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The Construction of a Consumable Body

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Abstract

In this essay, I analyze various ways in which pregnant bodies are rendered consumable. Tracing our preoccupation with pregnancy diets, I argue that a pregnant woman is made responsible for producing a consumable body. Indeed, producing and maintaining a consumable, fetus-friendly body is a responsibility that women carry before, during, and even after pregnancy. The sphere of this responsibility is also ever-expanding: it goes from detoxing the body to disinfecting the household, and even to protecting the environment at large. I examine two conditions that help construct the maternal body as consumable: 1) the invisibility of the consumed body, and 2) the appeal to “nature” as a justification for consumption. As I will show, the default position of women as consumable is reinforced both by erasing the maternal body and by appealing to the “naturalness” of breastfeeding.

Keywords: breastfeeding, consumption, pregnancy diet, maternal responsibility, motherhood, nature, reproductive ethics

In Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, fertile women are corralled, raped, and forcibly impregnated by high-level government officials in a theocratic dystopian state called “Gilead.” These women—the handmaids—are essentially sex slaves whose primary function is to produce children for their assigned household. Reflecting on the boredom she experiences as a handmaid, the main character, Offred, compares herself to a pig:¹

I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig. Sometime in the eighties they invented pig balls, for pigs who were being fattened in pens. Pig balls were large coloured balls; the pigs rolled them around with their snouts. The pig

¹ “Offred” means “Of Fred’s household,” so her name signals the reduction of her identity.

marketers said this improved their muscle tone; the pigs were curious, they liked to have something to think about. (2017, 69)²

Offred's comparison of her own predicament to that of a "prize pig" is telling, and what they share in common goes beyond the ennui of existence. Both the pigs and the handmaids are supposed to produce and maintain a body fit for consumption. The pigs are expected to produce quality meat for humans; the handmaids are expected to produce and nourish a baby for their master and mistress. Both pigs and handmaids are defined by, and reduced to, their function as a food source for others.

That the existence of a handmaid is defined by her function as a food source is particularly evident in the Hulu TV adaptation of the novel. In season two, Offred is shown having difficulty pumping enough breast milk as a result of being separated from her newborn daughter. To encourage milk production, Aunt Lydia (the autocratic custodian of the handmaids) arranges a meeting for Offred and her daughter. The purpose of the meeting is, in Aunt Lydia's words, to "prime the pumps." Offred is later permitted to return to her master's house (where her daughter lives)—but only to offer a steady supply of breastmilk. Moreover, it is noteworthy that handmaids serve as a food source in more than one sense. In addition to the monthly "ceremony" of impregnation—a ritualized rape—the daily task of a handmaid is food shopping for the household. She gets credit or blame for what she manages to bring home from the market, as food is scarce and rationed. Hence the handmaid is, in a sense, also a food source for the entire household.

While the handmaids exist only in the fictional world of Gilead, the novel depicts an all too real cultural tendency to regard pregnant women as consumable bodies to be disciplined and managed. The cliché that a pregnant woman is "eating for two" encapsulates an ongoing cultural preoccupation with pregnant women's bodies. The injunction that she is "eating for two" suggests that a pregnant woman ought to be vigilant about her dietary consumption, as she is no longer eating for

² Atwood has elsewhere invoked an implicit comparison between women and animals. For instance, in her novel *The Edible Woman*, the main character Marian—the "edible" woman who believes she is being devoured by her fiancé—invokes such a comparison when she visits the supermarket. Reflecting on the sounds she hears from the speaker, Marian is reminded of "an article she had read about cows who gave more milk when sweet music was played to them" (1998, 187). Both Offred and Marian are sensitive to the insidious ways we manipulate animals' bodies for our own purposes and how *their* own human female bodies are also susceptible to manipulation for (usually) male purposes.

herself only. The concern about maternal consumption is often couched in terms of its effects on fetal development, and specifically, the “risks” that certain foods may pose to fetal health. Yet the obsession over her responsibility to “eat right” also betrays a widespread cultural inclination to treat the pregnant woman’s preferences and cravings as subordinate to the fetus’s well-being. In other words, to be a good mother, a woman must be willing to subordinate her interests to those of the fetus. Whether a woman is willing to adjust (or even overhaul) her consumption habits becomes the test of her maternal love, a test of her willingness to put the fetus’s interests above all else.

Many women have experienced the intense policing of their bodies and diets during pregnancy. From a stranger’s disapproving look at the wine store to a restaurant server’s unsolicited advice, pregnant women are targets of constant public scrutiny. How best to understand the anxiety surrounding pregnant women’s diets? In a way, this sort of social scrutiny is not news for feminists: policing a pregnant woman’s diet is just one of the many ways a woman’s body is managed by patriarchy, one of the many reminders that women’s autonomy over their own bodies is constantly undermined. But while this explanation certainly contains some truth, it fails to tell the whole story. Indeed, while it is true that pregnant and nonpregnant women alike tend to be deprived of their bodily autonomy, there is a further form of objectification at work in our societal treatment of the maternal body. Specifically, the lack of autonomy ascribed to maternal bodies is compounded by society’s construction of the maternal body as a *consumable* body—a body whose default function is to serve as a food source for another.

What does it mean to have a consumable body? I propose that a body is rendered “consumable” when its *perceived default function* is that of a food source. In this sense, a consumable body is an instrumentalized body, but the form of instrumentalization it takes differs from other forms of instrumentalization, such as sexual objectification. Moreover, a consumable body need not be a disposable body. Even though disposability is the common fate of many consumable bodies (e.g., animals turned into meat), not all consumed bodies are disposed of. Indeed, different kinds of consumption involve different kinds of sacrifice: chickens, pigs, and cows are killed to become food, whereas a pregnant/lactating woman need not perish in order to nourish her fetus/infant. Some forms of consumption are violent, some less so. Some forms of consumption cause permanent and irrecoverable damage to the consumed body, some don’t. Some forms of consumption are offered voluntarily, some are forced. In short, both animals and pregnant women undergo external preparation and maintenance of their bodies *for the purpose* of being consumed. Yet the manner of consumption is vastly different. The human consumption of animals as meat is total and is characterized by physical force, violence, and death; the consumption of pregnant women’s bodies is not.

