Robyn Lee
The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics
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Breastfeeding, the topic of Robyn Lee's exploration of ethics and politics as power, pleasure, and poetics, is a term that exemplifies verbal "ambivalence." The word "breastfeed" is indefinite, looking two ways at once, as "to breastfeed" means both to give and to receive food via the breast. In *The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics*, Lee embraces ambivalence generally as a state of mind that fosters *poiesis*—an aesthetic and creative orientation to one's own embodied life and to the life of the body politic. Early on, she discloses that her own relationship to the topic of breastfeeding is that of "a cis-gender childless academic who remains ambivalent about how motherhood is experienced under contemporary conditions of neoliberalism" (9). Thus regarding breastfeeding "in terms of its strangeness" (9), she claims her own ambivalence as a site for imagining new ways to perform sociobiological roles, such as being a mother and feeding children. To formulate a new ethics and politics of breastfeeding that preserves maternal interiority and acknowledges the feeding of children as a social responsibility, she builds upon the theoretical work of Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, and Luce Irigaray.

Though not a breastfeeding subject herself, Lee stakes her authority to theorize breastfeeding in Elizabeth Gregory's argument that those who benefit economically and professionally from delaying or rejecting motherhood are morally obligated to support those whose time and attention are absorbed in the task of caring for children. In this supportive role, Lee seeks to liberate mothers from the self-abnegating moral imperative of breastfeeding imposed by medical discourse, exemplified for her by Health Canada's policy document *Nutrition for Healthy Term Infants,* and by maternalist discourse, exemplified by La Leche League's *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding.* She points out that although La Leche League, in defining breastfeeding as "womanly," initially sought to preserve maternal authority against medical control of childcare, the League subsequently enlisted the support of the medical community in making the argument that breast is best for human infants. Lee finds the medical and the maternalist constructions of breastfeeding inadequate because both frame breastfeeding as a "natural" or "biological" function, exempting it from critical scrutiny. Accordingly, both discourses assign mothers individual responsibility for child nutrition and overlook the need to implement social policies that support this important cultural work. Framing breastfeeding as a purely natural function, Lee goes on to demonstrate, also fails to acknowledge the many ways women's postpartum choice to breastfeed or not is socially and materially constrained by economic class, labor demands, and social conventions. Nor does an understanding of breastfeeding as a natural act acknowledge that

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not only postpartum mothers are capable of breastfeeding infants; Lee notes that through nipple stimulation, hormone treatments, and technological interventions, adoptive mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and trans-parents can also undertake the work of breastfeeding.

The ethics and the politics Lee espouses in her ambivalent analysis of breastfeeding are relational, narrative, and embodied. From Levinas she draws a relational, intersubjective ethics grounded in first-person responsibility to an Other. In particular, she explores Levinas's metaphorical use of breastfeeding to explain his ethical obligation to recognize and respond to the hunger of the Other, a relational obligation he describes in its more public form as "hospitality." Though troubled by Levinas's acceptance of separately gendered domestic and public ethics—and accordingly his feminine construction of care for the Other and his masculine construction of pleasure in receiving care—Lee values his insistence that pleasure must play a role in ethics. Unless we have tasted and savored our own food and satisfied our own hunger, Levinas reasons, we cannot recognize our hospitable duty to feed the Other. For Lee, this framing of care as inclusive of self-care introduces the possibility that mothers as well as infants are right to find all kinds of pleasure in the act of breastfeeding, an important step in resisting the self-sacrificial breastfeeding ethic of maternal duty.

