
Original Article

Breast-feeding and middle-class privilege: A psychoanalytic analysis of 'breast is best'

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Abstract Rosin's contribution to the April 2009 issue of *The Atlantic* entitled 'The Case Against Breast-feeding', created national outrage by questioning the medical literature on infant feeding upon which the mantra 'breast is best' is based. This article uses Rosin's ambivalence regarding breast-feeding as a way to understand why breast-feeding is a culturally and psychically fraught practice. It explores the rhetoric of breast-feeding advocacy in two contexts: (i) the US government's 2004 National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign and (ii) La Leche League International. I argue that the government campaign deploys a politics characteristic of Jacques Lacan's concept of the Symbolic Order. The approach used by La Leche, by contrast, constitutes a politics based on the logic of what Lacan calls the Imaginary realm. I will argue that breast-feeding promotion requires a politics derived from the logic of what Lacan calls the Real – an approach to which Rosin's piece unexpectedly points us.

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Rosin's contribution to the April 2009 issue of *The Atlantic* entitled 'The Case Against Breast-feeding', created national outrage by questioning the medical literature on infant feeding upon which the mantra 'breast is best' is based. Rosin herself is a mother who has breast-fed two children for longer than the minimum period that the American Association of Pediatrics recommends (and who, at the time of writing *The Atlantic* piece, was still breast-feeding her third child). She indicts what she sees as the guilt-inducing, scare-provoking rhetoric of modern breast-feeding discourse. In particular, she critiques the way that breast-feeding, even more so than eco-friendly

commodities such as wooden toys and organic snacks, has become the ‘real ticket to the club’ of committed, urban, middle class motherhood. She reiterates with particular acuity familiar arguments regarding the labor implications of the classist contemporary rhetoric surrounding breast-feeding when she contends that breast-feeding is ‘a serious time commitment that pretty much guarantees that you will not work in any meaningful way. [The time you spend nursing] adds up to more than half of a working day, everyday, for at least six months [W]hen people say breast-feeding is “free”, I want to hit them with a two-by-four. It’s only free if a woman’s time is worth nothing’ (Rosin, 2009, p. 7). Rosin’s article really pushes buttons, however, not through the vigor of her political economic critique, but through her wistful conclusion. Her attempt to make sense of why she has persisted with breast-feeding in the light of what she comes to see as hyperbolic interpretations of its benefits and its immense attendant difficulties ends on a poignant note: ‘My guess’, she suggests, ‘is something I can’t quite articulate. Breast-feeding does not belong in the realm of facts and hard numbers; it is much too intimate and elemental. ... even part-time, it’s a strain. But I also know that this is probably my last chance to feel warm baby skin up against mine, and one day I will miss it’ (Rosin, 2009, p. 8).

This article will circulate around the tension between Rosin’s confessed failure to adequately articulate an explanation for why she continues to breast-feed and her compelling arguments against breast-feeding, which detail how class privilege stealthily haunts both the discourse and the pragmatics of breast-feeding. The key intervention will be to use Rosin’s struggle to explain her attachment to breast-feeding as a way to understand why breast-feeding is a culturally and psychically fraught practice. In particular, I will argue that a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to analyzing the rhetoric surrounding breast-feeding can bring to light under-appreciated dimensions that supplement a political economic analysis.

Through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, I will argue that the inability to put into language why one breast-feeds should not be seen as a failure on Rosin’s part to find the appropriate words; breast-feeding is an act that stretches the logic of the Symbolic without ascending into the realm of the romantic ineffable. It thus evokes anxiety in participants and spectators alike, a specifically Lacanian variety of anxiety, not born out of a sense of lack, but rather an anxiety that strikes when the lack *required* for the subject’s emergence appears itself to be lacking. In breast-feeding, the necessarily lost object (a role that the breast comes to play) is encountered.

In what follows, I suggest that mainstream breast-feeding advocacy efforts in the United States miss this crucial aspect of breast-feeding, and thus are unable to address the question of why it is such a psychically fraught practice. In order to make this case, I will explore the rhetoric of breast-feeding advocacy in two contexts: (i) the US government’s 2004 National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign and (ii) La Leche League International (LLL). Although both of these

programs have contributed significantly to encouraging breast-feeding, I argue that because they fail to account for the ways in which breast-feeding stages an encounter with the lost object, they each, in their different ways, fail to confront a key obstacle to the widespread acceptance of breast-feeding. In particular, I will argue that the US government campaign deploys a politics based upon the logic of factual representation ('facts and hard numbers'), the realm that Lacan designates the Symbolic Order. The approach used by La Leche, by contrast, constitutes a politics based on the logic of what Lacan calls the Imaginary realm, which appeals to the fantasy of total unity and specular identification. I will suggest that, instead of a politics grounded in the Symbolic or the Imaginary, breast-feeding promotion requires a politics derived from the logic of what Lacan calls the Real (an approach to which Rosin's piece unexpectedly points us). For Lacan, the Real designates the dimension that lies beyond signification, the zone of shades left behind by the repression of the lost object (paradigmatically the breast).