“Consumable” is thus an umbrella term for bodies whose perceived default function is that of a food source. Although the particular *ways* and *degrees* to which such bodies are consumed differ, all such bodies share in the property of being regarded as consumable.³

My argument is structured as follows: in part 1, I argue that the widespread preoccupation with pregnancy diets is very much informed by the perception that the maternal body is, by default, a consumable body. In part 2, I argue that producing and maintaining a consumable, fetus-approved body is an ever-present responsibility for pregnant women. The sphere of this responsibility is also ever-expanding: it goes from detoxing the body to disinfecting the household, and finally to protecting the environment at large. Parts 3 and 4 draw from the literature on animal ethics to illuminate the conditions under which the maternal body is made consumable.⁴ Part 3 examines the connection between consumption and identity. There, I employ Carol Adams’s notion of the “absent referent” to articulate the ways that consumable individuals are often rendered invisible—animals are made into different “cuts” of meat, while pregnant women are displaced by the fetus. While the edible body remains invisible and nameless, the “consumer” is front and center while consuming with a sense of entitlement. Just as the consumption of animals presupposes human superiority, the consumption of the mother gives primacy to the fetus/infant’s interests. Part 4 examines how the consumer’s sense of entitlement to the consumable body is expressed in the form of an appeal to “nature.” As we will see, “nature” is regularly invoked as an authority to justify current consumption practices: meat eating is permissible because it is part of our

³ Of course, a mother is expected to do more than just feed the fetus/infant. To say that a maternal body is consumable does not mean that consumption is the *only* function of (or expectation for) the mother. Consumability is a perceived *default* function—a function that a pregnant woman (or mother) is expected to perform.

⁴ While there are certainly important differences between consuming an animal body and consuming a pregnant woman’s body, it is profitable to juxtapose these two forms of consumption as the rhetoric of meat eating is often repurposed in pregnancy-consumption narratives. As such, it is instructive for feminists who want to challenge pregnancy-consumption narratives to turn to animal consumption, as they are likely to encounter a form of resistance with which animal advocates are already familiar. It is further important to note that although my analysis is informed in part by narratives about animal consumption, the point is not to analogize or equivocate these two very different forms of consumption. Rather, in keeping with the idea that “consumable” refers to the perceived default function of the body, my goal is to make sense of the *conditions* that help construct the maternal body as consumable.

evolution, “breast is best” because breast milk is the most “natural.” In part 5, I identify some of the problems inherent in an uncritical appeal to nature. I conclude that doing away with the authority of nature opens up a space for us to rethink whether something or someone is, indeed, consumable.

Before I proceed, I should note that my analysis is based primarily on North American pregnancy culture. The studies I use and the cultural practices I cite in this essay are mostly North American. As such, my analysis is not (nor is it meant to be) applicable across all cultures. Moreover, it is worth noting that even within North America, perceptions and expectations of the maternal body vary according to one’s class, race, culture, and other identity markers—thus troubling any easy generalizations about the North American context. Furthermore, although my analysis is limited to the North American context, it is not meant to imply that the notion of a consumable maternal body does not apply to other cultures. Rather, further analysis is required to understand the specific ways in which the maternal body is constructed and policed in other cultures. After all, there are pregnancy-related food taboos in other cultures, and the excessive scrutiny of the maternal body is surely not exclusive to North America (e.g., Lau 2012; Jette, Vertinsky, and Ng 2014; Washington 2015). While my analysis is limited in scope, I hope it offers a useful vocabulary to understand and critique the policing of the maternal body.⁵

⁵ My sincere thanks to the editorial team and the two anonymous referees for their thoughtful comments on the essay. I am also grateful to Trevor Bibler and Rebecca Tuvel for offering substantive suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

One of the anonymous referees has suggested that I consider how the bodies of trans* individuals might complicate my argument. I am grateful for the suggestion. For one thing, not all pregnant bodies identify as women (as with the case of trans men who become pregnant). For another, in the future, new technologies such as uterus transplantation might enable transwomen (or cis men) to experience gestation and childbirth via cesarean section, thereby complicating the question of whose body is “consumable.” As commentators have pointed out, reproductive and fertility services remain trans-exclusionary; from compulsory sterilization to restricted access to assisted reproductive technology, trans* individuals are often deemed unfit to be parents (see Epstein 2018; Honkasalo 2018; Lowik 2018; Leibetseder and Griffin 2018; Toze 2018). Given the urgent need for reproductive justice for trans* individuals, I very much agree that trans* pregnancy deserves serious consideration in an analysis on the pregnant body. However, due to constraints of length, I will not explore this particular intervention here, as I fear a brief analysis would do injustice to such a rich and important topic. While in this essay I will restrict my goal to establishing the consumability of the maternal body, I agree that a pregnant body need not be maternal, and that it is also pressing to

1. Eating for Two: Constructing a Consumable Maternal Body

In the context of an affluent consumerist culture, a mother's competency is often measured by *how* she shops and *what* she shops for. (Does she buy dairy without recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH)? Does she check food labels? Is the bottle BPA-free?) The growing availability of organic food at the supermarket increases options—as well as anxiety—for any grocery shopper but for none more so than the mother. In their study on the ideology of the “organic child” in Canada, Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick argue that ideal motherhood now involves both preserving “the purity” of the child and protecting the environment (2013, 98). There is an expectation for mothers to keep their children “pure” and “organic,” to keep them away from the “harmful impurities of an industrialized food system” (98). In fact, even though the expectation to buy organic food is typically more widespread in affluent communities, and shopping at organic food stores is a class-privileged practice, poor and working-class women are in no way immune from the ideology of the organic child. As a result, women who lack access to expensive organic food often feel guilty about their inability to provide the “purest” food for their children (Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick 2013, 111–112).

