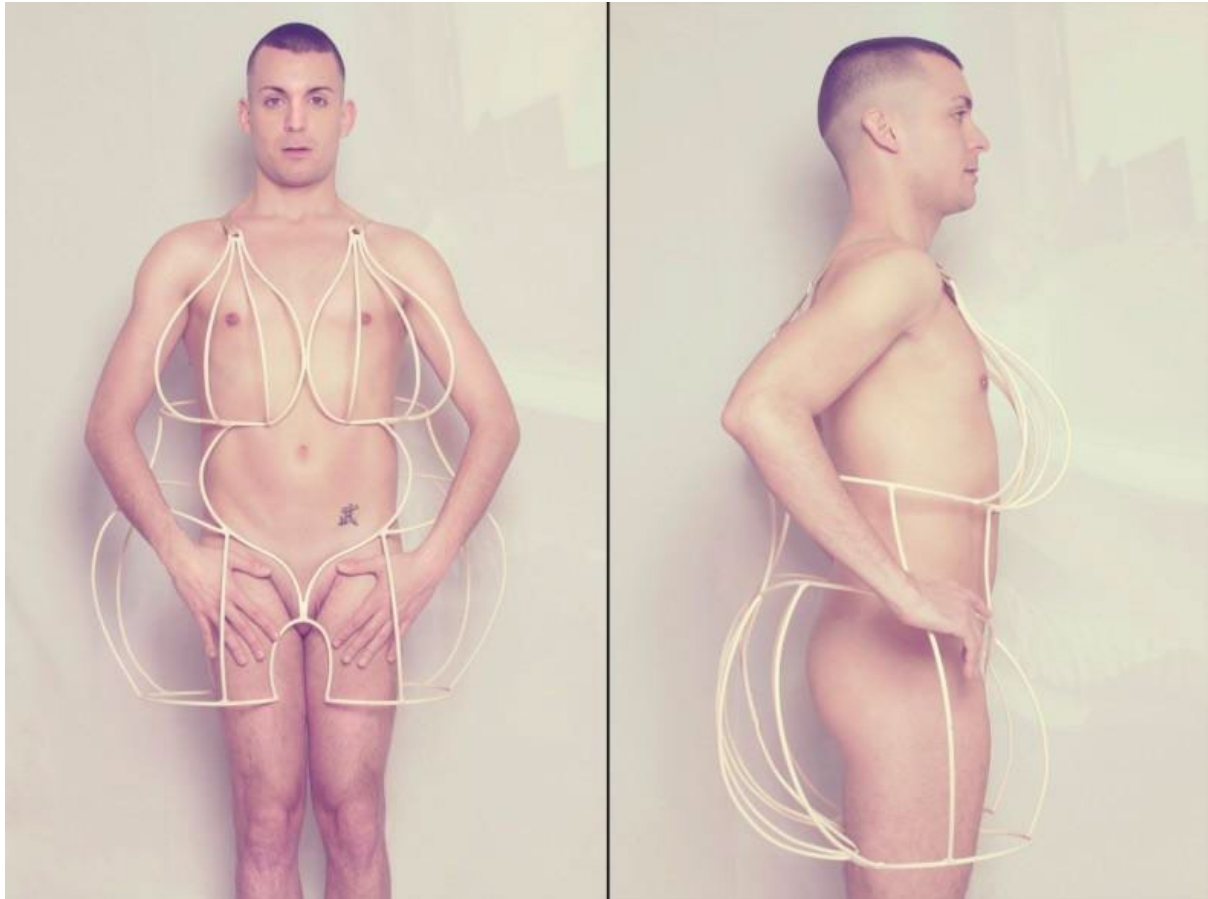
"Re-Model" – Photos by Carlos Valencia

One of the motivations for creating this piece was to "visibilise" bodies that do not fit the westernised fashion industry's "white, thin, young, cis" beauty standards. I decided to base the original extension on my own body, which has the physical attributes and curves common to many Latina women.

I felt really proud to see many different types of people wearing my "body", and at the same time I hoped that many women in Spain where the piece was exhibited would connect with the piece and feel empowered by seeing their curves taking an active role in public spaces.

At the Valencia Pride demonstration in 2013, transgender activist Graham Bell Tornado wore "Re-Model" (adapted as "The BIron Lady"), and the contrast between the body extension and Graham's own body were striking. Their thin, white body contrasted with both the curves of the body extension and the predominantly well-toned and muscular "perfect" male bodies "on display" in the parade.

The unsettling juxtaposition of body shapes and gender representations drew a lot of attention and ended up illustrating the article on Pride in local newspaper "El Levante", displacing the usual stereotypical images of the event.

Pride, Valencia, 2013 – Photo by La Erreria (House of Bent)

The piece was also employed in a participatory street action forming a key part of the Intramurs Arts Festival in Valencia in November 2014, when I invited the women amongst the public to take to the streets wearing and interacting with my "Planet Woman" body extensions.

When we reached the main festival venue, a wide variety of members of the public tried on the pieces, although only women were allowed to wear some of the pieces, such as "Visible" (depicted in the photograph below), which is designed to increase women's height and broaden their shoulders in order for them to occupy more space.

Many women commented that they felt powerful, proud and strong wearing the "Planet Woman" pieces, which were quite heavy to carry, their weight adding another dimension to the interaction.

"Planet Woman", Intramurs Festival, 2014 – Photo by Serena Rinaudo

"Life-Size" is another body extension I designed as a critique of the prejudices and stereotypes of feminine beauty. I wanted to create a piece that might help women to accept and be proud of their bodies, no matter what their shape or size. To reflect the diversity of women's bodies, I designed a made-to-measure soft body frame made from measuring tapes. These were fitted onto the body of each wearer, revealing their measurements.

"Life-Size" – Photo by Ana Wika

On the opening night of the "Patching, Occupying"[1], exhibition, I invited women to take part in the interactive performance "90-60-90? Life-Size!" I hoped that women would feel more comfortable wearing the piece and showing off their measurements proudly in public as part of a large group and that getting together would make us feel stronger. Throughout the evening, so many women volunteered to be measured and fitted with the "Life-Size" extensions that the action was still going on when the venue closed!

"90-60-90? Life-Size!", 2015 – Photos by Asún Bonilla

To celebrate International Women's Day 2017, the participatory action involving my piece "Life Size" was repeated in a public square as part of the event "Invisibilities: Discourse on the construction of female identity"[2], , organised by the EASD School of Art and Design in Valencia. Some participants wanted to keep the piece on even after the action was over and wear it at the march later that day. Some of the women who wore "Life-Size" commented that the fact that it was made-to-measure made them feel special, and others reported that they had developed a close relationship with it and ended up feeling as though it was a part of them.

"90-60-90? Life-Size!", 2017 – Photo by Elvira Rodriguez Puerto

In general, the actions have attracted a high level of participation and have, I believe, created a sense of bonding amongst those taking part. People have told me that they enjoyed the experience of being the protagonists of the work and having the opportunity to experiment. The only complaints I have received have been from cis men, who felt left out because they were not allowed to try on the extensions "Visible" and "Shattering the Glass Ceiling", which were specifically designed to draw attention to gender inequality. On the other hand, the piece "Re-Model" was quite popular with men, who were curious to feel what it would be like to have a female body and interact with it.

For me, the greatest satisfaction was seeing how each person experimented with the pieces in their own unique and often unexpected ways. I especially enjoyed the entire process of fitting the pieces and interacting with the public in such a personal manner and the shared sense of sorority which developed amongst us all.

Footnotes

[1] "Remendar, Ocupar", Valencia, 23/10/2015.
[2] "Invisibilidades. Discurso en torno a la construcción de la identidad femenina", Valencia, 08/03/2017.

Biography

Anna Maria Staiano is a Neapolitan-born trans-disciplinary feminist artist currently based in Spain.

She holds a BA (Hons) in Media and Cultural Studies (Middlesex University, London, 1995) an MA in Film and Video (Middlesex University, London, 1996) and a Higher Technical Diploma in Art Jewellery and Design (EASD School of Art & Design, Valencia, 2013), and is currently studying for an MA in Sexology.