This article thus extends questions raised by previous work on the limitations of breast-feeding advocacy – limitations not only at the level of its efficacy and inclusiveness that Kukla (2006) discusses, but also limitations that, as Badinter (2011) argues, it places upon women's autonomy. In particular, I contribute a psychoanalytic perspective to illuminate breast-feeding not solely in terms of its cultural, political and economic components, but also as a practice with profound psychic dimensions. This approach allows me to extend the analysis beyond the usual question of why women *do not* breast-feed even when it has become a social imperative to do so, to examining the question of why women *do* breast-feed even when that imperative is not persuasive. Through this approach, I aim to not only uncover additional concerns within existing advocacy rhetoric, but also provide new insight into how breast-feeding may resonate with women in ways that have not been explored previously.

The cases I am studying are limited to the two main strands of breast-feeding advocacy in the United States. This does not constitute a major restriction on my analysis, however. As Badinter notes, in Europe advocacy discourse is not greatly different, although there is generally greater compliance with national breast-feeding recommendations than in the United States (a variation frequently attributed to family-friendly governmental policies).¹ In particular, in her polemic against the constraints modern notions of motherhood place upon women, Badinter (2011, pp. 71–72) argues that breast-feeding advocacy campaigns across Europe and North America share an emphasis on breast-feeding as the key marker of a 'good mother' and that, in both the European and North American contexts, appeals to both ecological and economical interests are invoked as supplementary justifications. However, further work is required on the rhetoric of breast-feeding advocacy on a more global scale. This article sets out to provide a possible framework in which such work may be undertaken, work in which the framework itself may, of course, be placed under scrutiny rather than being imposed as some sort of universally appropriate *a priori*.

The National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign and the Limitation of the Symbolic

The National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign can be read psychoanalytically as one among several possible strategies to palliate the anxiety associated with a confrontation with the breast as the paradigmatic lost object (which Lacan situates in the domain of the Real). One of the most effective ways to protect against the anxiety that emerges from the over-proximity of the lost object is to encapsulate it within a symbolic scaffold (Copjec, 1991, p. 28). By building a case for breast-feeding based on rational appeals to facts and figures, the US government breast-feeding campaign attempts to do exactly this: inscribe breast-feeding within the lists of the Symbolic. Copjec (1991), in her account of the 'aura of anxiety that surrounds' eighteenth-century breast-feeding advocacy, argues exactly along these lines; in particular, she asserts that the incorporation of breast-feeding into 'Oedipalized space infuse[s] it with an air of interdiction, of rules, regulations and prescriptions and yet it offers us relief from the constricted, asphyxiating space [of] *zusammenschnueren* ...' (p. 28). Copjec points here to the ways in which the law of the Symbolic can interrupt the suffocating presence of the proximate object.

But the enduring cultural unease surrounding breast-feeding indicates that these efforts to claim breast-feeding for the Symbolic have not been fully successful. As Kukla (2006) confirms, breast-feeding rates within the United States 'fall well below the targets' identified in the government campaign, as well as being 'well below the rates in all other developed countries' (p. 160). Consumer culture in the United States provides telling examples of this lack of success. The specific anxiety surrounding exposure of one's breasts during public breast-feeding has spawned a whole industry of concealment products. Perhaps the most well known of these products is the 'hooter hider', an 'award-winning nursing cover, [which] was born out of necessity when ... [its creator] found nursing her infant daughter in public challenging' (*Bébé Au Lait*). But the products fail to allay anxiety. Indeed, their continuing commercial success is evidence for and thus depends on exactly this failure.

A more recent product, the 'booby beanie', has recently garnered considerable media attention. The 'booby beanie', a knitted baby hat that looks like a giant breast with a protruding nipple-shaped top, seems to openly mock the imperative to conceal the breast. When worn on the head of a nursing baby, the 'booby beanie' caricatures the breast upon which the baby sucks. In Žižek's sense, then, we may think of the 'booby beanie' as contributing to the ideologically subversive act of 'overconformity' (Krips, 2007, p. 6). By conspicuously announcing and exaggerating the object it dutifully conceals, the 'booby beanie' performs over-literal attachment to the 'law'. The 'booby beanie', thus, calls the bluff of the proscription to keep the nursing breast concealed by following the injunction to the letter, while violating its spirit. Such acts of overconformity, Žižek (1997,

pp. 18–22) argues, work to undermine the law by making explicit its premises that only function if they remain implicit.

Copjec offers an explanation for this failure: Symbolic incorporation, she tells us, is necessary but not sufficient to keep at bay the anxiety triggered by an encounter with the lost object (and with the Real, more generally). An additional move is required:

In order for the symbolic to evict the real it is necessary to say that the real is absented, to declare its impossibility The symbolic, in other words, must include the negation of what it is not [which] means ... that the symbolic will not be filled only with itself, since it will also contain this surplus element of negation.

(Copjec, 1991, p. 28)

Copjec (1991) contends that the only way that the Symbolic can perform the necessary act of ‘negation’ is through repetition, in particular, through the ‘signifier’s repeated attempt – and failure – to designate itself’ (p. 28). She then goes on to suggest that a key way in which the Symbolic works to include the rejection of impossible elements is accomplished by prohibiting that which is already impossible.