Keeping one's child “pure” or “uncontaminated” is certainly an impossible mission to accomplish, no matter how resourceful and affluent one is. However, not only are mothers held to the absurd standard of maintaining purity, they are often viewed as the *source* of contamination, especially if their fetus has a health issue (MacKendrick 2014). Centrally for the purposes of my analysis, the maternal body is often identified as the primary site responsible for mediating the child's exposure to toxins, despite the fact that environmental chemicals are omnipresent.⁶ As a result, mothers, rather than fathers, are typically the ones engaging in labor-intensive “precautionary consumption”: researching, purchasing, and consuming organic food and products (MacKendrick 2014). In short, the mother is perceived both as the conduit for—and the shield against—contamination.

When we talk about the “risks” that certain foods may pose to the fetus/infant, what do we really mean? We tend to understand “risk” as the *likelihood* of an undesirable outcome. But in pregnancy narratives, the concept of “risk” is often employed to justify a “better safe than sorry” hypervigilant approach that is overly cautious and arbitrary (Lyerly et al. 2009; Kukla 2010). For example, physicians routinely overemphasize the risk of radioactive exposure by discouraging

examine the ways in which nonbinary pregnant bodies can be rendered consumable.

⁶ For an excellent analysis of the complicated relationship between environmental concern and maternal responsibilities—or “motherhood environmentalism,” see Sandilands (1999).

diagnostic procedures that include radiation, such as a CT scan, during pregnancy (Lyerly et al. 2009). The concept of “risk” is also “laden with moral significance” as it allows us to assign blame (DeBruin 2016, 12). After all, if there is a risk, there must be a “risk-taker” to be held accountable. As Rebecca Kukla (2010) argues, pregnant women are held to a higher standard when it comes to risk avoidance. The focus on maternal diet or consumption highlights the individual responsibility of the pregnant woman and in so doing feeds the perception that the mother is *singularly* responsible for fetal health.⁷

Indeed, the conflation between risk and “don’t take your chances” contributes to an unreasonably high expectation imposed on mothers. As Joan Wolf argues, the widespread misunderstanding of risk and risk assessment in breastfeeding campaigns is responsible for what she calls “total motherhood,” an ethic “in which mothers are exhorted to optimize every dimension of children’s lives . . . good mothering is construed as behavior that reduces even minuscule or poorly understood risks to offspring, regardless of potential cost to the mother” (Wolf 2007, 615). Producing (and maintaining) a consumable body—to minimize environmental risks to the fetus—is part and parcel of the regime of total motherhood.⁸

Markens, Browner, and Press attribute our preoccupation with pregnancy consumption to “the extreme individualism in American culture and medicine” (1997, 369). Such individualism not only gives rise to a tendency to scapegoat the mother—it also obscures other social and institutional factors that contribute to fetal health. For example, by focusing on maternal consumption, we tend to

⁷ The infamous arrest of Pamela Rae Stewart is a particularly good case in point. Stewart was advised by her doctor to avoid various activities that could be harmful to the fetus, including sexual intercourse. However, when her son was born with extensive brain damage, Stewart was the only one charged and arrested for “fetal abuse” specifically for having intercourse against her doctor’s order. Stewart’s husband—the person with whom Stewart had intercourse—was never charged (Stabile 1992, 182).

⁸ The steep demand of total motherhood works in tandem with the presumption that a “good mother” is always willing to subordinate her interests to that of her child. Building on the literature on care ethics, Sarah LaChance Adams argues for a more nuanced account of motherhood—one that doesn’t idealize the mother-child relationship. For Adams, acknowledging the ambivalent and conflicted nature of maternal feelings can be “morally productive” (2014, 5). Specifically, it helps us recognize the need to care and be cared for, while also affirming the need to maintain independence—in this case, the need for the mother to be independent from her child (2014, 25).

overlook the effect of *paternal* consumption on fetal health.⁹ And by focusing on *individual* (whether maternal or paternal) consumption, we tend to downplay environmental and social factors that also affect fetal development. In the case of keeping children safe from chemical exposure, we put the onus on the mother by policing her consumption habits instead of directing resources to lobbying for cleaner air, stricter governmental regulations, or increased manufacturer responsibility. Moreover, substance abuse and other “risk-taking behaviors” are often prompted by environmental stresses such as domestic abuse.¹⁰ Yet we pay more attention to the *woman’s* responsibility and willpower than to stress management and social support. Even though intimate partner violence (IPV) contributes to various fetal health problems, health care professionals often fail to include IPV screening as part of the prenatal care routine.¹¹ This systematic oversight is especially problematic given that IPV often begins or worsens during pregnancy.

Given these other social and environmental factors that influence fetal development, the focus on maternal consumption is disturbing for the disproportionate burdens it places on women. This overburdening is even more alarming when we consider that a pregnant woman can be subjected to involuntary commitment or even incarceration if her habits of consumption are deemed harmful to the fetus. In Wisconsin, for example, a state law known as the “Cocaine Mom” Act permits the police to detain a pregnant woman if they suspect her of drug or

⁹ For example, both paternal and maternal caffeine intake before conception are associated with miscarriage risk (NIH 2016).

¹⁰ According to Bianchi et al., “Intimate partner violence during pregnancy may also result in negative, risk-taking behaviors, such as smoking, alcohol use, and the use of illicit drugs” (Bianchi, Cesario, and McFarlane 2016, 3; see also Deshpande and Lewis-O’Connor 2013, 143; Coker Sanderson, and Dong 2004, 266). Paltrow and Flavin study 413 cases from 1973 to 2005 in which pregnant women are deprived of their physical liberty for allegedly endangering the welfare of their unborn children; notably, “In several cases a woman’s efforts to seek help after having been physically abused resulted in her arrest, although factors such as drinking alcohol or using illegal drugs while pregnant were cited as grounds for those arrests” (2013, 313–314).