To build an ethics and politics of breastfeeding that further liberates women from the moral imperatives of medical and maternalist discourse, Lee turns to Irigaray's rejection of oppositional logic as an explanation of sexual difference. Like Irigaray, Lee wants to retain the female body, including its capacity for motherhood, and she wants to do so without surrendering female "interiority" to biological destiny. As women, Lee and Irigaray and I myself are all motivated to protect and nourish our personal versions of the interior life Virginia Woolf defended in *A Room of One's Own;* each of us possesses an interior Self that can only survive and evolve in an exterior environment that offers social and material support and enables this female Self to flourish. Women can build such an environment, according to Irigaray, by asserting their own embodied subjectivities in the public realm. Doing so, she maintains, requires poetic language—ambivalent language that surmounts dichotomous divisions, like male and female or public and private, by looking two or more ways at once.

Lee finds in Irigaray's work a model of "ethicopoetics" that is female, creative, and embodied—a new way of doing moral philosophy that claims the powers of sensual pleasure and nonrational play for women to employ in crafting their lives as works of art. Narrative is central to Irigaray's poetics, as she observes the moral subject always changing and becoming rather than simply being. This model of poetic ambivalence and narrative perception of Self, Lee maintains, is useful to the project of freeing women from a self-sacrificing morality that enables political dismissal of women's interests and devaluation of the work of feeding children. Viewing the historically female activity of breastfeeding in a playful, relational, and narrative fashion, Lee argues, produces an alternative, intersubjective model of the breastfeeding dyad, one in which breastfeeding becomes for the nursing mother "an incentive for thought and self-transformation rather than . . . a burden imposed by nature" (91–92).

Lee's rejection of the burdensome, essentialist logic behind "natural" explanations of mammalian lactation in humans often sits uneasily with her desire to craft an embodied ethics and politics of breastfeeding. Her interest in the bodily experience of nursing infants is confined largely to

considering the maternal body's experience of pain and pleasure during the physical transfer of milk, and she repeatedly dismisses biological explanations as incomplete, denouncing them as "merely" natural, instinctive, or physiological. She further distances herself from biological accounts of breastfeeding by separating them from the critical work of philosophy, as she worries that describing breastfeeding as a natural activity characterizes it as "unthinking or biologically automatic" (94). Conceiving of breastfeeding as a natural act instead of a social practice, she warns, leads to a "lack of critical engagement" (35) with normative ideologies of maternal care that prescribe this "natural" behavior as the common duty of all postpartum mothers. For Lee, breastfeeding is ethically and politically problematic precisely because it submits to categorization as a natural (animal) behavior.

In her introductory chapter, Lee describes the "naturalness" of breastfeeding as a site of academic *pathos*, and asks why it is "so vehemently extolled" and why it has become "a lightning rod for so much ambivalence and vitriol" (9). Her efforts to organize this *pathos* into systematic ethical and political thought are motivated by the laudable goal of liberating breastfeeding mothers from a moral straitjacket of maternal obligation. Convinced that "current dominant understandings of breastfeeding are deeply flawed" (183), she proposes to replace them with something new by recategorizing the feeding of children as "a radical act of ethical responsibility, not merely a domestic chore" (141) and by reintroducing a sense of pleasure to breastfeeding that is relational—and therefore ethical—as well as embodied. Near the end of her book she announces that in place of "natural" accounts of breastfeeding, she has, with the help of Foucault, Levinas, and Irigaray, developed "an alternative way" to understand it as an "ethicopoetic project" (184) that she hopes will "open up possibilities" for enabling breastfeeding subjects to understand themselves and the work of feeding children.

As Lee acknowledges, the success or failure of her project depends ultimately on how it is taken up by those who breastfeed children. Concurring with Irigaray that to abstract "the feminine" from women's embodied experiences is to be ensnared once again in an ethical system that serves masculine interests, Lee concludes that the documents she cites as exemplars of dominant discourses on breastfeeding can never fully contain the art of breastfeeding; instead, she contends, "it must be developed and transformed by those who breastfeed" (187). Significantly, however, this is a population that Lee herself does not belong to; in the final analysis, her academic perspective, like the medical and maternalist perspectives that represent "biopower," is the prescriptive stance of an outsider.