An example of this approach can be found in Žižek’s observations regarding the paradoxical structure of the cultural rhetoric surrounding child sexuality. Here, he claims, we encounter the ‘prohibition of something which is already in itself impossible ... [Childhood sexuality, we are told] does not exist, children are innocent beings, that is why we must control them strictly and fight child sexuality’ (Žižek, 1989, p. 164). The prohibition, thus, inscribes ‘its “repressed” point of reference’ through its excessive and senseless repetition of the impossible (Žižek, 1997, p. 7).

In the case of the government advocacy campaign, we see that the impossible is not so much prohibited through its repetition, but rather required. That is, in acknowledging and defending against breast-feeding’s many challenges, the government campaign *mandates* rather than prohibits the impossible. In particular, the National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign does this by drawing upon romanticized notions of the mother–child bond (derived from the Imaginary zone of fantasy) in order to supplement the appeal to rationality. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of breast-feeding as a way of experiencing ‘joyful bonding with your baby’ and ‘perfect nutrition only you can provide’ (National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign, 2014). The Campaign’s website announces, for example, that ‘many people feel warmth, love, and relaxation just from sitting next to a mother and baby during breastfeeding’ (National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign, 2014).

The campaign, thus, frames the sentimentalized (or what Lacan calls ‘The Imaginary’) in terms of the pragmatic (Symbolic), by pointing toward the

practical challenges of breast-feeding: physiological complications, the need to return to work and the lack of community support. But the campaign also replies to these practical challenges by listing pragmatic advantages such as ‘cost savings’ and ‘health benefits for both mother and baby’ (National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign, 2014). By thus acknowledging breast-feeding to be a logistically and culturally complex practice, affected profoundly by the dynamics of class and privilege, and by providing encouragement and useful (hard-to-come-by) information about ways to navigate its various difficulties, the campaign goes some way toward easing the anxiety associated with breast-feeding. But, I now argue, the two contrasting strategies that the government program deploys for framing breast-feeding – the sentimentalized (Imaginary) and the pragmatic (Symbolic) – fail to account for its psychic dimensions, and thus fail to disperse the anxiety surrounding it. This, I will argue, is evident in both the impossibility of the constraints that the campaign implicitly imposes upon breast-feeding and the residual discomfort that accompanies it, both by the mother and by the public.

The campaign makes gestures to encourage women to feel comfortable when breast-feeding in public. We are reminded that ‘it isn’t possible to stay home all the time and you can feel free to feed your baby while out and about. You should be proud of your commitment! Plus, no bottles and formula means fewer supplies to pack!’ (National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign, 2014). Here the campaign quite rightly indicates that a policy of exclusive domesticity would be impossible. But in its place they implicitly install another impossible requirement: one’s breasts must never be exposed during the act. In the light of the unpredictability and frequency of babies’ feeding needs, a mother and baby would have to stay home all the time in order to be certain of avoiding breast-feeding in public. As Hausman (2003), author of *Mother’s Milk: Breastfeeding Controversies in American Culture* pointedly remarks, ‘to have breast-feeding promoted by medicine and the government with the social stipulation that one must not appear to be doing what one is doing is a tall order indeed’ (2007, p. 490).

The importance of discretion in public breast-feeding is illustrated by the campaign’s website, which provides a list of suggestions for feeding without exposing the breast. Their suggestions include: using a ‘special breastfeeding blanket around your shoulders’; ‘breastfeed[ing] your baby in a sling ... it makes it easier to keep your baby comforted and close to you’; ‘slip[ping] into a women’s lounge or dressing room to breastfeed’; and ‘practice at home so that you can ensure you are only being as revealing as you feel comfortable with [sic]’ (National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign, 2014). It is worth noting that these are presented as suggestions only for allaying the potential discomfort of the nursing mother. Awkwardness about exposure is rarely located on the side of the public (they, after all, should be gleaning cozy vibes from being in the presence of the feeding dyad!). Hausman takes up this question of the public’s hidden stakes

in discrete forms of breast-feeding. She recounts that often when people express the importance for discretion while breast-feeding, their

comment is ... followed up by a description of a woman who was not discreet in her public nursing, which is generally perceived to be an embarrassment for the nursing woman, rather than for the storyteller, who is clearly the one experiencing the embarrassment. But why insist that one is embarrassed for another?

(Hausman, 2007, p. 503)

Hausman answers her own question by explaining that this displacement of embarrassment is a ‘blaming gesture’. I suggest that it is more than that. In addition to functioning as an act of blame or as a disingenuous remark deployed to conceal one’s own discomfort, embarrassment for another performs a fundamental psychic and cultural function. It acts simultaneously as a marker of one’s disturbing encounter with the Real of the lost object and a defense for withstanding that disturbance. Embarrassment, in particular one’s *announcement* of feeling embarrassment at what amounts to another’s proximity to the Real, serves to protect one’s own sense of being at a safe distance. The frequency of remarks of the sort to which Hausman draws our attention indicates that breast-feeding confronts spectators – even ones who are in favor of it – with an unsymbolizable dimension from which they seek cover. In this context it is noteworthy that, although unease regarding the possibility of exposure during public breast-feeding is one of the most frequently cited reasons women give for why they stop or never start breast-feeding, the campaign website does not make a more significant contribution to allaying this fear by emphasizing women’s legal protection. In particular, rather than underscoring a woman’s legal authorization, the campaign touts empowerment based solely on one’s personal choice and conviction.²

