

## Response to Shane Denson

---

*Meredith Nash*

In writing 'From 'Bump' to 'Baby': Gazing at the Foetus in 4D', I wanted to speak directly to the anxious attention situated around the moral status of the foetus, imagined and codified on screen, whilst simultaneously underlining the ontological confusion of fetal and maternal bodies.

My study of ultrasonography demonstrates that my pregnant informants recognised the oppressiveness of biomedicine yet, very often, these women also cooperated in maintaining its disciplinary bodily practices. Relying on a Foucauldian feminist perspective in this instance, my aim was to explain how such a contradiction was possible. In exploring how socialised (and socialising) scientific understandings are visibly engineered to become part of a woman's transition to motherhood, I argued that acting as a willing participant in the disciplining of one's own body is reflexive, a 'practice of the self', and capable of transforming subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Although I still find Foucauldian theory very persuasive, I cannot deny the difficulty in pinpointing sources of power or the equally impossible task of defining what constitutes 'oppression', 'empowerment' or 'resistance'. I agree with Denson that Foucauldian theory is potentially problematic in that self-surveillance through technology is overly focused on practices of the body rather than how the practices themselves become embodied.<sup>2</sup> In Foucault's discursively shaped docility, there is little room for transformation, resistance or for gendered bodies.

Like Foucault, however, Merleau-Ponty's concept of the 'lived body' is one that presumes that the body as a source for experience is by definition, male. This conception does not account for the idea that how we perceive our bodies in daily life can influence how we relate to other people and how others relate to us. The actively engaged bodies of both Merleau-Ponty and for example, the 'absent body' of Drew Leder, more obviously characterise affluent societies and are definitely associated with "rationalised social systems".<sup>3</sup> These instrumental approaches are arguably Anglo 'Western' masculinist systems that privilege "healthy males in their middle years not subject to the bodily processes involved in menstruation, pregnancy, ageing, illness and decay".<sup>4</sup> Masculinist phenomenological accounts are increasingly contested by feminists because they foreground women, racial or

sexual minorities as 'other' or abnormal. Whilst providing a powerful account of 'lived bodies' as Denson suggests, phenomenology does not provide a developed discussion of how bodies can be socially shaped and how this may involve or alienate individuals from society, nor does it address questions of difference.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, I would argue that my qualitative feminist framework is more conducive to the work of Iris Marion Young who has long argued that earlier theories of embodiment mask and repress difference to the advancement of those who are closest (physically and philosophically) to the ideal abstracted, rational individual (implicitly male). Young argues that traditional models of embodiment characterised by enforced homogeneity, universality and rationality comprises an individual who has "no particular history, is a member of no communities, has no body".<sup>6</sup>

Although a Foucauldian framework is troublesome, I disagree that this view is *merely* discursive or that it *has* to symbolise a retreat from 'real' or 'lived' experience. Exploiting the productivity of discourse can be 'potentially destabilising for patriarchal reproductive hegemony' and as shifting historical practices, may be seen as integral to lived experiences.<sup>7</sup> As I have illustrated, in the event of 'seeing' the foetus, the foetus and the spectator (the mother) are simultaneously embodied and enworlded. In order for the 3D/4D technology to encourage bonding, the mother (in a wanted pregnancy) must look at the ultrasound screen as though she is looking at a 'baby' and not just a 'foetus'.

Don Ihde suggests that technology withdraws into our own bodily senses as part of our ongoing sense of bodily being.<sup>8</sup> However, screens in general, and in this case, ultrasound screens, are only meaningful when they hold our attention.<sup>9</sup> Screens 'claim their being' by presenting information that is relevant to our activity in the world. For pregnant women, ultrasound technology would have no referent, importance, or meaning without its on-screen content. Women implicate themselves in the 'narrative' of foetal 'life' through the ultrasound screen; the foetal information on the screen would not exist without a mother. Pregnant women must assert themselves (as embodied) through objectification and orient themselves to the information on the screen through the inclusion of the placenta. Altering the 'material form' of the technology as Denson suggests is problematic because technoscience is an "inescapable materialisation of the world".<sup>10</sup> 'Seeing' is impossible without an ongoing referential of human existence; the foetus already has a meaning prior to visualisation based on the circumstances of the pregnancy

and women draw upon the information on-screen as they act and relate in the world (e.g. lived experience).

