The Romance and Science of 'Breast is Best': Discursive Contradictions and Contexts of Breast-feeding Choices

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We argue that a woman's decision to breast-feed or not is overdetermined by two discursive complexes we label "the romance of the natural mother" and "the science of breast-feeding." These complexes incorporate socio-historical articulations of motherhood, female sexuality, medicine, science, and advertising. Taken together, they dictate the performative possibilities of "normal" and "moral" breast-feeding. In problematizing normal, moral articulations, we offer alternative possibilities for conceiving and performing breast-feeding.

Keywords: Breast-feeding, female sexuality, natural motherhood, science

In August 1997, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a national "breast is best" campaign to encourage American women to breast-feed their infants. We argue that this campaign and others like it are part of a complex of historically shifting discursive relations linking mothers, morality, nature, and science in Western cultural discourses. We trace out some of these relations to illustrate the difficult contradictions American women must confront when they decide whether "breast is best." We begin by identifying breast-feeding as a contradictory cultural signifier and then trace these contradictions in competing discourse traditions, one that constructs breast-feeding as "natural" and the other that constructs breast-feeding as a subject of science and medicine. We argue that the "choice" made by individual mothers to breast-feed or not is enmeshed in the point-counterpoint dynamics of these discourses.

If, following Butler, we believe that gender is performative and that it has no ontological status apart from its ultimately contingent "stylized repetition of acts" (140), then the significance of these discourses of breast-feeding stems from their inscription and disciplining of maternal bodies. They dictate, and are instantiated by, performances that reinforce binary constructions of gender. Yet, as Butler points out, constructions of gender can never be fully internalized, not only because the internal is merely a "surface signification," but also because gender norms are "finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody" (141). Given this ontological instability, performative maternal identities and dualistic discourses of breast-feeding can be problematized to entertain alternative performances and discursive struggles. Our conclusion promotes breast-feeding as an opportunity to expand the repertoire of women's alternatives beyond the reductionistic "choice" over whether "breast is best."

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Breast-feeding is a loaded signifier. Not only does this practice evoke positive cultural images of maternal devotion, moral rectitude, and nutritional quality; simultaneously, it evokes negative cultural images of female sexuality, immorality, and debased bodily functions. These potent images are locked in an ongoing struggle over the value, status, and control of women’s bodies and subjectivities (Gatens). It is this struggle that contextualizes an individual woman’s “choice” to breast-feed. Although contemporary social research has identified several contributing factors in this decision—maternal health, maternal employment, infant temperament, degree of social support (Carter; Maclean)—we hold that discursive tensions frame the nature of the “choice” (and whether there will be one or not).

From a discursive perspective, the “choice” about breast-feeding evokes a central dualism facing women in Western culture. As Young states it, women in Western culture are confronted with a “choice” between two subjectivities: “womany power—the nurturing, competent, self-less mother, always sacrificing, the soul of goodness; or the fiesty, voluptuous vamp with the power of attraction, leading victims down the road of pleasure, sin, and danger” (197). This mother-vamp duality is discursively rampant, manifested in further dualities such as madonna/whore, altruistic mother/devouring mother, or asexual nurturer/erotic seductress. Further, they map “onto a dichotomy of good/bad, pure/impure” (Young 197) that articulates to dominant moral and social values.

Young casts the tensions of these dichotomies as affecting the ultimate undecidability of breasts and breast-feeding. She argues that breasts are “a scandal” because they problematize the patriarchal division between motherhood and sexuality and nipples “are taboo because they are quite literally, physically, functionally undecidable in the split between motherhood and sexuality” (199). The undecidable character of the female breast is at issue as states enact “breast-feeding exemptions” to obscenity laws that prohibit women from exposing their breasts in public—the word “nipple” has been exorcised from statutes in Michigan and Florida (see Barkhuis; Mahtesian). Clearly, breasts are a “scandal” for the body politic (Gatens).

Stallybrass and White draw out the implications of such embodied scandals for demarcating social-symbolic distinctions with political significance. Their own focus is the emergence of the European bourgeoisie and they argue that, in representations of body, literature, society, and place, this socio-historical identity was organized by a high-low duality. The politics of such a duality are energized not only by the threat of the low but by its desirability, the simultaneous evocation of repugnance and fascination that binds whatever is represented as low to whatever has been cast as high within a particular socio-cultural formation. Following Stallybrass and White, we argue that the dualities of breast-feeding are organized around a high-low tension as exalted and debased representations of breast-feeding bodies, practices, and social policies. These representational tensions contextualize a woman’s decision to breast-feed and render what appears to be an individual choice into a socio-cultural dilemma.

We illustrate the complex tensions among these representations by focusing on two historically embedded discourses whose contradictory injunctions continue to impact contemporary women’s interpretations and valuations of breast-feeding: the romance of the “natural mother” and the science of breast-feeding.
The Romance of the Natural Mother

The discourse we label as a "romance of the natural mother" supports breastfeeding as the natural fulfillment of maternal duty and capacities. This complex is represented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Romanticist philosopher-essayist, when he writes in *Emile* about the "depravity" of mothers who despise their duty to breast-feed:

> Do you wish to bring everyone back to his first duties? Begin with mothers. You will be surprised by the changes you will produce. Everything follows successively from this first depravity. The whole moral order degenerates... But let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature's sentiments will be awakened in every heart, the state will be repeopled. This first point, this point alone, will bring everything back together. (46)

In Rousseau's vision, the moral order, natural order, and God's order are condensed in the figure of the breastfeeding mother. This condensation elevates "nature" as the medium of moral and social rectitude.