¹¹ According to Smith, “Less than half of reproductive health care workers screen for domestic violence” (2008, 24). Parsons et al. (1995) suggest that male physicians are less likely to screen for abuse, while Mezey and Bewley point out that pregnant women are routinely screened for problems that are *less* prevalent than IPV, such as preeclampsia and gestational diabetes (1997, 528).

alcohol use.¹² Tennessee had explicitly passed a law permitting *criminal* charges for substance abuse during pregnancy (the law was in effect from 2014 to 2016); the supreme courts of Alabama and South Carolina have also upheld convictions that deemed substance abuse during pregnancy tantamount to criminal child abuse. As of June 2018, health care professionals in 22 states (and the District of Columbia) are required to report suspected prenatal drug abuse (Guttmacher Institute 2018). In other words, to enforce “fetal protection,” the state can strip a pregnant woman of her physical liberty and her privilege to physician–patient confidentiality.¹³

A pregnant woman’s privilege to physician–patient confidentiality is not the only value at risk here. Insofar as a pregnant woman’s body serves as the food source for the fetus, her consumability takes precedence over her privacy and bodily autonomy. In many states, a woman’s advance directive can be nullified if she is pregnant. That is, remarkably, the state can *override* a pregnant patient’s advance directive to keep her on life support against her explicitly stated will. In the notorious case of Marlise Muñoz, a hospital insisted on keeping her body on life support even though she met the neurological criteria for death. The hospital cited the “pregnancy exclusion” clause in the Texas Advance Directive Act, which requires continued life-sustaining treatment for pregnant patients.¹⁴ The pregnancy exclusion gives primacy to the consumability of the pregnant patient—her body is sustained for the explicit purpose of nourishing the fetus and keeping it alive.

What do these disciplinary measures that revolve around pregnancy and maternal consumption tell us? I argue that the repeated injunctions for mothers to eat healthily aim to produce a *consumable* body. The maternal body is both the site and the material for fetal consumption. Singling out the effect of maternal

¹² In 2013, a Wisconsin woman was accused of endangering her unborn child when she refused to start an anti-addiction drug. She was taken by the police to the hospital to be examined. And even though her doctor declared that inpatient treatment was unnecessary, the court ordered her to undergo inpatient drug treatment (Vielmetti 2013). In April 2016, a US district judge blocked the enforcement of the law statewide—the block was lifted by the Supreme Court in July 2017. For an analysis of the state’s intervention in the maternal–fetal relationship, see Linder (2005).

¹³ The very fact that a pregnant woman can be criminalized for allegedly harming the fetus reinforces the presumption that the mother–fetus relationship is adversarial: the mother becomes the “legal adversary” of the fetus and is “held liable for conduct that may cause it injury” (Thompson 1989, 359).

¹⁴ The pregnancy exclusion shouldn’t even be invoked in this case, given that Muñoz was considered dead by neurological criteria (Mayo 2014).

consumption on fetal health reinforces the idea that the pregnant body *serves* the fetus. It confers on the maternal body a duty to be consumed. As such, the disciplinary measures that revolve around maternal dietary consumption serve to construct a consumable maternal body. The pervasive rhetoric that the pregnant woman is “eating for two” is a constant reminder that the pregnant woman’s identity is defined by her function as a food source.

2. Once a Woman, Always a Mother

Importantly, this responsibility to be consumed is an ever-present one. There is, as mentioned above, the cliché that the pregnant woman is “eating for two,” hence the concomitant injunction that she needs to “eat right” for the fetus *during* her pregnancy. But a woman’s responsibility to produce a consumable body continues even *after* the birth of her child. Breastfeeding is rigorously promoted both in popular culture and the hospital. (The saying, “breast is best,” is perhaps just as ubiquitous as “eating for two.”) The expectation to breastfeed means that a woman must continue to feed her child *with her body*. That is, the maternal body continues to serve as the food source for the child. Insofar as the mother’s dietary consumption affects the production of her breast milk, she must continue to observe various dietary norms proper to a lactating, breastfeeding woman even after pregnancy.

Ironically, the expectation to breastfeed is so ingrained in North American pregnancy culture that even efforts to reduce such a pressure continue to privilege breastfeeding. There is a growing awareness of how presenting breastfeeding as the gold standard may cause non-breastfeeding mothers to feel guilty about their feeding practices. Accordingly, many childcare education materials are now taking measures to advise mothers to “not feel guilty” about formula feeding (Williams et al. 2013; Williams, Donaghue, and Kurz 2013). But as Kate Williams and her coauthors point out, telling mothers to not *feel* guilty does not actually reassure them that they *aren’t* guilty (Williams et al. 2013). On the contrary, it may inadvertently confirm the mother’s guilt—she is simply advised to not *feel* that way. In another study, Williams, Donaghue, and Kurz (2013) find that many non-breastfeeding mothers believe that the feeling of guilt is a marker of a “good” mother, even if they cannot breastfeed. For many non-breastfeeding mothers, guilt is a “proper” feeling that they should have when they have failed to offer the best for their child. In short, even the injunction to “not feel guilty” continues to privilege breastfeeding; that is, it continues to presume the woman’s body as consumable after pregnancy.¹⁵

¹⁵ Similarly, women continue to be cast as the primary (or default) food source for infants even in formula-feeding campaigns. The “Fed is Best” Foundation is an

Indeed, a woman's responsibility to produce a consumable body begins even *before* her pregnancy, as evidenced by public health campaigns that target women's pre-conception health. For example, the "Show Your Love" health campaign launched by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explicitly promotes the idea that a woman can show her love for her baby before pregnancy by taking care of her pre-conception health (Waggoner 2015, 944).¹⁶ In her analysis, Miranda Waggoner argues that the campaign is premised on the assumption that all women of reproductive age are "future mothers"—it encourages all women, regardless of their reproductive plans, to prepare for a healthy, pre-pregnant body (2015, 946). The campaign problematically divides women into two groups, the "planners" and the "non-planners" (as if *not* getting pregnant cannot be a proper plan for a woman). The "planners" are obviously expected to produce a healthy pre-conception body for their future babies, but even the "non-planners" are encouraged to prepare for a fetal-friendly body *just in case* they change their plans or accidentally get pregnant. The assumption is that even if a "non-planner" does not intend to get pregnant now, she may want to do so in the future, and it is never too early to get your body ready for a future fetus. Alternatively, a "non-planner" may get pregnant by accident, so it is important that she is always ready for a *possible* fetus. As Waggoner puts it, the campaign presents pregnancy "as an ever-present possibility and [assumes] that an unintended pregnancy will proceed to birth" (2015, 946). In other words, any woman, insofar as she *could* get pregnant, carries the responsibility to produce a consumable maternal body.