As part of her art practice, "CorpoREaction" (CorpoREacción), she designs performative pieces and body extensions – based on gender, masquerade, transformation and the interactions between body and object – which aim to alter sensory experiences and symbolic imagery. Often the pieces trigger unexpected interactions and are at the core of her participatory actions, performances, photographs and video-art.

In 2016, in collaboration with a host of other feminist and queer artists and activists, she published *Impure,* a book that breaks the moulds of format, genre, artistic and sexual practices, mixing art with jewellery, performance with fashion, and photography with literature.

On A Pedestal Up In A Cage

The weight

of rape

is about eight eight

any less is implosion

so either deny it space

or fill it with hate

on the days

I think

that's all that makes

up my body.

The date

of rape

is the second

or the last weekend in June

or overnight stays

and security gates

staying up late

because you can't sleep

and bottles of cava

and tops patterned with tartan

and saying no

when unhooking your bra

at the start

you always remember saying no.

The taste

of rape

is stale sweat on a plate

and peanut butter jam sandwiches

as the first thing you ate

as you try to convince yourself

it wasn't that bad

it just wasn't that great

and you wore red underwear

so it must have been fate,

the taste

of rape

is shame.

The time

of rape

was thrice

between eight and eight

what a coincidence

that was also your weight

it's a blur in slow motion

I think that summarises the notion

of trauma.

The name

for rape

is apportioning blame

to ourselves

for an act

where we were defamed

and social outcry

when we dare to show rage

and the moral irony

that our supposed lack of fight

got us here in the first place,

put on a pedestal

up in a cage.

The name

for rape

is one in five women.

The blame

for rape

is the rapist.

Sunlight

You can't trust the weather

to keep you dry;

it has a thousand different moods

and just like you

it has to rain sometimes,

with Mother Earth's tears

collapsing the sky

as you try

to hold the world up

and pretend everything is fine.

You survived the thunderstorm

but the lightening struck your heart;

its current blasted

through your body parts

and blew the fuse

that gave your life its spark,

leaving echoes of your former self

to search for meaning

in the grieving

of the stumbling dark.

Through what seems

like endless night

the storm will clear the way for stars;

each one is a person's wish

that you may know

how not alone you are,

so go outside, and with your hands

pluck the stars and hold them tight

until inside your chest, warmth spreads,

and you will find

there's sunlight.

Biography

I am a poet and spoken word performer from the North of England who began writing in 2017 and performing in 2018. I have been published in Catalogue of Failure, Dear Damsels, Whisper and the Roar, Morality Park, as well as the poetry anthologies 'Further Within Darkness and Light' (published by Nothing Books) and 'Essential Existentialism' (published by CTU Publishing Group). In summer 2018 my pieces were displayed and performed at the London multimedia exhibitions 'The Sunlight Project' and 'Testimony'. I have also performed at Manchester based spoken word night 'That's What She Said' and Grrrlizm Arts Fest.

You can find my work at www.undercompulsionpoetry.com

Abstract

This article explores queer pregnant male embodiment by analysing three works of fan-fiction that feature pregnant men. All three works use the television adaptation *Hannibal* (National Broadcasting Company) as a source text and take place in the 'Omegaverse', a science-fictional universe in which humans possess animalistic traits such as mating cycles, and men classed as 'omegas' are able to conceive. Omegaverse fan-fiction often conflates the ability to become pregnant with gender identity, coding the 'omega' man as female and thereby reproducing the cissexist discourse that pregnancy is an uncontrollably female and feminine process. However, the Omegaverse's conflation of pregnancy with gender identity means that choices around pregnancy gain queer potentiality: the omega man on birth control can be read allegorically as a misgendered transmasculine individual who becomes convinced that he can only find happiness by 'detransitioning' and starting a non-adoptive family. The bodily changes of 'detransitioning' – of reproduction and pregnancy – are characterised as abject and feminine; simultaneously, these changes play on the erotic violence and monstrosity of the source text, allowing for some degree of empowerment that challenges the desexualisation of queer and pregnant bodies. The tension between the Omegaverse's queer potentiality and cisnormative, restrictive constructions of pregnancy ultimately allows the texts to question misogynistic and cisheteronormative discourses of reproduction, starting important dialogues that challenge the gendering of pregnancy.

Introduction

Fan-fiction often explores queer sexualities alongside narratives that focus on domesticity and family life. Its portrayals of pregnancy point towards a queering of the pronatalist family and of the pregnant body itself. Here, I use queer and transgender theory to examine this idea by analysing the representation of pregnant male bodies in three works of fan-fiction (or 'fics') based on the television show *Hannibal* (National Broadcasting Company, 2013–2015). All three fics lie within the 'Omegaverse' subgenre, a genre which accentuates reproductive biology and its effect on gender identity; the Omegaverse thereby complicates the fics' presentation of male pregnancy. I argue that the fics explore experiences of pregnant embodiment from a variety of subject positions, many of which are describable as 'queer'; in this regard, they have a queer potentiality. The fics depict biologically essentialist discourses of queer pregnant bodies, including the idea that pregnancy is an inherently female, feminine experience. By depicting these discourses, the fics reflect the challenges faced by queer – particularly transgender/transmasculine – individuals as they navigate pregnant embodiment. They also highlight areas where queerness and pregnancy face similar characterisations; for example, in the construction of both queer and pregnant bodies as 'monstrous'.

Throughout this article, I use 'assigned female/male at birth' or AFAB/AMAB to refer to assigned sex. 'Female/male' refers to gender identity, and 'feminine/masculine' refers to gender presentation, although, as I discuss, the distinction between identity and presentation is not always clear. I utilise 'trans/transgender' as an umbrella term for those whose gender differs from their assigned sex at birth, while 'cis/cisgender' refers to those whose gender accords with their assigned sex. I use 'transmasculine' and 'transmasculinity' broadly in relation to transgender men, as well as to nonbinary and AFAB transgender individuals who include maleness/masculinity as part of their identity.

In recent years, queer, non-cisheteronormative means of achieving pregnancy and reproduction have gained increased cultural visibility. This increased visibility might suggest that cisheteronormative ideas of reproduction are beginning to show cracks; a cisgender heterosexual man impregnating a cisgender heterosexual woman is no longer viewed as the only viable option for having biological children. However, while pregnant transgender men have

captured significant public attention over the past decade, cultural representations of pregnant men often fail to contest the biologically essentialist female gendering of pregnancy.[1] The bodies of pregnant men are coded as 'female' by normative discourses and deemed irreconcilable with their maleness. This paper asks how this discourse is reflected within online fan-fiction, and whether fan-fictional representations of pregnant men always leave the female gendering of pregnancy unquestioned.

Fan-fiction refers to writing that transforms a pre-existing source text, usually published on unofficial platforms such as zines, fan-sites or fan work archives. Fan-fiction is known for queering popular cultural texts through 'slash shipping' (derived from 'relation*ship*'), a term used to describe the placing of (usually male) characters of the same gender in a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Slash shipping frequently involves narratives of domesticity, often to a degree not considered within the source text. Many works of slash fiction – including the fics I analyse here – are keen to ask how the characters in the ship would navigate procreation and raising children. Male pregnancy (or 'mpreg') allows writers to explore the consequences of biological reproduction within the context of a slash ship; as a result, mpreg is popular in many fan-fiction communities. In this context, mpreg involves a (typically cisgender) man becoming pregnant, often through fantastical means. Within both academic and fan circles, mpreg fan-fiction is often criticised for failing to challenge normative ideas about gender and sexuality.[2] While many fan-fictional representations of pregnant men reinforce the female coding of pregnancy, the presence of the pregnant man himself complicates this. By existing as both pregnant and male, his bodily acts and processes transgress cisheteronormative ideas about reproduction. Even when he is feminised, he holds queer potentiality.