Using individualist rhetoric, the government campaign acts as a cheerleader, encouraging mothers to embrace their personal decision to breast-feed. For example, when it comes to the category of addressing difficulties surrounding breast-feeding in public, mothers are told that ‘it is important to believe in yourself and your choice. Remind yourself that you can succeed and wear your confidence!’ (National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign, 2014). Such individualist rhetoric warrants ideological, and specifically, feminist critique. But more than that, it serves as an example of how the campaign shies away from achieving its own stated goals. In particular, although the narrative section of the government website encourages a woman to feel comfortable breast-feeding in public, it fails to detail the extent of the legislation that protects a mother’s right to do so.

Thus, it appears at first that the government campaign merely mandates the minimally permissible, encouraging the most conservative notion of what is

already culturally acceptable. Yet, on closer inspection, their emphasis on tips for discreet feeding, coupled with the omission of detailing codified, legal protections, implicitly reinforces the taboo of the exposed breast. And as the erratic and squirmy movements of hungry babies mean that even women with a deep commitment to discretion (swathed in protective ‘hooter hiders’) will expose their breasts, it seems again that breast-feeding becomes the site of an impossible requirement.

Another anomaly accompanies public reactions to exposure during breast-feeding. The amount of bodily exposure that occurs in most instances of breast-feeding is significantly less than the accepted revelation of the female breast in mainstream media and culture. Such disproportionate reactions might suggest that, rather than the exposed breast itself, what is dreaded is the exposure of the female breast in a desexualized, nurturing context. This proposition sheds light on the following puzzle: why do dress codes allow the female breast to be largely exposed as long as the nipple is concealed? Nipples, rather than their surrounding mounding flesh, are shared by both men and women. Thus, if the goal is to eliminate a sexualized view of the breast one might expect that codes of decency would require that the skin surrounding the nipple be concealed, rather than the nipple itself. That this expectation fails to be met suggests that the sight of a woman’s nipple is unsettling, not so much because of any sexual connotations, but rather because of its functional role as an orifice for milk.

The rhetoric of the government initiative surrounding public breast-feeding is permeated with such anomalies that, in psychoanalytic terms, amount to a logic of disavowal: ‘I know that x, but even so not x’. Disavowal enables one to cope with a reality that is too threatening to fully incorporate into our consciousness. One always and already ‘knows’ the thing that one disavows (or else there would be no need to disavow it), but because one cannot comfortably inhabit that knowledge one disavows it. Disavowal enables us to live with knowledge that would otherwise be too threatening to bear. We see exactly such a structure of disavowal in the case of breast-feeding: ‘we know very well’ that of course it is acceptable if the breast becomes exposed during breast-feeding (how could it never not?), ‘but even so’ one should avoid this from ever happening (as it would make both the mother and on-lookers uncomfortable); ‘We know very well’ that breast-feeding is a vital and loving act of nurturance, ‘but even so’ I do not want to see what is really taking place. The prevalence of such disavowals signals that, in breast-feeding, we are at risk of an encounter with the Real – an occurrence that imperils the illusion of symbolic closure.

In short, none of the suggestions made by the government campaign achieve what Copjec requires for enabling subjects to cope with brushes with the Real: namely, the prohibition of the impossible. Instead, the campaign offers a series of ultimately unsatisfactory defenses against a Real that always and already returns in the displaced form of new challenges and sources of anxiety.

LLLI and the Impossible Return to the Imaginary

Founded in 1956 as an alternative resource to the dominant ‘medical model’ of breast-feeding, LLLI remains the leading organization for promoting and supporting breast-feeding world-wide through advice imparted ‘from mother to mother’. As they describe, ‘Our Mission is to help mothers worldwide to breast-feed through mother-to-mother support, encouragement, information and education, and to promote a better understanding of breast-feeding as an important element in the healthy development of the baby and mother’ (LLLI, 2008). Although they occasionally offer tips for feeding ‘discreetly’, the tenor of their rhetoric is distinct in their commitment to advocating ‘complete breast-feeding’, a view of breast-feeding as a ‘relational process’ (Blum, 1999, p. 65). For La Leche, not only is the mother’s milk essential for the baby, but the mother’s continual physical presence is also vital. They advocate the mother’s ‘minimal separation from the baby, few supplemental bottles (if any), and feeding on the baby’s demand’ (Blum, 1999, p. 65). Their commitment to privileging the physical connection between mother and child has led the League to frown upon any sort of ‘substitutes for the bodily comfort’ that the mother can provide, including not only apparatuses associated with the baby’s oral needs such as ‘bottles and pacifiers’, but also the use of equipment such as ‘playpens and carriages’ (Blum, 1999, p. 65).

