

Love your Mombod: Race, Gender, and the Commercialization of Postpartum Fitness  
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Please note: I am still very early in this project. Please do not publish, cite, or circulate without the author's permission.

#### About me and this project

- Gave birth in 2017 at age 40
- Struggled with my post-partum body and with getting out of the house with a young baby
  - Participated in Fit4Mom Memphis classes to get out of the house, meet other moms, and lose baby weight
- These experiences raised questions for me about the history and politics of postpartum embodiment
  - Considering moms' fitness classes as entryway into potentially larger project on this topic
  - Still very early in this project – seeking thoughts, feedback, research, and experiences of others
  - Findings are still very speculative at this point

#### Selected Relevant Theory

- Pregnant Embodiment
  - “The pregnant subject, I suggest, is decentered, split, or doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head.”
  - “Medicine's self-identification as the curing profession encourages others as well as the woman to think of her pregnancy as a condition that deviates from normal health... Within the context of authority and dependence that currently structures the doctor-patient relation, moreover, coupled with the use of instruments and drugs in the birthing process, the pregnant and birthing woman often lacks autonomy within these experiences.”
    - Iris Marion Young, “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation,” in *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46-47.
- Intensive mothering
  - “The ideology of intensive mothering is a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children. In a society where over half of all mothers with young children are now working outside of the home, one might well wonder why our culture pressures women to dedicate so much of themselves to child rearing. And in a society

where the logic of self-interested gain seems to guide behavior in so many spheres of life, one might further wonder why a logic of unselfish nurturing guides the behavior of mothers. These two puzzling phenomena make up what I call the cultural contradictions of contemporary motherhood.”

- Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), x.

- Maternal ambivalence
  - “Maternal ambivalence constitutes not an anodyne condition of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side. However, much of the ubiquitous guilt mothers endure stems from difficulties in weathering the painful feelings evoked by experiencing maternal ambivalence in a culture that shies away from the very existence of something it has helped to produce.”
    - Rozsika Parker, “The Production and Purposes of Maternal Ambivalence” in Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone, eds., *Mothering and Ambivalence* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 17-36.
- New Momism
  - “The insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The new momism is a highly romanticized view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet.”
    - Susan J. Douglas, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 4.
- Gender Essentialism
  - “In both motherhood theory and motherhood activism the costs of patriarchal motherhood have been well examined and critiqued. I would argue, however, that this feminist criticism has been largely limited to the symptomatic manifestations of patriarchal motherhood, leaving unexamined their root cause: the gender essentialism of modern motherhood.”
    - Andrea O’Reilly, “Outlaw(ing) Motherhood: A Theory and Politic of Maternal Empowerment for the Twenty-first Century,” in O’Reilly, ed., *Twenty-First Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 371.
- “Doing” Pregnancy
  - “Pregnant women are expected to “do” pregnancy, actively performing socially established practices that signify the status of the body as pregnant... The social status of pregnant women is evaluated based on the perceived success of this performance. The process of “doing” pregnancy includes (1) the process of learning to be pregnant (by reading relevant literature and listening to the advice of others): (2) the process of adapting to pregnancy through mastering the daily routines of self-care (such as eating, drinking, exercising, walking, sleeping); and

(3) constant performing of pregnancy (ensuring that the process of “doing” pregnancy is acknowledged and approved by others).”

- Elena Neiterman, “Doing Pregnancy: Pregnant Embodiment as Performance,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 35 (2012), 372-3.
- Othermothers, Controlling Images, and Integrated Mothering
  - African American feminist theory and scholarship demonstrates that Black mothers face different constraints and expectations than white middle-class mothers. These include the expectation that an extended network of family and friends will be involved with childrearing, the necessity of paid work outside the home, and the existence of damaging stereotypes that shape how both mother and children are perceived.
    - Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2000).
    - Dawn Marie Dow, *Mothering While Black: Boundaries and Burdens of Middle-Class Parenthood* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019) and “Integrated Motherhood: Beyond Hegemonic Ideologies of Motherhood,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78 (February 2016): 180-196.