Hannibal and the Omegaverse

The presence of queer, abject pregnant bodies in *Hannibal* (NBC) fan-fiction both precedes and follows the show's example. In seasons two and three, Margot Verger's (Katharine Isabelle) character arc centres on her attempting to birth a male heir to attain her family's fortune. Despite her being a lesbian, she conceives via intercourse with a male partner, Will Graham (Hugh Dancy). However, her incestuous, sexually abusive brother Mason (Michael Pitt, later Joe Anderson) finds out about her pregnancy; he kidnaps her and has her uterus removed.[3] Mason coerces Margot into helping him locate and kidnap Hannibal Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen) by offering his sperm in exchange, with which Margot's partner, Alana Bloom (Caroline Dhavernas), can give birth to a Verger heir. However, upon Hannibal's capture, Mason refuses to provide the sperm and announces that after Margot's egg was removed, he transferred it to a surrogate. Margot discovers that this 'surrogate' is a live pig carrying her stillborn foetus. Margot eventually achieves her goals, harvesting Mason's sperm before killing him. In the process, however, her body is punished for its abject queerness. She is first obliged to forego her sexual orientation, conceiving a child through intercourse with a man. Her body is then permanently altered through violent regulation, her fertility being wrested from her control as Mason surgically bars her from reproducing. This seizure of control over her body is an irreversibly traumatic process, emphasised by Mason instructing the surgeons who remove her uterus to leave a scar. Having been scarred and rendered infertile, the only way for her to achieve her goal of having a Verger heir is by proxy and by force: to acquire her brother's sperm she is forced to rape him with a cattle prod. Her bodily integrity annihilated, Margot becomes monstrously infertile, only able to indirectly 'conceive' through violence against others. In her stead, her rapist brother becomes a more suitable reproductive partner, a pig a more suitable 'surrogate'.

Hannibal (NBC) mpreg fan-fiction portrays queer, abject forms of pregnancy, but not always in the same horrific mode as the show. The show's fan works predominantly focus on an imagined sexual/romantic relationship between Hannibal Lecter, a cannibalistic serial killer and psychiatrist, and Will Graham, a criminal profiler whom Hannibal encourages to commit violent acts throughout the series (this pairing is usually abbreviated to 'Hannigram').[4] Mpreg is popular within this pairing, with Will usually being the pregnant partner. Åström (2010) notes that, while mainstream fiction often portrays pregnant men as monstrous and emasculated, fan-fiction tends to engage with male pregnancy in an idealised, normalised domestic context

that prioritises non-adoptive family structures: mpreg is a "life-affirming [experience] resulting in the joy of fatherhood" (par. 1.5). Hannigram mpreg fics often reproduce ideals of domestic life alongside the characters' murderous tendencies, adding a queer ambiguity to their family dynamic. This is complicated even further when considering the 'Omegaverse' subgenre in which many Hannigram mpreg works reside.

At the time of writing (August 2018), 18,789 *Hannibal* (NBC) fan works are listed on *Archive of Our Own* (*AO3*), a multi-fandom online archive within which users self-publish fan-fiction and exchange feedback. Of these, 15,743 works contain Hannigram, roughly 84% of all archived *Hannibal* (NBC) content. A total of 451 works for the show are tagged with the word 'Mpreg', and 839 works are tagged with 'Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics' (*Archive of Our Own*, accessed 2018). This tag describes the 'Omegaverse', a subgenre of fan-fiction involving a speculative fictional universe which is often used as a vehicle for mpreg. While details vary from work to work, several features are observable across almost all Omegaverse texts:

1. Within the Omegaverse, a 'secondary gender' system overrides the sex binary.[5] While characters may be male, female or nonbinary in gender, the sexed characteristics of their bodies are defined by their secondary gender classification: either 'Alpha', 'Beta', or 'Omega'.[6]
2. Usually 'alphas' of all sexes and genders can impregnate others. Alpha males are more common than alpha females, the latter of whom are sometimes portrayed as sterile. 'Omegas' of all sexes and genders can be impregnated. Omega males often have both a penis and a uterus, and are frequently rarer than omega females. 'Betas' vary the most between fics but are typically cisgender, non-intersex men and women.
3. Alphas and omegas typically have animalistic traits, including strong sex pheromones which identify their secondary gender. Sometimes the production of these pheromones increases during alpha/omega mating cycles, wherein omegas go into 'heat' and alphas go into 'rut'.[7]
4.

According to *Fanlore* (accessed 2018), a fan-created wiki for documenting fan phenomena, the Omegaverse originated in 2010; it has thus developed at a similar time to the increasing visibility of transgender and queer pregnancies.[8] This simultaneous development is worth exploring in further detail.

To consider the Omegaverse's dialogue with queer experiences of pregnancy, I examine three *Hannibal* (NBC) Omegaverse fan-texts, applying theory around transgender and queer pregnant embodiment. I demonstrate that the pregnant omega male has a queer potentiality that is suppressed by the normative female coding of pregnancy. I read narratives of omega men on birth control as resembling narratives of transphobia: the omega male on birth control has altered his identity, and is met with gender-essentialist discourses claiming that he is unhealthily denying his 'true' identity. Becoming pregnant is framed as an acceptance of this 'true identity'. However, the bodily changes of omega pregnancy are themselves ambiguous in gender coding. Through his animalistic biology, the pregnant omega man casts off the desexualisation of his queer body by embracing pregnant abjection, a state between humanity and non-humanity. Simultaneously, this abjection is often uncontrollably 'feminine' in nature. The pregnant omega man is thus not equivalent to a pregnant cisgender woman, but a misgendered queer man whose body is overwritten by biologically essentialist discourses.

Within fan studies, there is "a tradition of insider or autoethnographic work" in which the researcher is also a fan who engages in fan communities (Popova 2018, 178). The researcher thus acts as their own "informant", being already familiar with fan community contexts and practices (Popova 2018, 178). My research continues this tradition, being autoethnographic in two regards: I engage in fan-fiction communities as a 'fan' and I identify as transgender/nonbinary. My methodology, including my focus on transgender and queer subjectivity, draws from the knowledge I have gained as a transgender individual in fan spaces.

The fan-texts I consider here are all sourced from *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*, because works using the same platform offer more appropriate grounds for comparison. Fan creators uploading works to *AO3* can assign the work a category, which identifies the source text/s being written about. Likewise, they assign tags denoting the fic's content, including the tropes used, making mpreg and Omegaverse texts easy to find. The texts are drawn from a database search on *AO3* for fan works within the 'Hannibal (TV)' category tagged with 'Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics'. Works under this tag were sorted in descending order by the amount of 'kudos' they had received (*AO3*'s version of 'likes'). They were then selected according to the following criteria:

1. The work must portray conception, pregnancy and/or childbirth.
2. The work must not be set in a geographical location, time or context different from that of the *Hannibal* canon.[9]
3.

Three texts meeting these criteria were chosen. All three focus on Hannigram, casting Hannibal as an alpha and Will as an omega. Based on best practice within fan studies, complete URLs have not been provided for the fan texts.[10] Page references are sourced from PDF downloads of the texts, available on the *AO3* website.

- "Wage Your War" by Della19 (published April 2014, updated September 2015) centres on Will and Hannibal's courtship, following Will from the moment he comes off birth control to the birth of the couple's twins. The text tracks Will's conflict with his bodily processes during his heat cycle and pregnancy, as well as his presenting fluidly as both a beta and an omega. Despite this conflict, Will pursues personal fulfilment by embracing his 'true' omega identity.
- "An Easy Kind of Love" by Dormchi (2017) is the start of a series entitled "The Murder Family Verse", which depicts the couple's experiences of domesticity and impending fatherhood. The story occurs after the show's season finale: while Hannibal and Will are fugitives, Will cannot obtain a prescription for birth control; he subsequently goes into heat and is impregnated by Hannibal. He expresses distress at heat's incongruity with his identity, yet his inner conflict is undermined through biologically essentialist discourses.
- "What To Expect (When Your Mate Is Expecting)" by maydei (2018) depicts Will's bodily changes during pregnancy. The text is structured around interludes from a self-help medical booklet for alphas whose partners are pregnant, a fictionalised version of the medical discourses that regulate and pathologise the pregnant body. The booklet delineates the pregnant omega's animalistic behaviours, which are paralleled within the narrative between Hannibal and Will. These animalistic behaviours allow for a queer pregnant sexuality that challenges the desexualisation of queer pregnant bodies.

Before considering these texts in further detail, I will establish my theoretical framework, reviewing queer reception theory and scholarship around slash fan-fiction, mpreg and the Omegaverse. I then explore the pregnant body's association with femininity, contextualising queer experiences of pregnancy and their erasure within normative discourses. Using these as a foundation, I argue that the texts present the usage of birth control as a 'gender transition': Will's experiences of using birth control are similar to transmasculine experiences of embodiment, and in-universe attitudes towards taking birth control are similar to attitudes that invalidate the identities of transmasculine individuals. I then discuss the gendering of pregnant embodiment itself. I question whether Will's animalistic biology provides grounds for a queer pregnant sexuality that transcends the female coding of pregnancy.