Like the government’s National Breast Feeding Initiative, La Leche mandates, rather than prohibits, the impossible. But, rather than operate through an appeal to the Symbolic (the realm governed by the logic of factual signification), La Leche promotes breast-feeding in terms of its connection to the Imaginary realm (governed by the fantasy of unity and specular identification). And, similar to the government campaign, the requirement for what ‘counts’ as ‘true’ breast-feeding within the La Leche’s framework is virtually unachievable, particularly within the US context where, at best, women are given only 12 weeks of unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act³ (Blum, 1999, p. 53). As a result, La Leche has come to dispense advice on pumping milk for babies to consume when the mother is not present, but this practice is nearly always framed as one that should be used only in cases where it is absolutely necessary for a mother to return to work. In other words, financial necessity rather than professional fulfillment is taken as the relevant reason. Along these lines, La Leche encourages families to explore ways of cutting household expenses by providing money-saving tips in order to spare women the need to return to work. As Hausman (2003) describes, ‘because the practice of breast-feeding promoted by the League is so all-consuming, the authors have a difficult time incorporating a positive assessment of working-mothers within its purview’ (pp. 174–175).

La Leche risks excluding women who are unable to weather the financial implications of forgoing paid work outside the home or who work for reasons that transcend instrumental economic rationale. But, their acknowledgment that exclusive breast-feeding is often incompatible with working outside of the home

does draw attention to the economic privilege required for sustaining exclusive and attached breast-feeding. Such recognition of the economic toll of breast-feeding backs up Rosin's violent attack upon the dominant discourse that perpetuates the myth that breast-feeding is free: '[w]hen people say breast-feeding is "free," I want to hit them with a two-by-four. It's only free if a woman's time is worth nothing' (Rosin, 2009, p. 7).

Kellymom, a prominent and frequently cited internet resource for information on breast-feeding, features a page that serves as a representative example of this dominant breast-feeding advocacy rhetoric. Under the heading, 'financial costs of not breastfeeding ... or cost benefits of breastfeeding', Kellymom enumerates the money saved by not buying formula, both in raw figures and in terms of commodities that can be purchased for the 'equivalent buying power', of 'the cheapest formula costs' (Kellymom, 2011). For example, by the end of day two of her baby's life, an exclusively breast-feeding mother has saved enough money to buy a 'video rental, book, or magazine', by 2 months the savings amount to 'new clothes for mom, microwave oven, or baby play yard', by 7 months she has saved enough to accrue a 'new dining room set' and by 9 months of exclusive breast-feeding, she has saved the equivalent of a 'washer/dryer or 3 night Bahamas cruise for mom, dad & baby' (Kellymom, 2011).

In her cost-benefit analysis, the writer of kellymom limits the costs of breast-feeding to a tally of 'optional' aids one can purchase, such as nursing bras, dresses, pillow, stool and breast-pump. Commodities appear here as the only 'costs' of breast-feeding; the labor cost (as Rosin laments) remains invisible. In short, it seems clear that the argument for exclusive breast-feeding as a 'cost-effective' practice (apparently aimed at a woman for whom such savings would matter) works paradoxically to naturalize the class privilege necessary for a woman to opt out of paid labor.

Although the La Leche's insistence on the importance of the mother's physical engagement with the child provides a refreshing antidote to the 'disembodied' rhetoric of the government campaign, and the dominant discourse with which it is aligned, it falls into similar traps. Blum, in her path-breaking book, *At the Breast: Ideologies of Breastfeeding and Motherhood in the Contemporary United States*, laments the turn to 'disembodied motherhood' that attends dominant discourses promoting breast-feeding in the twentieth century United States. In Blum's view, the government campaign, with its emphasis on providing working women with opportunities and physical spaces to pump milk (rather than on extending the duration of paid work leave or the construction of on-premise child-care facilities), 'fetishizes' mother's milk. 'Through this fetish', Blum (1999) argues, 'the mother is disembodied, as if she *is* the milk; by providing this milk, she still qualifies as an exclusive mother, *as if* mother and baby are monogamous and physically tied' (pp. 53–55).

I will suggest that, more than fetishizing mother's milk, La Leche winds up creating a fetish out of maternal embodiment itself. In Freudian terms, a fetish

operates through the mechanism of disavowal, described earlier, that enables a subject to cope with a difficult reality. To be specific, a fetish enables a subject to simultaneously hold together a conscious knowledge (in Octavio Mannoni's formula, 'I know') and the belief that it is not really so ('nevertheless ...') (Johnston, 2004, p. 264). A fetish thus operates as a liminal zone between illusion and reality; it provides a subject with a comforting (but illusory) substitute for an unbearable/impossible reality. How, then, can maternal embodiment itself take on the role of fetish? By emphasizing the need for the continuous presence and unity with the mother's body, *even outside of the feeding relationship*, I suggest that the La Leche's mandates surrounding maternal embodiment enable us to locate a key anxiety precipitated by the act of breast-feeding. In particular, in its advocacy of the continual bodily co-presence of mother and child beyond the context of feeding, La Leche can be seen as (unintentionally) attempting the impossible: reduplicating the intertwining of bodily boundaries that necessarily occurs *in utero*, the loss of which (according to Freud) constitutes the originary (repressed) trauma.