A self-identified academic, Lee has written a conventionally academic text, to be read by other academics. Throughout much of the book, breastfeeding becomes an occasion for her to explicate the moral and political theories of the French philosophers Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, and Luce Irigaray and to enter into conversation with them. Although she acknowledges the irony of having time to write a theoretical book about breastfeeding "as a consequence of never having breastfed anyone" (9), Lee does not similarly acknowledge the complementary irony of people whose bodies, time, and attention are claimed by the work of breastfeeding having little time to read it. Because breastfeeding is for Lee a theoretical construct instead of an embodied experience, she regards it with an academic's objective detachment, a stance conveyed in part by her heavy use of passive constructions that transform breastfeeding subjects into the passive objects of social forces and cultural ideologies. In revealing her own ambivalence about

breastfeeding, for instance, Lee refers to motherhood as something that "is experienced" by unnamed Others under neoliberal conditions (9). Similarly, in analyzing the neoliberal construction of breastfeeding by the dominant cultural discourses of medicine and maternalism, she presents actual and potential breastfeeding women as passive objects of external forces, describing them as people to whom "techniques of self . . . have been applied" (35), who "are discouraged" from behaving in certain ways and "are encouraged" to behave in others (35); "The female subject," she writes, "is displaced by an emphasis on the health and wellbeing of the infant" (35), even as "it is assumed that women will benefit from what is good for their infants" (48). In thus emphasizing an absence of agency in the identity-construction of breastfeeding mothers, Lee embraces the feminist project of "decentering motherhood as integral to women's identity" (10) but does so conceptually, abstracting not from the embodied experiences of women but from the textual evidence of prescriptive ideologies.

This is not to suggest that individuals like Lee who are not themselves breastfeeding subjects should not theorize breastfeeding subjectivity, but rather to point out that "merely" conceptual reasoning about breastfeeding is in its own way as limited and limiting as the "merely" natural account of human lactation. In observing breastfeeding from the outside, what appear as the dominant discursive forces shaping the activity may differ considerably from those that appear dominant from the inside. Likewise, breastfeeding individuals' experience of physical and relational pleasure and their playful and innovative orientations to personal and political life may be entirely obscured to those who observe the breastfeeding dyad from a third-person perspective. Overlooking such possibilities by focusing her analysis exclusively on prescriptive texts about breastfeeding and on philosophical texts about identity-construction and ethical relationality, Lee presumes that ethicopoetics is a brand new, liberating alternative to a socially constructed category that makes breastfeeding just another domestic chore that women are obliged to perform.

A former breastfeeding subject myself, I was once intimately familiar with the medical and maternalist discourses Lee challenges in this book. But these were not the only discourses to shape my breastfeeding practice, nor did they seem to me to be the most powerful. Certainly breastfeeding became an activity my children and I engaged in strategically, not just for the sake of infant nutrition but also for bonding and physical pleasure and for many other purposes beyond the feeding of children—to relax in a rocking chair and read, for example, to experience closeness and interlocking gaze, to regulate moods, to quiet and comfort a fussy child, or even to relieve inner-ear pressure during take-off and landing on plane flights. In my recollection, one of the most powerful discursive influences on my breastfeeding practice was the conversation and examples of the other breastfeeding mothers I met through organizations like La Leche League, Mothers of Multiples, and my neighborhood babysitting co-op. Dwelling for the most part in the conceptual realm of theory, Lee overlooks the ambivalence that many breastfeeding subjects themselves surely feel, ignores the multiple "resistant" or "alternative" discourses that already dampen the influence of medical and maternalist ideologies, and fails to appreciate the playful, creative, open-ended approaches that individual women and others already bring to their performance of breastfeeding labor. Although Lee's study performs the important work of bringing the embodied practice of breastfeeding to the attention of philosophy, it does not similarly demonstrate the relevance of philosophy to those who are actively engaged in the ethical and political work of breastfeeding.