Slash Fiction as Queer Fiction
Omegaverse slash narratives often resonate with queer and transgender experiences of pregnancy. However, within fan studies, the readers and writers of slash fiction are often figured as heterosexual cisgender women who represent gay male couples heteronormatively; for example, by making one partner uncharacteristically feminine.

Even where slash authors/readers are cisgender heterosexual women, this does not bar them from posing a challenge to cisheteronormativity. Queer and transgender approaches to reception theory suggest that anyone of any identity can assume a queer gaze/position, or read a text from a non-cisheteronormative perspective, and thereby challenge gender and sexual binaries (Doty 1993, 3; Halberstam 2005, 86). However, Doty (1993) and Halberstam (2005) both agree that overtly representing queer characters does not necessarily make a queer text or reading (78; 105). Thus, many texts that feature queer characters fail to account for the complexities of queer experience.

Far from assuming a queer gaze, slash fan-fiction often uses an inverted male gaze, making male characters into objects of female desire (Busse 2009, 106). This inverted male gaze reverses the "subject/object relations" between men and women without challenging those relations or the gender binary on which they rely (Busse 2009, 106). Whether these specific power relations carry across to mpreg fiction is debatable. Mpreg texts depict queer men raising a non-adoptive family, undermining cisheteronormative constructs of domesticity and kinship. However, Busse (2009) and Åström (2010) both caution against suggesting that slash and mpreg fiction inherently subverts cisheteronormative discourses by depicting queer men. Busse (2009) suggests that academic debates around slash fiction (and fan-fiction more broadly) have previously used a reductive model of patriarchy, ignoring other power mechanisms that may be present within the fics, such as cisheteronormativity (106). In this respect, their discussions of slash as a subversive practice are limited. Åström (2010) suggests that reading slash texts as products of 'resistance' ignores the potential for these texts to be heteronormative: for example, mpreg works frequently idealise a gender-normative "family life" that is emphasised as being "just like" that of "heterosexual couples", particularly through associating pregnant men with femininity and "motherhood" (par. 3.4). Through this argument, most mpreg texts maintain a heterosexual, cisgender gaze despite depicting pregnant male embodiment.

While these observations are useful, Busse and Åström's arguments mostly ignore fans who are not cisgender women. Busse (2009) interprets some features of fan-fiction culture (particularly the prevalence of gift cultures, the practices of editing, publishing and exchanging fan-fiction for free) to be gendered as female (106), while Åström (2010) genders an implied reader of fan-fiction as female by default (par. 7.1). It is important to acknowledge the predominance of cisgender women within many fan-fiction communities. However, I argue that there are more inclusive (and, potentially, queerer) ways to conceptualise fan writers and readers, as well as the texts themselves. Revising critical frameworks around slash fiction provides better foundations for representing queer and LGBT fans, while allowing that non-queer individuals can assume a queer position (and vice versa). Such a revision would also decentre the identity of fan authors, allowing fan texts to be read as literary "objects of study in their own right", as opposed to being "merely products of an interesting subculture" (Busse 2009, 105) or strictly "derivative"/"appropriative" works (Derecho 2006, 64). Through this approach, wider conclusions can be drawn from fan-fictional depictions of queer bodies.

Most Omegaverse scholarship has focused on audience desire and the gender-coding of alphas and omegas. Linked to the assumption that most fans are cisgender women, omegas are almost always figured as equivalent to cisgender women. Milena Popova (2018) claims that omegas map onto a "western female sexual script" and Arnaiz (2018) argues that "omegas undoubtedly stand for females" (184; eBook location 2430). For Arnaiz, male omegas occupy a displaced position from which women can safely enact scenes of sexual violence and "gain mastery over [...] deep-rooted negative feelings", including "helplessness, humiliation, worthlessness and unlovability" (eBook location 2462). Even here, the Omegaverse's queer potentiality is overwritten into an allegory of cisgender womanhood made exclusively by cisgender women.

Scholarship on the Omegaverse, then, has largely failed to consider the queer potentiality of depicting pregnant men. One gap within existing scholarship is an extended discussion of the queerly animalistic traits of alpha/omega bodies. Many aspects of Omegaverse biology are appropriated from facts and myths of lupine zoology, particularly the heat/rut cycles and alpha/beta/omega social structures. These provide an additional queer potentiality, partly drawn from their similarity to portrayals of lycanthropy. Phillip A. Bernhardt-House (2008) reads the werewolf as a liminal and potentially queer figure. He notes the correspondence between fears around queer sexuality and the usage of werewolves in horror fiction: queer sexuality is often associated with canine/lupine symbolism, being attributed a "beastly, unnatural and atavistic [nature]" (159). The Omegaverse maps lupine, animalistic traits – including the heat cycle, evidence of an uncontrollable sexuality – onto human bodies, recalling the figure of the queer werewolf. This complicates the idea that the omega male is symbolically a cisgender woman and that alpha/omega relationships cleanly map onto cisgender heterosexuality.

The Omegaverse explores queer bodies that transcend sexual and gender norms as well as, potentially, humanity itself. However, this exploration does not necessarily correspond to specific lived queer experiences, particularly regarding the Omegaverse's interactions with transgender experience. Within the Omegaverse, alpha/beta/omega power dynamics often surpass the importance of the gender binary. Where this occurs, the Omegaverse plays down the social consequences of being pregnant and male, indulging in a "fantasy of fluidity" of gender (Halberstam 2005, 96). A utopian theory of gender fluidity implies the total deconstruction of the gender binary.[11] However, this deconstruction is difficult to apply beyond theory (or beyond fiction). It fails to acknowledge the specific situations of many trans individuals, for whom gender fluidity is too dangerous and too commodified to be fully accessible (Halberstam 2005, 92). It also assumes that the social construction of gender has no lived effects and can be easily dismantled: in this sense, it is oversimplified and removed from gendered experience. Lanei M. Rodemeyer (2018) argues that such models fail to account for the lived effects of gender presentation and sensed embodiment. This prevents transgender voices from defining their own experiences of identity (Rodemeyer 2018, 105–107). Thus, the Omegaverse typically does not deconstruct cisnormative ideas of sex and gender, although it does form a dialogue with them. I will now consider these cisnormative discourses in further detail, exploring their effects on queer and male pregnant bodies.

Conceptions of the Pregnant Body

Within biologically essentialist discourse, the pregnant body is constructed as female and feminine. Michelle Walks (2013) argues that "feminine pregnancy is a cultural fetish": non-feminine pregnancy is near inconceivable within existing social discourses, and the 'default' position of the pregnant body is one of femininity (n.p.). K. J. Surkan (2015) suggests that the female coding of pregnancy is because the pregnant body contradicts expectations of the ideal feminine body, including through weight gain (61).[12] This is irreconcilable with the slender feminine ideal enforced on AFAB bodies, so normative discourses must work even harder to associate pregnancy with femininity, avoiding association with 'unfeminine' and therefore ambiguously 'queer' fatness. Although Jane M. Ussher (2006) focuses on pregnant cisgender women, her argument is similar. She argues that the 'unfeminine' bodily developments of gestation are constructed so as to alienate the pregnant woman from her own body. The pregnant body 'naturally' cannot perform normative cisgender femininity, and the pregnant individual lacks the agency to control this, a 'failure' which is deemed part of 'being a woman' (Ussher 2006, 89). The pregnant body thus paradoxically occupies two spaces of gender presentation. Many aspects of pregnant embodiment are ambiguous in gender, even queer, but these aspects are blamed on an uncontrollable femininity. Within normative discourses, then, pregnant individuals cannot reclaim the 'unfeminine', 'masculine' aspects of pregnancy as queer experiences: these aspects are removed from their agency and are tied to femininity by normative discourses.