In other words, La Leche's call for the virtually uninterrupted continuation of the mother-child dyad works to deny the bodily separation of the birth event, and, in so doing, appeals (more or less covertly) to the fantasy of primordial unity, associated with the Lacanian realm of the Imaginary. Unlike the Symbolic, which attempts to mediate the Real by installing distance between the subject and the over-proximate object, the strategy of the Imaginary involves creating the illusion of unification with the always and already lost object. In a sense, the Imaginary works to create a retrospective illusion that the object once had a definite presence and wholeness, and then offers a form of return to this originary state. Whereas the government Campaign's appeal to science, medicine and legal rights attempts to inscribe breast-feeding within the safety of the Symbolic realm, La Leche tries to mitigate the anxiety of breast-feeding by an appeal to this Imaginary unity.

In particular, La Leche performs a disavowal of the discomforting reality that the two discrete bodies of mother and child are nonetheless physically dependent on one another:⁴ we know of course that the mother and child are no longer physically tied, but we nonetheless act as if they were. The imaginary reduplication of the fetal relationship that is enabled by this disavowal helps to mask the excessive element of breast-feeding. In short, La Leche downplays the rhetoric of 'empowerment by choice' that the government campaign pushes, and instead situates the post-birth feeding relationship exclusively within the framework of the Imaginary – as continuous with the fetal-feeding relationship. Such a maneuver helps make breast-feeding appear as both necessary and inevitable, rather than a symbolically infused, rationally calculated choice.

The continued bodily connection between mother and child, even outside of breast-feeding, that is involved in La Leche's vision of 'embodied motherhood' works to disembody the mother by denying her the full range of bodily

movements, connections and enjoyments that are incompatible with bodily attachment to the child. The League provides a compensatory rhetoric for this loss by ‘gently endor[s] breast-feeding pleasures’ and ‘sensuality’ (Blum, 1999, pp. 66, 98). Blum recounts a passage from the most recent edition of La Leche’s book, *The Womanly Art of Breast-feeding* (2004), cited in Blum (1999, p. 98), in which the sensual side of breast-feeding is addressed more explicitly:

Breast-feeding is intended to be a pleasurable experience for a mother. A woman who breastfeeds with pride and satisfaction is aware that breast-feeding is a sensual experience. She also knows that this is a perfectly healthy and normal aspect of her sexuality.

(cited in Blum, 1999, p. 98)

Here by privileging the depth and range of the mother’s physical connection to the child, maternal embodiment is presented as what amounts to a fetish that enables the transformation of the unbearable Real (the impossible *return* to the pre-symbolic unity of the mother-child dyad) into a bearable reality (the *continuing* bodily bond).

In sum, I am arguing that breast-feeding threatens to confront us with an unbearable excess: namely, the bond of nurturance that, occurring invisibly *in utero*, appears excessive when it is no longer biologically required. The insistence on maintaining other forms of uninterrupted contact between the baby and mother helps to lessen one’s sense of this excess. Why? Because when a mother is able to come and go, when she can pursue desires beyond the child, the Imaginary illusion of mother-child total unity is irredeemably disrupted. In this context, La Leche’s requirement of ‘complete breastfeeding’ may be read as a mandate for the impossible *return* to mother/child unity. By seeking to create *continuity* with the mother-child dyad, their program works to undermine the uncanniness of encountering this impossible return.

Breast-Feeding and the Real

In the light of these arguments, we can now return to Copjec’s argument that Oedipalizing an anxiety-laden act works to assuage anxiety in the specific context of breast-feeding. In particular, I will question whether, in the case of breast-feeding, the introduction of the Symbolic, as in the government campaign, might precipitate rather than palliate anxiety. Copjec’s suggestion for allaying the anxiety of the Real via its ‘domestication’ in the Symbolic seems predicated on the usual assumption that the Symbolic realm operates to smooth over the fissures created by the Real. But La Leche’s appeal to the Imaginary realm in calling for continuous post-birth physical binding of the mother and child prompts us to

consider a complication in this standard position. The analysis of La Leche's rhetoric points to the prospect that in the case of breast-feeding the arrival of the Symbolic itself is what must be diminished in order to keep anxiety at bay. Such a proposal requires us to re-evaluate Copjec's thesis. Specifically, it raises the possibility that breast-feeding presents us with a fundamental exception to the usual appeal to the Symbolic as a help in coping with the threat of the Real.

It is tempting to respond to this point by looking to the Imaginary as a means of allaying the anxiety of breast-feeding. And indeed, the Imaginary register presents us with a different path for an 'impossible attempt to escape the various manifestations of the Real that threatens disintegration of one kind or another: trauma, loss, anxiety and so on' than the one offered by the Symbolic (Daly, 2004). Unlike the Symbolic, which attempts to mediate the Real by installing distance between the subject and the over-proximate object, the strategy of the Imaginary involves creating the illusion of unification with the always and already lost object. In a sense, the Imaginary works to create a retrospective illusion that the object once had a definite presence and wholeness, and then offers a form of return to an originary state of unity with it. Whereas the government initiative's appeal to science, medicine and legal rights attempts to inscribe breast-feeding within the safety of the Symbolic realm, La Leche, I have argued, tries to mitigate the anxiety of breast-feeding by exactly such an appeal to the Imaginary. That is, rather than try to distance us from the over-proximity of the lost object, La Leche's rhetoric invokes the fantasy of a return to pre-Symbolic Imaginary unity with the lost object.