Diachronically, the responsibility to produce a consumable body extends beyond the nine-month pregnancy. A woman is responsible for maintaining a consumable body before, during, and after pregnancy. Synchronically, the sphere of maternal responsibility extends from the womb to the household. A 2015 study on

organization that offers an alternative voice to the "Breast is Best" motto endorsed by mainstream medical establishments. By rejecting exclusive breastfeeding as the gold standard and promoting pluralism in feeding practices, one might expect men to increase their share of work when it comes to infant feeding. Nonetheless, in the Fed is Best promotional video, we continue to see a cascade of images with women doing the feeding, with just one image of a man feeding an infant. In other words, women continue to serve as the primary food source for the infant—even when their bodies are no longer required.

¹⁶ Mansfield argues that seafood consumption advisories "depend on and even intensify demands that women, including childless ones, discipline themselves in order to be 'good mothers'" (2012, 598). Indeed, seafood consumption advisories are predicated on the assumption that all "premenopausal women are mothers of *potential* fetuses" (Mansfield 2012, 598–599; my emphasis).

school-based healthy eating intervention concludes that “future interventions that seek to target eating practices would do well to *target* the mother since she would appear to be the main food ‘gatekeeper’” (Hardcastle and Blake 2015, 6; emphasis mine).¹⁷ Just as women are made responsible for producing a consumable body (read: pure and organic body) for their fetus/newborn, they are also made responsible for providing an overall healthy household for their children, and by extension, their family.¹⁸

Remarkably, the sphere of maternal responsibility goes beyond the household. As we have seen in Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick’s study on the figure of the “organic child,” the mother is expected to keep her child “pure” and away from contamination. “Good” mothers are those who strive to “preserve their children’s purity and protect the environment through conscientious food purchases” (Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick 2013, 101).¹⁹ Extending maternal responsibility to the environment presents a burden to pregnant women/mothers that they have to confront every day: environmentally conscientious food shopping. Consistent with my argument that pregnant women are expected to produce a consumable body, the transition into motherhood is often the catalyst for women to begin researching and buying organic food, as they have now taken on the moral burden of caring for another life (Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick 2013, 103). Importantly, the desire to produce an “organic child” often intersects with a form of environmentalism that puts a premium on individuals making good, responsible consumption choices—shopping at Whole Foods or local farmers’ markets, for example.²⁰ In Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick’s study, some participants even

¹⁷ In this study, researchers conducted interviews exclusively with mothers. Given that mothers have traditionally been responsible for food preparation, the focus on mothers is not surprising. Yet, the recommendation to “target” mothers in future intervention reinforces the notion that mothers—as “food gatekeeper”—are *especially* responsible for the health of the family.

¹⁸ In light of my analysis, it is perhaps not a mere coincidence that the handmaids in Atwood’s novel are also responsible for food shopping for the household.

¹⁹ The extension of motherhood to environmentalism is consistent with the emergence of global motherhood: mothers are encouraged to extend their maternal responsibilities to *all* babies. One particularly pertinent example is the “One Pack = One Vaccine” initiative, a joint effort by Pampers and UNICEF in which First World mothers are encouraged to help Third World mothers (and their babies) via ethical consumption. For a helpful feminist analysis of the “One Pack = One Vaccine” initiative, see Hawkins (2011).

²⁰ As many have pointed out, shopping is an important ritual through which a woman enters into motherhood. “Caring shopping” is also a way to express

link motherhood to environmental responsibility by claiming “a greater responsibility toward future ecological sustainability” (2013, 107). Given the popular conviction that shopping is a means to effect environmental change, and given that entry into motherhood is a time period in which many women begin to shop more conscientiously, it is not surprising that motherhood invokes a greater sense of environmental responsibility.²¹ As such, the sphere of maternal responsibility extends from the woman’s body to her household, then from her household to the environment at large.

Examining contemporary pregnancy-consumption narratives makes it clear why women bear a disproportionate share of the burden when it comes to food labor. My analysis of pregnancy consumption offers an *embodied* account of this uneven distribution of labor. More specifically, it articulates a connection between a socially constructed maternal body and women’s perceived duty to become keepers of family health. As the site of consumption, the maternal body becomes singularly responsible for the fetus/baby’s health. The mother’s exclusive responsibility to consume properly, in turn, reinforces the perception that women are especially responsible for children’s health even after the birth and weaning of a child. This ever-present responsibility to maintain a consumable body accounts for why women feel particularly responsible for their family’s well-being, and by extension, environmental health.

In the next two sections, I will examine two conditions that help construct the maternal body as consumable: 1) the invisibility of the consumed body, and 2) the appeal to “nature” as a justification for consumption. As I will show, the default position of women as consumable is reinforced both by erasing the maternal body and appealing to the “naturalness” of breastfeeding.

3. The Invisibility of the Consumable Body

In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams argues that our anthropocentric language often masks our violence against animals (2010, chap. 3). From objectifying animals by referring to them with the pronoun “it,” to insulting other humans by calling them “animals” or “beasts,” our language betrays our contempt for other nonhuman creatures (2010, 93). Adams also points out that by giving animals different meat names (e.g., “veal” instead of calves, “pork” instead of pigs), the animal victims are rendered absent (2010, 98). After all, it is much easier to consume anonymous body parts than an individual with an identity who comes with

maternal love (see AbiGhannam and Atkinson 2016; Afflerback et al. 2014; de Laat and Baumann 2014; Song and Paul 2016).