The pregnant body is associated with an abject, 'natural' femininity which "[s]imultaneously [signifies] reverence and revulsion" (Ussher 2006, 84). The pregnant body is characterised as "a

[natural] site of pollution" that must be medicalised and subject to "expert containment and control" (Ussher 2006, 1; 81). Clare Hanson (2004) observes that, paradoxically, this control and close monitoring is often to ensure a 'natural' (or non-pathological) birth. Given the associations between femininity and nature, to idealise 'natural' childbirth (while simultaneously denigrating pregnancy as 'naturally' monstrous) is to gender the pregnant body as feminine. Even theories that seem to challenge the nature/culture dichotomy may still feminise the pregnant body by associating it with nature and distancing it from culture. Both Hanson (2004) and Butler (2006) cite Kristeva (1980; 1982), who aligns the pregnant woman with the pre-cultural. Kristeva argues that the pregnant body is abject, caught between nature and culture. Butler, however, criticises this argument for alienating women from culture, denying them the ability to redefine discourses around the pregnant body. By characterising pregnancy as pre-cultural, it becomes a "maternal instinct", and the pregnant subject is left without agency (Butler 2006, 123). Hanson, Ussher and Butler highlight the biological essentialism that shapes pregnancy into a natural instinct. This robs the pregnant individual of subjecthood, while defining their body as inescapably feminine.

While Hanson and Ussher only focus on cisgender women, they emphasise the damage of failing to acknowledge subjective experiences of pregnancy. In a model that reduces pregnancy to a feminine body that must be regulated, pregnant men struggle to find a position that neither erases their identity as queer men, nor erases their pregnant embodiment. As an example, Walks (2013) interviewed trans men, butch lesbians and genderqueer/nonbinary individuals about their experiences of pregnancy. Many participants observed that, after announcing their pregnancy, their friends and family treated them as though they were "*finally* embracing femininity", even if their gender presentation did not change throughout pregnancy (n.p., original italics). The female coding of the pregnant body means that queer and gender non-conforming individuals' identities are erased during pregnancy: the two seem irreconcilable.

Queer and poststructuralist theories of pregnant/gendered embodiment take steps towards reconciling gender nonconformity and pregnancy. However, they do not offer an entirely convincing remedy. These theories establish paradigms between sex/gender and the essential/constructed. These paradigms fail to wholly account for transgender experiences of identity (Rodemeyer 2018, 106; Sellberg 2009, 71). Transgender experiences involve an authentic sense of identity, yet social constructivist models deem identity to be a construct, meaning that experiences of identity cannot truly be described as 'authentic' (Sellberg 2009, 73). Another risk is that, under queer theory, being transgender is reduced to "a subversive act of gender transgression", rather than a lived identity with social consequences (Hines 2007, 26). However, Sellberg (2009, 82) suggests that it may be possible to reconcile these two perspectives:

If embodied subjectivity were to be reconsidered neither as a stable essential entity nor as a de-essentialised vacuum in a fetishised shell, but rather as an uncharged series of inputs that develop in processes of 'becoming', then gendered, transgender, and queer subjectivities could be expressed within a shared discursive space, intermittently and coextensively.

Drawn from Rosi Braidotti (2002), 'becoming' involves a repeated performance of gender, which allows the expression of an 'authentic' gendered self. Here, gender performance can be linked to an authentic gender subjectivity; thus, the two are not as mutually exclusive as they at first appear. This concept of 'becoming' also accommodates instances in which gender identity appears 'unclear' or 'contradictory' – at least, within discourses that rely upon binaries of authenticity/constructedness.

In the Omegaverse, where becoming pregnant means also 'becoming' a particular secondary gender, the omega male embodies this contradictory sense of gender identity. I posit that the figure of the male omega is a site of simultaneity, where multiple readings can be applied to the same fictional body. The pregnant omega male body can variably and simultaneously

connote a trans man, a cis woman, a cis man, and/or an intersex person of any gender (to name only a few), while the same representation may vary from queer and self-reflexive to cissexist and heteronormative.

Within the Omegaverse texts I am discussing, fecund and/or pregnant embodiment almost always takes precedence over queer identity. The texts stage an overt conflict between Will's maleness and his ability to become pregnant: his fecund/pregnant body is regulated by discourses that cannot fully accommodate a queer experience of identity.

'His body is a warzone': Birth Control and Identity Trouble

This section discusses the biologically essentialist discourses that see the 'pre-pregnant' omega male as inescapably feminine. "Wage Your War" and "An Easy Kind of Love" depict these discourses and explore their effects on omega male identity. Will's usage of birth control – which allows him to pass as a beta – is discouraged within the narratives. The medical and political discourses of the Omegaverse combine to present the usage of birth control as unhealthy, transgressive and a disavowal of one's unquestionable identity as an omega, an identity which inevitably seems to involve rape and impregnation. The 'authentic' omega identity seems to involve a relinquishing of bodily integrity in two ways: the ability to consent to sex and pregnancy and the ability to present as a different secondary gender. Within the context of the Omegaverse, both of these forms of bodily integrity can be read as transmasculine; this is despite Will's eventual acceptance of pregnancy and his given gender classification. I conclude that the writers use Will's status as a queer pregnant/pre-pregnant man to explore the regulation of AFAB bodily autonomy and the repression of queer experiences of gender.

Both "Wage Your War" and "An Easy Kind of Love" depict conception. At the start of both narratives, however, Will wishes to avoid pregnancy. He takes 'heat suppressants' which prevent him from being subject to an oestrus cycle and becoming pregnant, taking the strongest legally prescribed suppressants for "thirteen years" in "Wage Your War" and "18 years" in "An Easy Kind of Love" (Della19 2015, 9; Dormchi 2017, 4). By emphasising this detail, both texts frame Will's background in a way that assumes pregnancy and Will's character to be mutually exclusive until a narrative catalyst comes into play.[13] These catalysts force Will to accept the bodily processes of heat and pregnancy and embrace his omega identity, promising a happy ending with a family. With this development comes the assumption that Will's identity was initially unfulfilled and false.

In "Wage Your War", Will's taking of heat suppressants positions his identity as inauthentic, and as denying supposedly 'essential' aspects of being an omega (Della19 2015, 4):

Will was all for the omega liberation movement of the sixties: he was eminently grateful that his status as an individual with ovaries didn't mean he couldn't hold down a job, but for all that, passing oneself off as a beta was still the 'socially acceptable' thing to do. It wasn't a necessity anymore, and if the second wave omegists had anything to say about it it'd be a dying trend, but for the most part, if you weren't making a political statement, mated or looking for a mate, you were on at least suppressants, and probably wearing a beta scent.

Historical feminist movements are paralleled here; consequently, omega identity is conflated with cisgender womanhood. The act of leaving one's body unaltered becomes a 'political statement', one which is affirmative of womanhood/'omegahood'. For the second-wave omegists, then, assigned sex (or secondary gender) determines identity. Omegas who alter their sex characteristics are thus vilifying their 'true' identity.[14] They function as an allegorical displacement of the 'feminists' who conflate body parts with gender: like those feminists, they construct a sense of identity by relying on "a biological understanding of sex as fixed from

birth" (Hines 2007, 33). Della19's text thus questions essentialist feminist perspectives on gender, yet indirectly reproduces them by associating omegas with cisgender women.

If omegas are allegorically cisgender women, presenting as a beta becomes an act of transitioning from one's assigned (secondary) gender. Taking heat suppressants is a transmasculine act, analogous to taking testosterone as part of gender transition.[15] The omega taking heat suppressants and the transmasculine individual taking hormones both claim bodily integrity, altering their body in a way that changes how their gender is externally received.