In sum, whereas the government campaign operates along the same lines as the eighteenth century breast-feeding advocacy that Copjec (1991, p. 33) analyzes, by 'seek[ing] to submit the child not to the mother but – quite to the contrary – to the social law', La Leche's rhetoric attempts to submit the child solely to the mother by mitigating the unwelcome intrusion of 'law'. Both of these approaches, I have argued, are unsuccessful in mitigating the anxiety provoked by the surfacing of the Real. In what follows, I suggest that these two strategies – one deploying the resources of the Symbolic and the other drawing upon the mythos of Imaginary wholeness – face a unique challenge in the case of breast-feeding, a suggestion that also points to an exception to Copjec's thesis that Oedipalization (introducing the Symbolic) is a step toward assuaging the anxiety created by encountering the Real.

A Lacanian account of the role of the lost object, as what he calls the *objet petit a* (of which the breast figures as an example *par excellence*), sheds light on why breast-feeding provides us with an exceptional case for the inevitability of failure on the part of both the Symbolic and Imaginary to ease anxiety. The *objet petit a* operates as a property of the body from which we must separate ourselves in order to become subjects (Copjec, 1991, p. 34). As an instantiation of the *objet petit a*, the breast functions as just such an 'extimate' object – an object that is 'simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; in a word, it is

unheimlich' (Dolar, 1991, p. 6). But the temporal status and ontological consistency of the *object petit a* is trickier than this initial account reveals. The *object petit a* is not simply the object whose eventual renunciation marks the subject's emergence. It is an object that is *created* by the subject's entry to the Symbolic. It follows the logic of the future anterior in that it 'will [retroactively] become what it was The Lacanian answer to the question, from where does the repressed return, is then paradoxically: from the future' (Žižek, 1991, p. 188). To put this in concrete terms, it is only through the subject's emergence into the Symbolic that the breast retrospectively becomes an *object petit a*. Thus, the breast-as-object is not in any romantic sense ineffably beyond signification. Rather, as we will see, the complication it poses for signification arises because it is foundational to signification. It cannot be properly signified due to its function as the object whose retrospective loss becomes the *cause* of signification. Its loss propels the child to enter the symbolic realm and accede into subjectivity. Likewise, the breast as *object petit a* is not the object of desire for the subject, but rather the object whose lack *causes* the subject to desire – inaugurating the subject's (futile) quest for an object to satisfy her perceived lack.

As Harari emphasizes, this Lacanian notion of the breast as lost object differs from Melanie Klein's view of the breast as a fully present object whose eventual loss influences a subject's subsequent psychic life. The Kleinian position holds that the subject and object once co-existed, until the moment at which the object is no longer present, such as in the transition from breast-feeding to weaning. By contrast, for Lacan, the breast never existed as an object, although it was present; it can only become an object – *object petit a* – at the moment at which it no longer exists for the subject. As a lost object, the breast emerges not as a marker of the subject's separation from the mother, but rather of division internal to the subject her/himself (Harari, 2001, p. 113). Brousse (2007) emphasizes that 'when one speaks of an object, one is speaking of a lost object' (p. 2). The breast, thus, must be appreciated for its role in marking a liminal dimension that is neither clearly the property of the mother nor that of the child. In Harari's (2001) cogent description, it comes to function as an *object petit a* through 'a corporeal automutilation from which the subject is separated, "in a matter which is to a certain extent internal to the sphere of its own existence" with the aim of thus being able to constitute itself' (p. 190). This insight highlights why the romantic notion of mother–child symbiosis, offered to us by appealing to the Imaginary, is of little comfort. An appeal to Platonic complementarity – to re-uniting with one's 'other half' – cannot heal the rift of internal division. The subject is not missing an 'other', but rather a fragment of its self.

In Lacanian terms, human beings must sacrifice the 'immediacy of ... *jouissance*, as well as access to that primordial object of completion which is the mother' in order to emerge as fully fledged subjects (Dolar, 1991, p. 15). The Symbolic both precipitates and compensates for this loss. In the Imaginary the baby lacks nothing, but must cope with its utter dependence on the mother by

imagining that it is as ‘indispensable to the mother as she is to it’ (Lapsley and Westlake, 1990, p. 72). Only when the child senses that the mother has needs of her own and experiences itself as having needs that are not met does the child accede to enter into the symbolic world, in the hope of finding what it lost. As Fink puts it:

if nourishment is never missing, if the desired warmth is never lacking, why would the child take the trouble to speak? As Lacan says ... ‘what is most anxiety producing for the child is when ... there is no possibility of lack, when its mother is constantly on its back.’ Without lack, the subject can never come into being.

(Fink, 1995, p. 103)

Lack, therefore, enters onto the scene as a *cause* of the subject’s entry to the Symbolic, not solely as its *effect*. It is, then, the lack of this lack – felt when the ‘lost’ object appears to have returned – that threatens to devastate the security of the objective world. The unbearable pleasure of *jouissance* turns out to be the price the subject pays for grounding in the objective world. In the face of this necessary but hefty sacrifice, the encounter with an entity (the breast-feeding mother–child dyad) that appears to have access to direct *jouissance* – that appears as the impossible ‘unbarred’ subject – becomes unbearable.