²¹ For a helpful account of how pregnancy consumption and environmentalism intersect, see also AbiGhannam and Atkinson (2016).

a distinct history and personality. As such, animals are not only made absent in slaughterhouses by being killed, they are also made absent in our language by being renamed (2010, 98). Accordingly, we may say that animals are being consumed twice: both by having their flesh eaten and by having their identity obliterated. The literal consumption of one's body often goes hand in hand with the metaphorical consumption of one's identity.

Although there are obviously important differences between the treatment of animal and human mothers, Adams's notion of the "absent referent" helps us understand the ways the human maternal body is also rendered consumable. In pregnancy narratives, a pregnant woman is also made "absent" by the fetus in her womb. Feminists have identified and critiqued the "mother vs. fetus" rhetoric in discourses about women's reproductive rights (Berlant 1994; Lupton 2012; Stabile 1992). One especially important accessory to this rhetoric is the perception of the fetus as an individual, abstract from the womb, seeking "rights" against the mother. Following Rosalind Petchesky's (1987) important work on visual culture and reproductive discourse, feminists have diligently identified various cultural images that posit or presuppose the fetus as an independent entity (Hartouni 1992; Oaks 2000; Stabile 1992). As Petchesky and others have argued, ultrasounds further the image of the fetus as a free-floating, autonomous entity by erasing the maternal body. In an effort to promote fetal interests over, and *in opposition to*, maternal interests, anti-choice groups often capitalize upon the visual abstraction of the fetus from its mothers. Furthermore, the free-floating fetus is often represented as a *baby*, even if it is still in the early stage of gestation. Thus, we have a baby-looking fetus taking center stage in the image, being suspended in midair as if it were man in space, with the umbilical cord being the only reminder of the fetus's connection to the maternal body. As Petchesky argues, we need new representations that "recontextualize the fetus, that place it back into the uterus, and the uterus back into the woman's body, and her body back into its social space" (1987, 287).

With new technological and social currents, we see new visual representations of the fetus being developed—a new "public fetus." In recent years, pregnancy photography has become fashionable. This trend is promoted in part by our new obsession with the "baby bump." The pregnant belly is no longer something that the woman conceals by wearing loose clothing, but something that she wants to show off (Oliver 2012). In many of these pregnancy pictures, the baby bump is the focus. For example, photographers may feature the silhouette of the pregnant woman by tracing the curve of her belly. Another popular belly shot is the close-up of the baby bump, with the hands of the expectant mother (or her partner) on her belly, as if she is holding her child from the outside.

At first glance, the emphasis on the baby bump seems to suggest a reversal of visibility—the fetus is now the one made invisible. We do not even see the fetus,

just the belly. Does this mean we have finally put the fetus “back into the uterus, and the uterus back into the woman’s body,” as Petchesky advocated more than three decades ago? Does our interest in the baby bump signal “progress” in the feminist movement?

I think not. If we pay closer attention to these images, a disconcerting pattern emerges. The face of the mother is often missing from these photographs: by featuring the silhouette, the mother is literally cast as a shadow; meanwhile the close-up shot of the baby bump is achieved only by blurring or cropping out the rest of the mother’s body. In the first case, the pregnant woman is faceless. In the second case, she is represented as a headless, dismembered torso. Her face is hidden, and her identity is reduced to her belly, her pregnancy.

This kind of dismemberment is replicated in other pregnancy memorabilia as well. In addition to taking belly shots, making a “belly cast” is becoming increasingly popular. A “belly cast” is a plaster sculpture of a pregnant woman’s belly. Although some women also cast their breasts and limbs, most of these casts sculpt only the belly. It is common for a parent to decorate the belly cast, giving an individualized character to her cast with various embellishments. However, even though a belly cast can be made unique, one cannot tell *who* the mother is by simply looking at the cast. Just as the belly shot produces a headless torso, a belly cast constructs a dismembered body. In both instances, the identity of the mother is diminished or excluded to the point of removal. It appears that even though the new “public fetus” is “back to the maternal body,” our belly obsession reinforces the perception that the maternal body is a vessel for the fetus, a means to an end. As such, the new “public fetus” serves as a reminder of maternal responsibility; that is, the responsibility to protect her precious cargo and make sure she delivers.

In this section I discussed various forces that serve to erase the maternal body by centralizing the fetus and its interests.²² In the next section, I turn to the role played by appeals to nature in constructing a consumable body. Specifically, I will examine how “naturalizing” breastfeeding may inadvertently render the practice normative.

4. “It’s Evolution, Baby”

The push to “natural birth” in the West has been a response to the overmedicalization of childbirth. While “natural birth” can mean many different things, there are certain practices that natural-birth advocates often privilege:

²² To be clear, I am not arguing that belly casts/baby bumps themselves show that pregnant women are consumable. Rather, my discussion is meant to show the *invisibility* of pregnant women. The invisibility (or, the effacement of identity) is one of the *conditions* that enable the pregnant body to be consumable.

vaginal birth is considered superior to cesarean section, drug-free labor is hailed as empowering and preferable to epidurals, and breast milk is deemed better than formula. At times, the appeal to nature goes beyond what is purportedly natural for women—it can even mean appealing to the natural world. In popular culture, for example, placenta eating has been promoted on the grounds that other mammals *in nature* also do it. How should we understand these various appeals to nature in relation to the maternal body? What role does the language of nature play in constructing the maternal body as a consumable body? Once again, we can glean insight from literature in animal ethics, and in particular from the ways that “nature” is employed to justify animal consumption. As we will see, invoking nature is yet another way to reinforce the perception that certain bodies are, by default, consumable.

Even though veganism/vegetarianism has gradually amassed supporters, meat eating remains the dominant dietary practice in North American society. However, it is not just that meat eating happens to be more “popular” or that more people “prefer” to eat meat. Rather, Marti Kheel makes the case that meat eating is “compulsory” by comparing it to the normativity of heterosexuality: just as in a heteronormative society one is expected to be heterosexual, in a compulsory meat-eating society one is expected to be a meat eater; once queers and vegetarians “come out,” they are often subjected to interrogation for their “deviant” sexual/dietary practice (2004, 329).

