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The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics

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Book under review: Lee, Robyn. 2018. *The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding. Power, Pleasure, Poetics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

“The art of breastfeeding can take many forms” (186).

While breastfeeding has been traditionally depicted in the prescriptive behaviour of handbooks and health guides, in *The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding*, Robyn Lee conceives it as an ongoing and creative process. In this monograph, Lee moves away from prevalent discussions of breastfeeding versus formula feeding to provide a thorough analysis of the current political, cultural, and social status of breastfeeding while also providing a feminist approach to breastfeeding studies that assesses radical and artistic breastfeeding practices. The book presents a rethinking of nursing based on theoretical grounds to propose a new ethics of breastfeeding that challenges systems that oppress on the basis of gender, race, and/or socioeconomic conditions.

The subtitle, *Power, Pleasure, Poetics*, highlights different aspects of the debate that Lee examines. The author departs from notions of power contained within the two dominant discourses on breastfeeding—the maternal and the medical—to acknowledge the current status of breastfeeding politics embedded within neoliberal politics. The book assesses biopower to analyze the medicalization of breastfeeding through constant advice in governmental health guides, but Lee also highlights the isolation and challenges of subjects who breastfeed. In addition, Lee considers how a strictly maternal approach reifies the “naturalness” of breastfeeding, thus maintaining gender binaries and notion of mothers as the only breastfeeding subjects. Noting the failure of governmental policies and society as a whole to address “the broader social factors that impede breastfeeding,” (67) mainly due to lack of support and initiatives to promote breastfeeding in all social strands, Lee proposes her own theory.

The theoretical background to Lee's ethics of breastfeeding is framed within the works of Michael Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, Luce Irigaray and, to a lesser extent, Donna Haraway. Pleasure is conceived as an alternative to the sexualization of breastfeeding, suggesting that all breastfeeding subjects have the potential to experience it. Following Foucault, Lee advises that the ethical self is capable of experiencing pleasure and being a flexible force of creative transformation. In addition, in keeping with Levinas, Lee states that the social dimension of breastfeeding, which poses all subjects as responsible for feeding the hungry other, is a dimension that can address the isolation of breastfeeding subjects. Irigaray supports Lee's ethics of breastfeeding by stating how different possibilities, such as induced lactation, can have subversive potentiality in opposition to dominant discourses. Throughout the book, Lee emphasizes that language is determinant in constructing a new ethics of breastfeeding. In this regard, she acknowledges the contribution of Foucault, Levinas, and Irigaray and their use of words and poesis. Given the controversies around some of these works, however, especially regarding Levinas, I do question if these are the best theorists to back up the ethics Lee proposes.

On the other hand, Lee also takes a feminist approach in her use of language and subjectivities. Mothers seem the sole focus of recognition as breastfeeding subjects in traditional approaches to breastfeeding, but Lee acknowledges the different possibilities in terms of bodies and entities that can feed babies. Lee shows an extensive knowledge of current debates on breastfeeding and combines these with a feminist approach to social issues in order to create her *Poetics*. Lee achieves her initial purpose of building her ethics and poetics of breastfeeding as supported by radical and artistic performances and projects such as milk banks, induced lactation, *The Lactation Station* or *The Lady Cheese Shop*. Delving into art provides Lee the grounds to speak not only of a theory but of a way to live and understand breastfeeding that moves away from maternal and medical discourses. This is the most significant accomplishment of the book.

Another of Lee's achievements is her departing from the locality of the Canadian situation in her analysis of breastfeeding to foster a theory that can be employed in further discussions of nursing. She assesses the dominant roles of La Leche League and the Canadian health system in prescribing behaviour. This discussion may be thought-provoking for audiences as it can lead them to acknowledge the dominant structures of their own geographical locations, thus fostering construction of a new ethics and politics of breastfeeding that Lee promotes in her overall discussion.

The *Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics* proposes a new perspective on breastfeeding studies, but also contributes to cultural and sociological studies. The book not only enables academics and non-academics to broaden their awareness of issues around nursing, but can also be interpreted as a political manifesto that attempts to subvert the risks, privileges, and pressures that surround breastfeeding. Art is constructed as the means to achieve the new discourse on breastfeeding but it is also a goal in itself, since Lee considers breastfeeding an art that is framed within particular social and cultural contexts. As such, Robyn Lee builds a poetics while she constructs herself as a leading expert on breastfeeding.