#### Selected Relevant History and context

- Little historical analysis of advice to new mothers about how to care for their own bodies postpartum
  - Instead, focus is on infant care, breastfeeding, and labor/delivery (doctors vs. midwives, hospital vs. homes, medicated vs. unmedicated)
- Postpartum women return to “normal” activities far more quickly than ever before (due to both choice and circumstance)
  - Tina Cassidy, *Birth: The Surprising History of How We are Born* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 221-225.
- Women experience many cultural messages encouraging them to “get back” (or even improve upon) their pre-baby bodies (and selves)
  - Angela Garbes, *Like a Mother: A Feminist Journey Through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), chapter 8.
- Growth of “wellness” culture in postwar period
  - Role of women in particular in creating women’s fitness classes (Jazzercise, Jane Fonda) and in promoting women’s health (reproductive rights and feminist women’s health movements)
  - Both promoters of the 1980s aerobics craze and feminist health advocates urged women to feel more connected with their bodies, to enjoy movement and physical activity, to reject previous messages from “experts” about the dangers of women’s exercise and the unseemliness of women’s bodies
  - But “wellness” culture (and promoters of aerobics in particular) has been criticized in terms of reinforcing beauty culture, ableism, fat-phobia, and broader

social inequalities. Likewise, it tends to promote individual solutions to what are often structural, public problems.

- Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, “Thanks, Gender! An Intellectual History of the Gym” in Raymond Haberski, Jr., and Andrew Hartman, eds., *American Labyrinth: Intellectual History for Complicated Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 86-103.
- Shelly McKenzie, *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

### Moms’ Fitness: Questions and Problems Raised

Takeaway: Mom’s fitness classes reflect rather than resolve many conflicts regarding the embodiment of contemporary motherhood.

### Fitness for Profit (in general)

- As commercial fitness classes, these programs have the pros and cons of many similar classes that are not geared towards moms.
  - Pros: Exercise in a setting that will encourage you to push yourself harder than you might if working out alone; Satisfaction of working out in a group; Meeting others in class; Engaging in activity in a group
  - Cons: Many fitness classes, particularly for-profit and commercial classes, reinforce myriad inequalities based on class, race, weight, sex, gender, and ability.

### Potential Appeal of Fitness Classes for Mothers

- In an era of fairly isolated motherhood, there is great appeal for social activity with other women who can offer support and encouragement, share tips and tricks (fun songs and activities, baby care tips, etc.), and help with adjustment to life with a new baby.
- For those who enjoy exercise, these classes are a way to do so with one’s children. Classes are often fun for children and can be a bonding experience for mother and child(ren).
- Likewise, the classes allow mothers to model behavior (fitness, enjoyment of physical activity) that they would like their child(ren) to adopt.

### Reinscribing Gender Essentialism and Inequality

- As classes marketed directly to mothers, they promote a “mom” identity in an apolitical and non-reflexive environment. This approach is supposed to make these classes feel welcoming and accessible to everyone (not just progressive or conservative women, women who work for pay outside the home, or women who do not). But this approach can also serve to reinscribe a number of assumptions about motherhood. For instance:
  - These classes are for women only, and all are predicated on being a mother (not just a woman, not just a parent). As such, they reinscribe both gender

essentialism and a fairly exclusive model of biological motherhood that denies othermothers.

- Likewise, they assume mothers have the financial and time resources to devote an hour to an exercise class (and can create guilty feelings for those who do not have these resources). Weekday daytime classes are generally predicated on a mother being a full-time caretaker, having a flexible job and childcare situation so as to attend class with her child, or being on maternity leave. Weekday evening classes, meanwhile, require a woman to be able to not be home around dinner time, to not work an evening shift, and to not be too exhausted for a workout with child in tow at the end of the day. Likewise, weekend classes require a woman to be able to take a fitness class rather than work or engage in other kinds of parenting or caretaking activities (caring for older children, grocery shopping, etc).

#### “Doing” Motherhood in an Age of Intensive Mothering

- Participation can be a performance of motherhood to classmates and to a more public audience on social media
- Performing dedication to self-care and to fitness: You’re out there sweating—even when your baby isn’t yet sleeping through the night, even when it took an extra 30 minutes to get your recalcitrant toddler out the door. You are “doing something for you.”
  - The catch: your kid is also there and often needs attention throughout class, while you are trying to exercise. This activity is not just about you as a person. It is always about you as a mother.
  - Also creates potential areas for judgement about parental choices: Your child has had how many snacks during this 1 hour class? Are they processed? Organic? Is that formula or breast milk in that bottle? Did you remember sunscreen? Is s/he warm or cool enough? Did you speak too sharply when s/he threw something for the umpteenth time?