I suggest that our customary rhetoric surrounding weaning implicitly divulges these Lacanian truths; in particular, it reveals the intolerability of an encounter with the impossibility of a subject who has entered the symbolic without having paid the price of *jouissance*. It is customary to say glibly that breast-feeding should end ‘when the kid can ask for it’. But why? Why is the acquisition of speech an appropriate indicator of the need to wean, any more so than a variety of other developmental milestones? Why is the image of a talking, breast-feeding subject so unsettling? My guess is that this conventional wisdom guards us from encountering the impossible Real that accompanies breastfeeding: the appearance of a fully fledged subject who has not sacrificed immediate *jouissance*.

Politics

I conclude by considering what sort of political approach might be most effective for breast-feeding advocacy. The government approach is dominated by a politics of the Symbolic, which attempts to distance us from the Real by embedding breast-feeding within the rational world of facts and figures. LLLI draws heavily upon the logic of the Imaginary, which aims to domesticate the Real through an appeal to the mythos of primordial incorporation. What is absent from both of these discourses surrounding breast-feeding is what Daly calls a ‘politics of the

Real'. Such an approach does not aim to negate or incorporate the impossible object, but rather endeavors to engage with the ways in which the persistent existence of this disruptive dimension is fundamental to our sense of reality. It involves inhabiting the recognition that the Symbolic order is itself founded on impossibility and that any appeal to its totality is an illusion. The appearance of Symbolic wholeness is produced only through the exclusion of objects that challenge its consistency. In particular, the Real must be excluded for reality to exist. A politics of the Real must face this exclusion, and, in particular, acknowledge that the Other (the Symbolic world) is necessarily lacking. Thus, by contrast with frequent characterizations of the Real as a terrifying Thing that *causes* the symbolic system to stumble, Lacan emphasizes that the Real is the *effect* of the constitutive failure of the symbolic to flawlessly render reality.

Although largely read as a manifesto against breast-feeding, perhaps Rosin's *Atlantic* article contributes to such a project of breast-feeding advocacy from the side of the Real. Rosin both demonstrates the shakiness of the scientific literature upon which breast-feeding advocacy draws and dismantles the romantic appeal to mother-child symbiosis through a devastating political-economic critique. What she is left with is the 'irrational' truth that none of this has compromised her own desire to continue to breast-feed.

Here, I suggest, Rosin's unexpected conclusion embodies the Lacanian notion that 'truth' exists at the point where knowledge fails. Verhaeghe powerfully captures this Lacanian distinction between knowledge (which exists in the realm of the Symbolic) and truth (which is a property of the Real):

[there is a] difference between knowledge and something beyond knowledge, something that belongs to another register, other than the symbolic order there is something that cannot be put into words, something for which words are lacking the essential characteristic of truth is that it confronts us with the ultimate point where knowledge about desire ... can no longer be put into words This dimension beyond the signifier is the Lacanian real.

(2001, pp. 38–39)

Against expectation, therefore, Rosin's piece might turn out to provide one of the most compelling public accounts of how breast-feeding can be appreciated for its engagement with the Real. Through the pursuit of a desire that she cannot 'quite articulate', Rosin engages with the irrational passions that exceed the romantic image of mother-child symbiosis and are antithetical to her 'knowledge' of the exaggerations of breast-feeding's benefits. Rosin's 'The Case Against Breast-Feeding' disrupts the symbolic closure that it seeks to perform and, in so doing, touches profoundly on the Real that propels one to act according to one's desire. This is not the ineffable Real that romanticized readings of Lacan foreground, but rather a Real that, in its disruptive effects upon the Symbolic

order, opens up a space in which new ways of ordering the world can be entertained. This is not a positively articulated alternative, perhaps, but rather a leap into a new domain of thinking, away from established ideological patterns.

About the Author

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Notes

- 1 It is also worth noting that within Europe there is considerable variation in breast-feeding statistics, with Scandinavian countries engaging in near total conformity with governmental regulations for breast-feeding compliance and Ireland and France representing the lowest levels of breast-feeding compliance in Europe.
- 2 Breast-feeding is permissible anywhere that a woman and her child are permitted to be; several US states have put in place explicit provisions for protecting breast-feeding from public indecency laws, even if the nipple is exposed. This information is omitted from the narrative content of the government website, but they do provide links to these laws. It is perhaps noteworthy that the sites to which they direct us for this information are sponsored by La Leche League International.
- 3 The National Breastfeeding Campaign minimizes the severe inadequacies of the Family and Medical Leave Act through the use of voluntaristic rhetoric. They blithely advise: 'Take as many weeks off as you can. At least six weeks of leave can help you recover from childbirth and settle into a good breastfeeding routine. Twelve weeks is even better'.
- 4 Ann Oakley (2007) alerts us to exactly this reality when she adds breast-feeding to her list of conditions of embodiment that she terms 'two-in-one' bodies, such as pregnancy and conjoined twins, which deliver a blow to the myth of bodily integrity.

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