The notion that pregnancy is increasingly interpreted by biomedicine as a 'risk' to be 'managed' with the use of highly sophisticated technology is integral in understanding how pregnant women 'see' themselves. Drawing on the narratives of my pregnant informants, unsurprisingly, the medical view that a pregnant woman is the 'second patient' in competition with her foetus causes many women to feel insecure about the capabilities of their bodies and what is 'normal'.<sup>11</sup> Feelings of bodily instability and disembodiment are evidenced by a range of studies suggesting that as pregnant women are marginalised biomedically and culturally, their feelings of bodily insecurity are manifested in their pregnant 'selves'.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the ways in which pregnant women perceive themselves is intimately linked to cultural context but also to the ways in which biomedicine represents women's bodies in pregnancy. Critical to my assessment of bodily disciplinary practices are the ideological constraints experienced by women which change/challenge their perceptions of their own objectification. In some cases, bodily fragmentation is transformative and my article was intended to highlight the necessity of crafting a feminist visual literacy for understanding how the technological relationship between mother and foetus often displaces other discourses of connection. Rather than focusing directly on the technology as Denson suggests, it was my aim to explore whose story is being told in the visual narratives of fetal life and what is at stake for women in these constructions. As Haraway suggests, feminist inquiry is "no more innocent" than any other system of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> My concern has been to try and correct the myopia which has for so long submerged women's own responses to reproduction; to empower pregnant women as viewers.

*Meredith Nash is a PhD candidate at Melbourne University. Previous degrees include MA from Melbourne University and BSc from the University of Illinois. Her Master's thesis analyses the exposure of the pregnant belly as a site of surveillance and object of the medical gaze. Meredith's current research, The Baby Bump Project (<http://babybumpproject.tripod.com>), explores public pregnancy and women's narratives.*

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol.3 of *The History of Sexuality*, New York, Vintage Books, 1988
- <sup>2</sup> Alexandra Howson, *Embodying Gender*, London, Sage Publications, 2005, 24
- <sup>3</sup> Drew Leder, *The Absent Body*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1990; Chris Shilling, 'The Body in Culture, Technology and Society' in Mike Featherstone (ed), *Theory, Culture and Society*, London, Sage, 2005, 59
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, 56
- <sup>6</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'Impartiality and the civic public: some implications of feminist critiques of moral and political theory' in Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (eds), *Feminism as Critique*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 60; Nancy Duncan, 'Introduction: (Re)placings' in Nancy Duncan (ed), *Bodyspace: destabilizing geographies of gender and sexuality*, London, Routledge, 1996, 1-10
- <sup>7</sup> Dion Farquhar, '(M)other Discourses' in Gill Kirkup et al (eds), *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, London, Routledge, 2000, 217
- <sup>8</sup> Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press
- <sup>9</sup> Lucas D. Introna and Fernando M. Ilharco, 'On the Meaning of Screens: Towards a Phenomenological Account of Screenness', *Human Studies*, vol.29, 2006, 57-76
- <sup>10</sup> Donna Haraway, 'The Virtual Speculum In the New World Order' in Gill Kirkup et al (eds), *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, London, Routledge, 2000, 231
- <sup>11</sup> Sheila A. Smith and Deirdre M. Condit, 'Marginalizing Women: Images of Pregnancy in Williams Obstetrics', *The Journal of Perinatal Education*, vol.9, no.2, 2000, 15-16
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid; for example, DS Moore, 'The body image in pregnancy', *Journal of Nurse Midwifery*, vol.22, no.4, 1978, 17-27; K Davies and J Wardle, 'Body image and dieting in pregnancy', *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 1994, vol.38, no.8, 787-99; V.R. Strang. and P. L. Sullivan, 'Body Image Attitudes During Pregnancy and the Postpartum Period', *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic & Neonatal Nursing*, vol.14, no.4, 1985, 332-37; P Fox and C Yamaguchi, 'Body image changes in pregnancy: a comparison of normal and overweight primagravidas', *Birth*, vol.24, no.1, 1997, 35-40; Virginia Schmied and Deborah Lupton, 'The externality of the inside: body images of pregnancy', *Nursing Inquiry*, vol. 8, 2001, 32-40; Lucy Bailey, 'Gender Shows: First-time Mothers and Embodied Selves', *Gender & Society*, vol.15, no.1, 2001, 110-29; Sally Johnson, Ann Burrows, Iain Williamson, 'Does my bump look big in this? The Meaning of Bodily Changes for First-Time Mothers-to-be', *Journal of Health Psychology*, vol.9, no.3, 2004, 361-74; Sarah Earle, "Bumps and Boob": Fatness and Women's Experiences of Pregnancy', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol.26, no.3, 2003, 245-52; Helen Skouteris et al, 'A prospective study of factors that lead to body dissatisfaction during pregnancy', *Body Image*, vol.2, 2005, 347-61
- <sup>13</sup> Haraway, 'The Visual Speculum', 235