#### Maternal Embodiment

- Vulnerability of working out in a body that is profoundly changed by the experience of pregnancy and childbirth.
  - More weight and less muscle tone than pre-pregnancy – physical activity is more challenging than before
  - Leaking (everywhere!)
  - Bouncing (everywhere!)
  - Clothes and bras fit differently
  - Fatigue
- Being with other mothers can be very affirming since these are very common postpartum issues. Likewise, these classes offer a range of modifications so that they are challenging but doable (and safe) for a variety of pregnant and postpartum bodies.
- But the vulnerability of the pregnant and postpartum body also make these classes spaces where emotions (both good and bad) can run high for individual women. Classes

can be empowering and pleasurable, or isolating and demoralizing depending on individual experience with group and activity.

- Likewise, these programs promise to fix some of these problems, which could lead to greater rejection and self-consciousness rather than acceptance of a post-partum body with all its imperfections.
- Could also increase feelings of isolation, maternal ambivalence, or masking of existing ambivalence.

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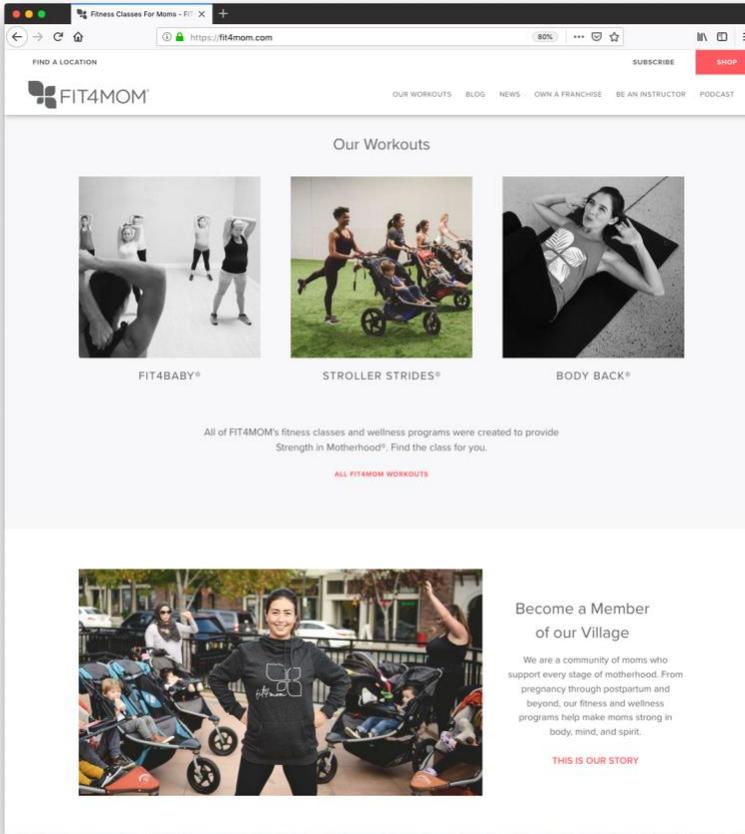
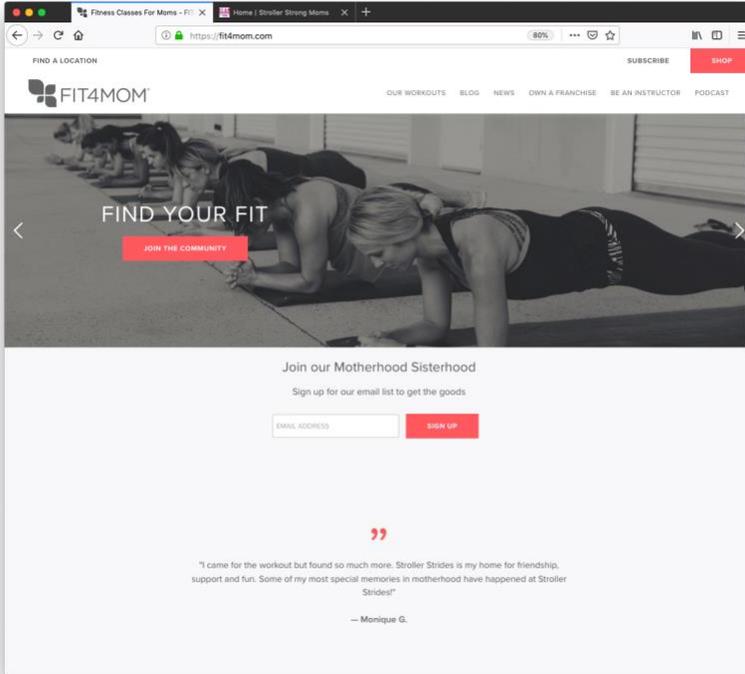
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Fit4Mom website (screenshots from 10/10/19)



Stroller Strong Moms website (screenshots from 10/10/19)