While the allegory is not exact, the concerns of both converge in a key way: a desire to 'pass' as a particular gender/secondary gender. Will 'transitions' to assume a beta identity and considers it key to ensure that his body does not give away his omega status; he uses "beta cologne" to this effect (Della19 2015, 4). By "[p]assing […] as a beta", Will avoids "posturing alpha pheromones" and "omega heats triggering inconvenient ruts" (4). If Will experiences a heat cycle or is biologically attracted to an alpha, neither would give him the option to consent sexually: hence, Will's need to pass as a beta is also linked to avoiding the loss of his bodily integrity. Will's perspective gestures towards transgender experiences of passing. Sandy Stone (2006) characterises passing as a social imperative "to erase" oneself and "fade into the 'normal' population as soon as possible" in order to avoid social ostracism (230). Will's goal of 'passing' is, likewise, to be accepted as a 'natural' beta. For Will, however, 'passing' does not have the aim of erasing his trans status from public view (and thereby being able to claim social acceptance), but instead of erasing his 'true' identity: that of a female-coded omega. Thus, while Will's subjectivity does somewhat align with trans experiences, specifically the imperative to 'pass' and become invisible, the text parallels the argument that being transmasculine is a matter of social coercion, convenience, and a misogynistic disavowal of femaleness. Being transmasculine *itself* is framed as "the 'socially acceptable' thing to do" (Della19 2015, 4). Here, the text reflects Halberstam (2005)'s fantasy of gender fluidity (92). Will's fluid secondary gender presentation has some surface similarities with transmasculine experience. However, the text does not otherwise fully engage with the complexities and "sensed embodiment" of transgender experience (Rodemeyer 2018, 108). His queer potentiality is overridden by the notion that, by passing, he is attempting to deny his own femaleness/'omeganess' out of 'convenience'.

The beginning of "Wage Your War" sets up a 'detransition' narrative, in which Will stops taking heat suppressants and accepts his assigned identity as an omega. I use the term 'detransition narrative' to distinguish 'narratives' of detransition from the lived, diverse and complex situations that often accompany an individual detransitioning from a transgender identity. Those who detransition have not always experienced a shift in their identity, but instead may be doing so due to social pressure or an inability to continue financially supporting their medical transition. Despite this, evidence of individuals detransitioning is often used to invalidate transgender experiences of identity altogether.[16] Will's coming off heat suppressants is, in many ways, a detransition narrative.

Within detransition narratives, "cisgender identity tends to be seen as the healthy opposite of a problematic transgender identity" (Newhook et al. 2018, 217). Likewise, within the fic, the 'healthiness' of Will's biological imperatives is contrasted with the 'unhealthiness' of his maintaining a beta (or transmasculine) identity. The biological changes caused by Will's heat suppressants are unpleasant if not dangerous: he is deemed medically irresponsible for making 'unhealthy' choices about pregnancy and gender presentation. His suppressants come with "a fun grab bag of side effects", such as "night terrors, night sweats, insomnia, unusually disturbing nightmares, suicidal thoughts and even, on occasion, visual and auditory hallucinations" (Della19 2015, 9).[17] To maintain bodily integrity, Will is forced to harm himself with suppressants. Maintaining his "easy, bland" beta life causes him abject sickness; his omega identity continually inflicts damage on him for the crime of denying it . His obstetrician also "chastis[es]" him for enduring the suppressants' side effects for so long (9). When he tries to take the focus off the side effects, she gives him "a look […] that says, *you're not getting away that easily*" (9, original italics). This exchange is light-hearted but has an undercurrent of

pursuit: Will's intentions and personal sacrifices mean little to a medical system that he cannot "[get] away" from, a system that is primarily interested in preserving his healthy, fecund body, and which will police his medical decisions accordingly. Although Will "wants a family", it is not enough to feel this imperative: he suffers from his temporarily infertile bodily state (7). Will's use of suppressants is thus deemed unacceptable: his figuratively transgender, electively infertile body is associated with illness and reckless bodily choices.

In 'detransitioning' and accepting his biologically ordained identity, Will gains a happy ending with a family, an ending determined before it has actually occurred in the main narrative. After Will detransitions, being "*so* tired of being lonely" (7, original italics), he successfully courts Hannibal. One chapter closes with the two about to mate, before being followed by an interlude chapter from the perspective of Will's estranged alpha mother. She notices a newspaper picture of Will "beaming" alongside Hannibal, "each one holding a child of perhaps a few weeks old" (49). Will and Hannibal's procreation is established as a fixed endpoint before Will even becomes pregnant. To bolster the detransition narrative, the plot discards its conflicts (including Will and Hannibal's risking death to conceal Hannibal's serial killer identity) and presents a happy ending at the narrative midpoint, which is later fulfilled as promised. By doing so, the text reinforces biologically essentialist discourses which claim that transitioning is an ineffectual band-aid rife with medical complications and loneliness, and that only detransitioning and accepting one's biological imperatives will end with a partner, a family, and good health.

When Will stops taking heat suppressants, a conflict commences between his 'masculine' mind and his impregnatable 'feminine' body. In "An Easy Kind of Love", Will describes waiting for his heat cycle as "waiting for [his] body to turn on [him]" (Dormchi 2017, 6). Similarly, in "Wage Your War", his heat commences with the following: "his body is a warzone", his sexual desire "all consuming, so strong it nearly *chokes him* as it churns in his stomach and his throat" (Della19 2015, 10, italics mine). His reproductive cycle is inescapably violent, an antagonistic battle for dominance. Will's "hole", not Will himself, is "aching, needing, *desperate*", and "can barely tell the difference" between an alpha's penis and a dildo (10).[18] Synecdoche separates Will from his body parts; the latter have their own consciousness when he is in heat. Will's mind is suffocated and 'choked' by his body. This conflict perpetuates a mind/body binary which, as Butler (2006) observes, masculinises the mind and feminises the body (17). The consequence is that sensed embodiment and freedom are considered to be mutually exclusive (Butler 2006, 50); hence, Will's corporeality costs him his sexual agency and ability to consent. And if this corporeality is feminine-coded, this implies that the male omega's 'masculine' mind cannot overpower his uncontrollably 'feminine' body. Feminine corporeality is therefore defined as almost inevitably subject to bodily violation, including rape. Will is relatively comfortable with this, noting earlier that "[h]eat is heat" (Della19 2015, 10). However, his subjective agency and experience works against inevitability, as Hannibal later breaks into his house and "replace[s] his birth control pills with placebos" (22). Thus, while Will chooses to detransition in Della19's text, he would inevitably have been robbed of this 'choice'.

The biological imperatives of heat conflict with the male omega's ability to sexually consent and define his gender identity. This conflict is posited as the effect of an unruly, female-coded body, a natural part of omega identity. This is demonstrated in "An Easy Kind of Love", after Will has been forced to 'detransition' and he and Hannibal have copulated:

"I didn't want our first time together to be like this." Will squeezes his eyes shut. Tears leak from the corners. "I tried so hard not to open the door, Hannibal, but I couldn't…. I *can't*."
"Never feel ashamed to be who you are, Will," Hannibal soothes, wiping at the corner of Will's eye with his thumb. "Your biology does not make you weak. Quite the opposite, in fact." (Dormchi 2017, 14)

The claim that Will's biological classification does not make him weak both empowers his omega identity while belittling his desire to alter his body and its classification. Will's body is thus rendered a crucial, uncontrollable aspect of his identity; his taking birth control and acknowledging the mutability of his own body (and, therefore, of his gender identity) is redefined as 'shame'. Will attempts to change his body to avoid losing his sexual autonomy and potentially being raped. However, his struggle is invalidated by biological essentialism, the idea that these factors are simply part of being an omega.

Although Will is female-coded, his literal position as a male omega is one of queer potentiality and flexible political allegory. Will's decision to take birth control is denigrated, resembling discourses that discourage and/or restrict AFAB people from exercising bodily autonomy and using contraception. However, because the Omegaverse ties reproductive anatomy to gender identity, birth control is also a tool that allows the individual to present as a different gender. Within the texts, the choice to take birth control is deemed the production of an unhealthy, lonely body. However, stopping birth control is no better, and leads to an uncontrollable, uncontrollably feminine body. Will ultimately sacrifices his agency and his (trans)masculinity for happiness, with the end of Della19's text and Dormchi's series promising him and Hannibal a contented family life. While the omega male is misgendered and feminised here, his body *during* pregnancy might still offer a platform for queer empowerment.

Monstrous Impulses: Unruly Bodies, Queer Wolves

This section explores the Omegaverse's animalistic biology as presented in "What To Expect", considering its dialogue with queer sexuality, monstrosity, and the unruly pregnant body. Within "What To Expect", the pregnant body is coded as pre-cultural and violent. Owing to the canonical violence of Hannibal and Will, however, the text has some room to normalise Will's pregnant abjection. His monstrosity is redefinable as sexually empowering; his presentation as a queer pregnant 'werewolf' conflicts with the text's otherwise feminised descriptions of – and responses to – his body.

