

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Lee, Robyn. *The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018, pp. 245, hardcover, (9781487503710).

Robyn Lee's book is an insightful examination of breastfeeding that makes a valuable and unique contribution to scholarship in this area. Her project is neither neatly aligned with breastfeeding advocates nor its opponents, the arguments of both she subjects to a careful and skillful critique. Instead, she proposes an "ethico-poetics" of breastfeeding,¹ an approach she suggests is necessary to reach a 'proper' understanding of breastfeeding, that situates and responds to breastfeeding's social and cultural conditions as well as its implications for subjectivity and relations between self and Other. Drawing from the work of Foucault, Levinas and Irigaray, Lee strives to attend to multiple agendas, including an effort to support breastfeeding among marginalized mothers who wish to breastfeed *and* an attempt to decentralize motherhood as central to women's identity, especially as it affects both cis women and trans people.

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for Lee's project and captures the limitations of viewing breastfeeding through the lens of Western liberal autonomy, especially as such arguments are deployed by both feminist advocates and critics of breastfeeding. Lee brings together Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Levinas' ethics and feminist politics to focus on breastfeeding as a site for reconceptualizing ideas of the self, subjectivity and dependence. Having defined the ethico-poetics of breastfeeding she aims to develop, in chapter 2, Lee shows the limits of the dominant discourses of breastfeeding. She provides an account of the medical and maternalist discourses that dominate breastfeeding promotion as they appear in two texts; Nutrition for Healthy Term Infants, guidance for health professionals produced by Health Canada and its partners, and the *Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*, the central text of international breastfeeding promotion organization La Leche League. Through her analysis of both texts, Lee examines both maternalist and medicalized discourses of breastfeeding (and motherhood) through the lens of biopower, highlighting how both discourses ignore breastfeeding's cultural elements,

1. Robyn Lee, *The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 30.

individualize the practice and emphasize mothers' reliance on expert advice.

Pleasure offers one way to resist this biopower but not just in a simplistic attempt to bring breastfeeding and sexuality together but instead, a reconceptualization that separates pleasure from sexuality. Drawing from Foucault's reading of Greco-Roman ethics, Lee suggests that as a relational act, breastfeeding can be a site of the kind of pleasure that takes "us out of ourselves"² rather than the "self-regarding"³ pleasures associated with sexuality. Breastfeeding offers a way to achieve a "reciprocal" kind of pleasure that relies on rather than denies a relation with the Other and facilitates an "intersubjective" development of self.⁴

Having established the value of Foucault's "self-dissolving"⁵ conception of pleasure for reconceptualizing breastfeeding, in chapter 4 Lee turns to Levinas' ethics of self which begins with obligation to the Other and is predicated on enjoyment. Anticipating and responding to critiques of Levinas, particularly from feminists, Lee brings together Levinas' idea of ethics and feminist politics to forge her ethico-poetics of breastfeeding, and argues that reading breastfeeding as an ethical obligation to the Other does not merely reinforce women's moral obligation or reduce them to self-sacrificing domesticity but instead directly challenges the biopolitical "individualized responsibility for infant feeding"⁶ in favour of a shared responsibility to ensure that children are "well fed".⁷

Finally, Lee draws from Irigaray as a corrective to Levinas' over-emphasis on women's capacity for self-sacrifice. Lee describes Irigaray's account of sexual difference as "never finally determined [and] always open to reinterpretation and transformation"⁸ that allows a relation to the other that is irreducible to self-sacrifice. Irigaray stresses the importance of interiority, suggesting that breastfeeding (and the relationship between the self and other that it involves) need not require overwhelming each other but instead operate as a site for positive connection and pleasure. In this chapter, Lee also pushes Irigaray to attend to the "symbolic meaning"⁹ developed during breastfeeding, moving beyond a focus on physiological processes that assumes that only a cis woman who has recently given birth is capable of breastfeeding. By accounting for ex-

2. *Ibid.*, 84.

3. *Ibid.*, 85.

4. *Ibid.*, 96.

5. *Ibid.*, 90.

6. *Ibid.*, 101.

7. *Ibid.*, 100.

8. *Ibid.*, 122.

9. *Ibid.*, 139.

periences of inducing lactation, Lee reveals the simultaneously natural and cultural, physiological and symbolic meanings of breastfeeding and invites the reader to consider the political potential of this creative opening up of breastfeeding.

Chapter 6 brings together Levinas, Foucault and Irigaray to consider the political implications of this new model of subjectivity that Lee has fashioned, this ethico-poetics of breastfeeding. The thread weaved throughout this chapter is a rejection of the individual “autonomous subjectivity”¹⁰ assumed by dominant biopolitical readings of breastfeeding; Lee calls on the reader time and time again to accept society-wide responsibility for breastfeeding. Through Irigaray, Lee reconceptualizes this wider responsibility for breastfeeding as a “sexuate right”¹¹ but goes further, going beyond the physiological and pushing Irigaray to include those other than cis women in her conception of breastfeeding as the expression of sexual difference, “the source for ongoing poetic creation and transformation in order to avoid trapping individuals in fixed representations”.¹² Lee concludes with a discussion of the revolutionary potential (and limits) of “creative transformations of breastfeeding and milk exchange”¹³ with reference to performance art, milk kinship and other practices of milk sharing. Such possibilities are, as Lee notes, limited if they do not consider existing inequalities.

It is here where Lee’s welcome and important discussion of racialized women’s experiences of breastfeeding could be more nuanced. Lee’s description of race as an “impediment”¹⁴ to breastfeeding risks eliding the highly complex reasons why some racialized groups have ‘low’ breastfeeding rates and indeed how these reasons inform breastfeeding promotion efforts within those communities. There is a missed opportunity to reflect on the nascent movement Black Women Do Breastfeed as a case study for the greater socio-political support Lee uses Levinas and Foucault to call for. Examining this movement (and other breastfeeding advocacy groups like it) could also offer commentary on how an explicitly politicized rejection of individual responsibility may be operationalized. I’d also be interested to know what Lee makes of reports of black and Asian women’s higher rates of breastfeeding initiation in Canada.

Lee makes an important intervention in breastfeeding scholarship both outlining the “biopolitical norms”¹⁵ of dominant breastfeeding dis-

10. Ibid., 153.

11. Ibid., 167.

12. Ibid., 172.

13. Ibid., 182.

14. Ibid., 151.

15. Ibid., 51.

courses, summed up in the insistence that ‘breast is best’ or ‘natural’, and the public health initiatives developed to maximize breastfeeding rates, *and* accounting for the lack of actual social and political support for women and other individuals who choose to breastfeed. In this way, Lee offers a critique of both ‘breast is best’ and “bottle-feeding culture”¹⁶ without lapsing into a prescriptive call for all women to breastfeed. As she notes throughout the text, efforts to fulfil the “ethico-poetics of breastfeeding”, to care for the self, take self-dissolving pleasure, fulfil obligation to the Other and acknowledge the sexed nature of breastfeeding while remaining creatively open to the practice’s possibilities, may look very different depending on women’s social location and the resources available to them. Lee’s argument is clearly articulated, uses art as a novel form of ‘evidence’ and makes for an insightful read.

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16. *Ibid.*, 171.