The normative, compulsory nature of meat eating is often couched in the language of “nature.” Melanie Joy articulates the “Three Ns of Justification” in meat eating: Natural, Normal, and Necessary (2011, 96–97). Meat eating is “normal” (or “normalized,” as Kheel argues) because it is purportedly “necessary” and “natural” for us to eat animals. We have come to believe that meat eating is a “necessity” because we “need” nutrients from meat to stay strong and healthy. We have also come to believe that meat eating is part of “nature”: from the claim that humans are at the “top of the food chain” to the biblical myth that asserts human dominance over other animals, we seem to find our “natural” place atop other animals.

The “naturalness” of meat eating is strengthened by the belief that we have *evolved* to eat meat, or that it is evolutionarily advantageous for us to eat meat. For example, in an article published in *Nature*, Katherine Zink and Daniel Lieberman argue that meat consumption plays a significant role in the evolution of *Homo erectus* (2016). Specifically, they contend that meat requires less masticatory force to chew per calorie than tough plants that were available to early hominids; thus, the consumption of meat enabled selection to favor hominids with smaller masticatory features. The decrease in facial and dental size, in turn, makes room for functions such as “speech production, locomotion, thermoregulation, and perhaps

even changes in the size and shape of the brain” (Zink and Lieberman 2016, 502). I shall leave it to the evolutionary biologists to determine the merits of this argument. What is significant for the purpose of the present discussion is the idea that meat eating favors the development of speech. As we know, there is a long philosophical tradition going back to Aristotle whereby humans are defined as *the* animal with speech: our capacity to speak is the quality that defines us as human, a quality that sets us apart from other animals. To say that meat eating is a part of evolution does more than naturalize the practice, for it suggests that meat eating facilitates both our biological evolution (becoming *Homo erectus*) and our ontological evolution (becoming an animal with speech). Indeed, when *Time* magazine picks up this article, the author reminds us that without meat, “we wouldn’t even have *become* human—at least not the modern, verbal, intelligent humans we are” (Kluger 2016; emphasis mine).

It is difficult to overstate the weight evolution carries in the rationalization of meat eating. The appeal to evolution is supposed to illustrate the “necessity” or “naturalness” of meat eating, thereby normalizing the practice. After all, how can we fault nature? If meat eating is what *makes* us human, how can it be wrong? How can we be blamed for doing what is merely necessary? In these ways, evolution (or more generally, nature) lends *moral* support to meat eating.

Concomitant with the practice of compulsory meat eating is the notion that animals are, by nature, consumable. After all, if it is part of a natural order for humans to eat meat, then it is also part of a natural order for animals to be eaten, and if we have evolved to eat meat, then animals are designed by evolution to become meat.²³ Animals are, by nature, consumable insofar as their existence is not only defined but also justified by their function as food. This is evidenced by the fact that animals are often bred for the explicit purpose of being consumed. Indeed, it seems that even wild animals are destined to be eaten: former Alaska governor Sarah Palin famously declares in her book that “there is plenty room for all Alaska’s animals—right next to the mashed potatoes” (2010, 19). For Palin, an avid hunter, animals’ place is on our plate. It is their inevitable fate to be eaten.

We have seen thus far that an appeal to nature renders the animal body a consumable body. In pregnancy-consumption narratives—and here I will focus specifically on breastfeeding—we see a similar appeal to “nature” or “naturalness.” I should say at the outset that I am not interested in settling the debate over the benefits or drawbacks of breastfeeding, nor does my analysis depend on such a debate. And it is certainly not the purpose of this essay to either promote or reject

²³ Of course, this position suffers from its own inconsistencies. Not all animals are considered consumable: humans are not food, and many people who eat cows and pigs would not consider eating cats or dogs.

breastfeeding. I am primarily interested in how the *language* of nature is employed to construct the maternal body as consumable, as well as how “natural” has become a shorthand for “good.”

Just as the appeal to nature is used to justify meat eating, the appeal to nature is employed to encourage breastfeeding (in particular breastfeeding in public). In fact, some of the justifications for meat eating are so similar to the promotion of breastfeeding that we need only change the subject matter from “meat” to “breast milk” to recognize an all too common narrative.

Here are two examples of breastfeeding campaigns that explicitly invoke “nature”:

- A section in *The American Academy of Pediatrics New Mother’s Guide to Breastfeeding* carries the heading: “Breastfeeding: A Natural Gift” (Meek and Yu 2011,18).
- In 2013, the US Department of Health and Human Services initiated a campaign aimed specifically at encouraging African American mothers to breastfeed. It is called “It’s Only Natural: Mother’s Love, Mother’s Milk.”²⁴

It is important to remember that the appeal to nature in pregnancy narratives is often made with the intention to empower women. As noted above, the “natural birth” movement is a response to the overmedicalization of childbirth; it is one way for women to reclaim control over their bodies and assert agency over pregnancy. As such, “nature” as an alternative is meant to resist the hegemony of medical knowledge and intervention. At times, “nature” is employed to resist the continued pathologizing and shaming of public breastfeeding. Despite the expectation to breastfeed, breastfeeding *in public* is still treated as taboo: breastfeeding mothers are often asked to retreat to bathrooms to feed their children, perpetuating the idea that breastfeeding is a shameful practice that ought to be hidden. In response to such hostility, breastfeeding campaigns endeavor to empower breastfeeding mothers by “naturalizing”—thereby normalizing—the practice.²⁵

²⁴ See <http://www.womenshealth.gov/itsonlynatural/>.