When considering the omega man's pregnant embodiment, his zoomorphic traits cannot be ignored. Here, I revisit Bernhardt-House's reading of lycanthropy as reminiscent of a queer subject position, both being associated with atavism and danger within dominant discourses. While normative discourses alienate the pregnant subject from their body, the werewolf is forced into a different sort of biological determinism, often being portrayed "as a human divided against itself, unable to control its emotions or its body", its sexuality inescapably dangerous and impossible to accept (Bernhardt-House 2008, 163). The Omegaverse's use of lycanthropic tropes reinforces the pregnant body as being naturally unruly, but if the werewolf might be queer, this offers ground for queer potentiality.

From its opening onwards, "What To Expect" uses the Omegaverse's animalistic biology to queer biologically essentialist discourses around pregnancy. The first line assumes the voice of a self-help pregnancy booklet for alphas: "It's simple biology, a tale as old as life itself. Alpha and Omega bite, bond, mate, and procreate" (maydei 2018, 1). The reproductive relationship between "Alpha and Omega" is figured as pre-cultural, "as old as life itself": the relationship is posited as unquestionable, a biological given. However, the first sentence's assertion of "simple biology" is contradicted by the animalistic terminology in the second, specifically "bite" and "mate". A tension forms between the fan work's reader and the booklet's addressee. The text overtly addresses the alpha addressee of the self-help booklet, for whom these animalistic characteristics are commonplace, while covertly addressing the reader of the fan work, aware that they are reading a work of science fictional fan-fiction. The dual address of the self-help booklet foregrounds the fictionality of the Omegaverse's "simple biology": the text shows how biological essentialism reifies the reproductive coupling of bodies. The text's biological essentialism is itself 'queered', rendered mutable and open to question.

The text undermines its own queerness, however, by highlighting the unruly inconveniences of the pregnant body. These inconveniences are represented in a way that largely concedes to the feminine coding of pregnancy. Each bodily change in the pregnancy booklet (almost always pathologised, defined as a "symptom" [2]) is exemplified by a subsequent scene between Hannibal and Will. The first scene depicts Will's pregnancy cravings interrupting the couple's dinner ritual: "Dinner has always been a simple affair between them. Hannibal cooks. Sometimes Will helps. […] Food is eaten when it's prepared, and not a moment before" (2). These rituals only remain in place "prior to Will's pregnancy"; during his pregnancy, he experiences unusual food cravings, eating raw ingredients such as whole chilli peppers prior to Hannibal's cooking them (2). Unusual pregnancy cravings are often deemed symptomatic of the uncontrollable pregnant woman's body. However, this specific craving is more ambiguously gendered: enjoying spicy food is often associated with masculinity.[19] Will's cravings disrupt the couple's eating rituals and transgress against the cultural fetish of feminine pregnancy, which would otherwise recast the 'symptom' as 'irrational' femininity. Despite this ambiguity, the feminine coding of pregnancy goes largely unchallenged. Given the brief mention that "the meat" in Hannibal's chilli "is decidedly not beef" (maydei 2018, 3), Will's cravings interrupt a specifically cannibalistic dinner. His pregnant body is thus rendered incompatible with their monstrously queer version of domesticity. Will is defined by an uncontrollable cisgender femininity that partially overrides his queer identity.

While Will's bodily changes are feminine-coded, he does present some more animalistic and unpredictable changes. These changes gesture towards non-human biology, providing him with queer potentiality, yet limiting his agency. When confronted about his food cravings, Will growls and bares his "short omegan fangs" before he replies (2); the physical characteristics of his pregnancy render him grotesque and bestial. The self-help booklet illustrates many typically observed pregnancy characteristics (such as nesting and "a need for excessive rest" [3]), but adds an animalistic spin, warning of dire consequences for the alpha who "underestimate[s] […] what [their mate] is capable of in defense of their children" (3). When Hannibal disturbs his mate's rest, Will attacks him, his eyes "wild, half-crazed", his "teeth bared and poised to rip Hannibal's throat out" (4). When he comes to, "awake and aware", he confesses that he "wasn't really thinking", although he was "about ready to slaughter [Hannibal] *in defense of their pup*" (4, italics mine). Will's bestial, uncontrollable characteristics are thus tied to his status as a pregnant father-to-be, reinforcing the pregnant body itself as monstrous, pre-cultural and uncontrollable.

The fic characterises the pregnant body as abject and dangerous, which invokes the uncontrollably queer and sexual lycanthropic body. Hannibal observes that the way in which his legs interlock with Will's while fighting is "not so different from how he had knotted him earlier […] hips slotted together" (4). 'Knotting' references the couple's canid anatomy: alphas in the Omegaverse sometimes have canine penises, featuring a bulb (or 'knot') which swells during sex, tying or 'knotting' them to their penetrated partner. Knotting also commonly occurs in sexually explicit werewolf fan-fiction. Elliott (2016) argues that knotting in werewolf fan-fiction acts to displace 'unacceptable', unknowable queer sexual acts – much like Will and Hannibal's gay sex, which involves the pregnant body. The sex is made knowable and visible by its monstrous, animalistic characteristics; hence, monstrosity can accommodate positive representations of queer sexual desire (Elliott 2016, 104).[20] The couple's murderous monstrosity similarly acts as a means of queer displacement.[21] Hannibal receives Will's violent episode itself with positivity: he "would normally be thrilled" by his partner's murderousness if not "for the circumstances", and he later wonders if "perhaps he should *reward* his 'instincts'" to fiercely protect their child (maydei 2018, 4, original italics). The episode thus links violent eroticism not only with Will's queerness but also with his pregnancy. This recalls Bernhardt-House (2008)'s hypothesis that the werewolf's violent, mindless corporeality could reveal the alienated, "rather poor relationship a great deal of human society has with sexuality – its most animal and bestial set of behaviours" (163). "What To Expect" associates queer sexuality during pregnancy with a less alienating, more empowering form of monstrosity. The text presents a couple who embrace their queerness and for whom murder is part of daily life. As a result, the

lycanthropic, violent corporeality of omega pregnancy contributes to Will's queer sexuality and sexual desirability.

This combats the desexualisation of both the queer man and the pregnant body, providing room for queer subversion. However, it risks reinforcing a hierarchy in which Will's pregnant body is defined by its attractiveness to alphas. The couple's violent, homoerotic exchanges could also frame homosexual relationships as dangerous and abusive, rather than providing a liberatory queer platform (something which Elliot [2018] perhaps too optimistically overlooks when analysing Will and Hannibal's relationship in the *Hannibal* canon [262]). Will's cisgender female coding further removes him from agency and from his queer identity. When Will has regained consciousness after attacking Hannibal, the couple embraces, and Hannibal notices that "the curve of Will's belly is illuminated by the moonlight through the window, pale and lovely and full, ripe with their child between them" (maydei 2018, 4). These sorts of descriptions are repeated throughout; Hannibal often observes the "soft swell of Will's stomach" and the "soft baby curls" of Will's hair (2; 3). Will's body is a site of both sexualised danger and softness, innocence and intimacy. While none of these traits are inherently feminine, their depiction alongside pregnancy makes them difficult to untangle from idealised femininity and 'motherhood'. Furthermore, his pregnant belly is illuminated by the moon, symbolising both lycanthropy *and* femininity. The text is thus ambiguously queer: while Will is overtly presented as a queer man, he is subtextually female-coded, reinforcing the fetish of feminine pregnancy. His pregnant body occupies multiple subject positions, but two in particular stand out: the queer wolf-man and the cisgender woman. Neither grants him agency or self-sufficiency.

Throughout "What To Expect", the presentation of the pregnant body is ambivalently queer. The text demonstrates a queer potentiality through its presentation of visibly 'monstrous' queer traits alongside domestic intimacy. The conclusion promotes a pronatalism that transcends cisheteronormativity: the narrative ends with Hannibal and Will admiring their newborn child, the couple's "convoluted history [...] ironed smooth with love and understanding" (maydei 2018, 8). However, Will's body itself moves between two female-coded archetypes, from dangerous and monstrous to innocent and soft. His animalistic behaviours do not just queerly cross the boundary between human and non-human: they demonstrate that he cannot escape from the Omegaverse's biological essentialism. Like the 'pre-pregnant' Will, he is governed by his body, a female-coded condition which comes with the assumption that the pregnant body is inherently feminine, whether the specific brand of femininity is monstrous, maternal, or both.

Conclusion
The omega male body is queer and potentially transmasculine, yet also female-coded and forcibly associated with femininity. The omega man who uses birth control is figuratively 'transmasculine', yet can only find happiness by accepting pregnancy, female gender coding and a lack of bodily agency. "What To Expect", meanwhile, demonstrates that the pregnant male omega embodies an intersection between queer masculinity, lycanthropy and pregnancy, all three of which are desexualised in normative discourse. The male omega's overt, normalised sexuality makes queer pregnant sexual practices visible and acceptable, yet his potential for queer empowerment is subsumed by the female coding of pregnancy. The omega male's female-coded reproductive capabilities are intrinsic to his gender identity, misgendering him as female and consequently making a pregnant man seem like "an impossibility" (Surkan 2015, 62), a fantasy that cannot transcend normative discourses of sex and gender – at least, not without erasing the complexities of lived queer experience.

While these texts present normative gendered discourses, they do not "replicate uncritically relations of domination" (Butler 2006, 42). The Hannigram Omegaverse works that I have explored here combine numerous taboos: ultra-conservative perspectives on gender and amoral, violent, erotic acts mix with the unusual yet harmless circumstances of a pregnant man starting a family with another man. Transgressing these political and gendered

boundaries – from several conflicting positions of reception – creates a sense of confusion, a queer fluidity that undermines the gender essentialism of the Omegaverse's world-building. Thus, even fics that appear to rely on cisheteronormativity offer much in the way of subversion, and can encourage critical conversation about gendered constructions of reproduction and the pregnant body.

Although fan-fiction communities have predominantly female, nonbinary and non-straight contributors (Popova 2018, 178), existing fandom scholarship has not wholly embraced fans beyond cisgender women, or considered the complexities of cisgender heterosexual women assuming queer positions. The Omegaverse provides an ideal platform to examine these complexities: even in fics that appear to align omegas with females, the male omega can stand for far more than cisgender womanhood, and can start broader dialogues on gendered experiences of pregnancy. The Omegaverse's gendered allegories are inconsistent and ambivalent, creating a liminal space which can also accommodate queer and non-female experiences of pregnancy. The male omega provides a displaced, mutable platform to explore areas where AFAB and intersex people of all genders face similar (though not identical) institutional challenges, such as the restrictions on bodily autonomy related to pregnancy. In line with fan-fiction's history of queering texts, these fics take steps towards queering the cultural construction of the pregnant body and interrogating its connection to gendered experience.

Footnotes

[1] In 2008, Thomas Beatie described himself as the first transgender man to become pregnant after transitioning (Halberstam 2010, 77). More recently, Hayden Cross became the first legally recognised man to give birth in the United Kingdom (Baynes 2017). Headlining these instances as 'firsts' reinforces the falsehood that transgender experiences are contemporarily specific phenomena, while overvaluing the degree to which the transgender individual has legally/medically transitioned.

[2] Berit Åström (2010) argues that mpreg fan-fiction reinforces heteronormative constructions of kinship and domesticity (par. 7.1), while fan writer thedeadflag (2016) suggests that mpreg fetishises transgender and intersex bodies: because mpreg typically involves placing transgender and intersex bodily features on cisgender men, it has limited potential to represent intersex and/or transgender experiences of pregnancy.

[3] Mason is played by Pitt in the second season of the show. Anderson took the role in season three, coinciding with Mason's facial reconstruction after his mutilation in season two.

[4] Jacquelin Elliott (2018) and Jeff Casey (2015) queerly read the presentation of Will and Hannibal's relationship within *Hannibal*; shipping Hannigram operates similarly as a queer reading of the show.

[5] Fan writers and readers commonly use 'secondary gender' to describe alpha/beta/omega classifications. By conflating gender with sex, the term foregrounds the gender binary's role in naturalising the sex binary (Butler 2006, 46), or, in this case, sex ternary.

[6] In practice, nonbinary characters are rare in Omegaverse fics; my descriptions will therefore focus on male and female characters.

[7] Heat (or oestrus) generally involves sexual receptivity and sexual desire that is overpowering and impossible to control. Rut involves increased sexual aggression and desire; however, the alpha can usually autonomously resist these urges with effort. The zoological accuracy of these cycles varies substantially from fic to fic.

[8] Laura Campillo Arnaiz (2018) argues that the trope can be traced further back to *pon farr* in the *Star Trek* episode "Amok Time" (1967), wherein biological mating imperatives provided fertile ground for slash fan writers (eBook location 2346).

[9] In fandom, 'canon' refers to a fan work's source text, in this case *Hannibal* (which will hereafter solely refer to Fuller's show).

[10] Fan communities often consider themselves private, even when fandom communications and fan works are publicly accessible (Hellekson and Busse 2009). Fan writers may "acknowledge that the substance of their communication is public" but believe that "the

specific context in which it appears implies restrictions on how that information is – or ought to be – used by other parties" (Markham and Buchanan et al. 2012, 6). To protect the authors' privacy, Hellekson and Busse (2009) recommend that scholars avoid directly linking to fan works where possible.

[11] I use the term 'gender fluidity' to match Halberstam's wording; this is not synonymous with a 'genderfluid' gender identity.

[12] Jennifer Musial (2014) notes that lactation is often compared cisnormatively to the 'masculinity' of penile ejaculation (406). Multiple characteristics of the pregnant body are thus constructed as transgressing cisnormative expectations of femininity.

[13] In "An Easy Kind of Love", the catalyst is Will's inability to retrieve his prescription while on the run. In "Wage Your War", the catalyst is Will's meeting Hannibal and 'imprinting' on him, a process which identifies him as an ideal genetic partner.

[14] This argument parallels trans-exclusionary strands of second-wave feminism: as Susan Stryker (2006) recounts, transitioning was often perceived as "a form of false consciousness", unable to produce an 'authentic' identity from observed gender norms (4). Likewise, Hines (2007) observes that, within some radical feminist discourses, "transgender men have been located as renegades seeking to" reject womanhood and "acquire male power and privilege" (18).

[15] Given the possibilities of the Omegaverse and the intersex characteristics of omega men, the politics of heat suppressants could be read quite differently from an intersex perspective. From this perspective, heat suppressants would be similar to the unnecessary medical interventions that attempt to 'correct' intersex bodily traits by bringing them in line with non-intersex (or 'beta') anatomy. Analysing the Omegaverse would be fruitful for scholars interested in intersex representation, and would again highlight the possibilities of interpreting omegas beyond cisgender, non-intersex womanhood.

[16] Julia Temple Newhook et al. (2018) analysed studies that measured detransition rates in gender non-conforming children: the studies' methodologies neither accounted for the reasons for detransitioning, nor for the possibility of retransition. Consequently, these studies did not represent the fullest range of experiences encapsulated under 'detransitioning' (216–217). There is limited peer-reviewed analysis of cultural representations of detransition; however, blogger Zinnia Jones (2015) observes that detransitioning individuals in the public eye have sometimes been co-opted into detransition narratives within anti-trans discourse: these narratives falsely suggested that the individuals regretted their transition and wholly rejected the gender identity to which they had originally transitioned.

[17] All of these side effects are in the show (as symptoms of Will's encephalitis).

[18] The vagueness of "hole" should be noted; in Omegaverse texts, the omega male's cervix is commonly located within the anus.

[19] See Deborah McPhail, Brenda Beagan & Gwen E. Chapman (2012), who interviewed Canadian families to study the impact of gender normativity on food choice. Many participants claimed that men prefer and/or women tend to avoid spicy foods (480; 482).

[20] Musial (2014) argues that pregnant sexuality itself has queer potentiality, being similarly perceived as 'unacceptable' due to discomfort around acknowledging the sexual intercourse that generally precedes pregnancy (398).

[21] See Elliott's "This Is My Becoming" (2018), where she writes more extensively on queer monstrosity within *Hannibal*.

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Acknowledgements

Biography
J.T. Weisser is an undergraduate student at Newcastle University. Throughout their English literature degree, they have developed a keen interest in studying embodied identity within contemporary literature and culture. After their bachelor's degree, they aim to complete a master's degree which further develops this interest.