²⁵ While my analysis is primarily concerned with how the language of “nature” is deployed to justify or mainstream breastfeeding, it is important to note that “nature” is a double-edged sword. For example, the purported “naturalness” of breastfeeding may contribute to the shame and humiliation experienced by many breastfeeding mothers—especially when this “naturalness” ties the mother to an animal. For an excellent analysis of the ways breastfeeding is associated with animality, and the ways in which our negative attitudes toward breastfeeding stem in part from our anthropocentrism, see Tuvel (2013).

But the appeal to nature in pregnancy narratives can disenfranchise as much as it can empower women (Williamson et al. 2012). After all, if mothers are supposed to breastfeed, then the “failure” to breastfeed is likely to undermine one’s identity as a mother (Williamson et al. 2012, 11). Emphasizing the “naturalness” of breastfeeding also obscures the fact that breastfeeding is often difficult and unpleasant for many women, and even impossible for some. Mothers often find themselves unprepared for the reality of breastfeeding, and they tend to blame themselves for the “inadequacy” of their bodies when they struggle to breastfeed (Williamson et al. 2012, 7). Furthermore, the language of nature may even *shame* women who do not breastfeed. As feminists have rightly pointed out, the effort to put breastfeeding in the mainstream is not value-neutral. For Kukla, the slogan that “babies are born to be breastfed” implies that breastfeeding is a “natural entitlement of infants,” and mothers are “thwarting natural law if they don’t manage to breastfeed” (2006, 173). Charlotte Faircloth even argues that “nature” is invoked as a “moral authority” insofar as it authorizes feeding practices that are deemed unconventional by the mainstream (2017, 23). Faircloth finds that proponents of “full-term breastfeeding”²⁶ often appeal to nature to justify their practice. For example, they cite the breastfeeding practice of nonhuman primates to articulate the “need” to delay weaning, thus promoting this atypical feeding practice in terms of “evolutionary adaptation and development” (2017, 28). Once again, “evolutionary” becomes a shorthand for “necessary” or “beneficial.”

5. The Failed Promises of Nature

My analysis reveals that the appeal to nature helps construct a consumable maternal body. Yet, just as our (purported) natural appetite for meat does not justify meat eating, the “naturalness” of breastfeeding does not mean it ought to be promoted as the paragon of infant feeding. Suppose breastfeeding is indeed natural—does being “natural” automatically imply it should be promoted? I am not here suggesting that we should discourage breastfeeding. Rather, I am simply pointing out that “natural” does not necessarily mean *good*—at least not without an argument. After all, there are many things in nature that we wouldn’t necessarily want to promote. For example, bullying and social hierarchies also exist in nature.

But my concern goes beyond the validity of these arguments, as an uncritical appeal to nature may yield further unexpected, problematic consequences. If we conflate the natural and the good, then the flip side of this conflation would also be true: the *unnatural* becomes the bad and the undesirable. As Jessica Martucci and Anne Barnhill (2016) argue, the association of the unnatural and the dangerous has

²⁶ Full-term breastfeeding involves weaning the child only when he or she no longer wants breast milk.

problematic implications in medicine. For example, opponents of childhood vaccination regularly employ the rhetoric that vaccination is “unnatural” and therefore risky and harmful. As such, the appeal to nature in breastfeeding promotion may inadvertently undermine *other* medical care that is essential to public health (Martucci and Barnhill 2016).

Setting aside the problem of equivocating between the natural and the good, feminists should be especially wary of this sort of “nature” talk. First, it reinforces the gender stereotype in which a woman is cast as a default (“natural”) caretaker (Martucci and Barnhill 2016, 2). Second, the idea that it is “natural” (and hence necessary) for a lactating woman to breastfeed may inadvertently promote the perception that the woman’s body is always at the service of others. Third, the way reproduction happens nowadays is highly regulated by technology—there is nothing “natural” about taking birth control pills or wearing a condom, and while miscarriage is part of nature, abortion is not. Given that many of the reproductive rights we want to safeguard for women are not “natural,” the appeal to nature in pregnancy narratives is problematic from a feminist point of view.

But lastly, a particularly insidious feature of appeals to nature concerns their purported authority. When nature becomes a “moral authority,” can it still make good on its initial promise to liberate women, allowing them to reclaim control over pregnancy and childbirth? Or does it liberate women from the tyranny of the medical establishment only to subject them to the new puissance of “nature”? As we have seen, the appeal to nature is an attempt to mainstream breastfeeding practices that have been marginalized (be it breastfeeding in public or full-term breastfeeding). However, an appeal to nature that accords nature a moral authority does not necessarily promote diversity or tolerance, especially when such an appeal merely replaces one practice with another as the proper, *normative* practice.²⁷ In other words, even if the language of nature may empower some, it is done at the expense of others. It is time to jettison our reverence for “nature” and consider a new strategy to support breastfeeding mothers, a strategy that does not presuppose a good mom/bad mom dichotomy or deepen the perception that it is an ever-present responsibility for women to maintain a consumable body. And finally, without the “authority” of nature to normalize or necessitate our consumption/feeding practices, we can also begin to reconsider the question of what makes something or someone consumable, and whether we are justified to treat them as such.

²⁷ According to a policy statement issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics, “Breastfeeding and human milk are the *normative* standards for infant feeding and nutrition” (2012, e827; emphasis added).

In conclusion, the way we have codified the norm to produce a consumable maternal body goes hand in hand with the “just in case, don’t take risks” mentality that produces a hypervigilant pregnancy-consumption culture. This culture imposes excessive bodily, cognitive, and emotional burdens on the pregnant/breastfeeding woman. As we have seen, the responsibility to produce a consumable body extends well beyond pregnancy, as women are expected to be perpetually readying themselves for possible pregnancy, regardless of their family planning. This ever-present responsibility suggests that having a consumable body is a *default* position for women—they are *supposed* to produce and maintain a consumable body. As I have argued, two conditions are particularly salient in constructing the maternal body as a consumable body: the invisibility of the maternal body coupled with appeals to nature. As such, to challenge the idea that women are, by default, consumable, we must address the ways the maternal body has been displaced by the fetus/child, and we must reconsider the strategy of appealing to nature as a way to empower women.

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