Harley argues that maternal breastfeeding by upper-class women most often occurs during historical periods in which dominant social discourses afford a privileged and romanticized status to "nature." For instance, in his discussion of nursing in Stuart England, Harley notes that while sixteenth-century medical and literary authors endorsed maternal nursing, it was not until the seventeenth century that upper-class English mothers disproportionately began nursing their own children. He argues that more significant than fear of contamination—material and moral—from wet-nurses were religious arguments by Calvinist moralists that placed a new value on motherhood and appealed to a "transcendent Nature": nursing one's own children was a duty, according to natural religion, while the refusal to nurse was attributed to pride, "'lewd Inclinations and base Lusts'" (Harley 215). Harley concludes that discourses which celebrate the natural condition while simultaneously articulating motherhood as a romanticized or quasi-religious natural activity are likely to encourage maternal breastfeeding.

But the elevation of the breastfeeding mother as the sign of natural and moral order was not without tension. The fate of wet-nursing during this period illustrates the contradictions of breastfeeding. The romance of the natural mother incorporated images of the unnatural, immoral, and sinful perversions of breastfeeding in the figure of the lower-class mother who rented out her breasts as a wet-nurse. The asexual purity of the breastfeeding madonna celebrated in the romance of the natural mother was perverted by wet-nurses who instrumentalized their reproductive capacities and transformed breastfeeding from a sign of natural, self-less, maternal devotion into a public display of economic exchange.

Paradoxically, however, women of status and the merchant class continued to rely on wet-nurses despite this sense of perversion. We suggest that the romance of the natural mother caught such women in a dilemma. As nurturers of both children and the moral order, they were held above sexual desires; yet as flesh-and-blood women in a patriarchal, heterosexual social order, they were capable of, and often obligated to, put their own sexual and material pleasures above their moral duties. Wet-nurses mediated this dilemma. Held to standards other mothers found impossible to maintain, their bodies bore the burden not only of infant sustenance but of social and moral scrutiny. Their failure to pass scrutiny inspired a fascination that lingers even
today over the image of the wet-nurse, whose continuously lactating body was for
sale and always available for satisfying the needs of the monied classes.

And yet, although breast-feeding—when performed by an asexual, devoted mother—
has been commemorated in prose, verse, and iconography, it has also been regarded
as a debased activity, whether performed by mother or wet-nurse (Boostrom). In his
overview of the dualities of breast-feeding, Boostrom points out that breast-feeding
has been simultaneously articulated as both “love and defilement.” Breast-feeding as
defiled draws upon the distinctions between the “naturally” pure and impure,
articulating associations among breast-feeding, breast-milk, and “natural” bodily
impurities, contaminations, and pollutions. For example, one long-held belief was
that women’s menstrual blood is converted to milk during lactation (Fildes; Treckel).
Thus, breast-milk and breast-feeding came under suspicion as “defiled” because
they bore the trace of another powerful female fluid, one ambivalently associated
with pollution and contamination.

At another level, defilement can be linked to the eroticization of the female breast
and sexuality as a debased activity. As an object of male desire, the female breast was
no longer unproblematically a source of infant sustenance. Coupled with the
deep-seated belief that breast-milk quality affected the intellectual and emotional as
well as the physical development of infants (Boostrom; Fildes; Treckel), breast-milk
and breast-feeding inspired excessive concern over the “contamination” of breast-
milk through the sexual excesses of lactating women (Boostrom; Fildes; Treckel). It
was further held that sexual intercourse would cause the resumption of menstruation
and thereby halt milk production (Boostrom; Fildes; Treckel). These beliefs inspired
the elevation of the “natural mother’s” chastity at the same time that they justified
institutionalized controls over women’s sexuality.

In effect, the simultaneous articulation of breast-feeding as both love and defile-
ment led to the paradoxical subject possibilities that confronted upper and middle-
class women: to be the morally chaste madonna, subordinating male desire in a
self-less devotion to infant needs and securing an identity claiming quasi-religious
goodness, or to be the morally suspect mistress, subordinating infant needs to
heterosexual pleasures and duties and securing an identity constituted upon male
desire. In the articulations of the “natural mother,” the figure of the wet-nurse
mediated these paradoxical possibilities, embodying the social and moral suspicions
of breast-feeding and giving over the moral high ground to those whose husbands
paid for both nursing services and unencumbered conjugal sex. But at the same time,
the mother and the wet-nurse were bound together physically through sharing the
infant-maternal connection—biological in one case and material in the other—and
morally through the criteria for motherhood that neither one could hope to
actualize.

The contemporary romance of the natural mother incorporates the same dualistic
tensions while offering resolutions that reproduce extant social and moral orders.
Although the asexual, quasi-religious madonna remains dominant, the modern
construction of sexuality as public, social, and pervasive casts breast-feeding as
sexually sensual, either in terms of heterosexual desire or as woman-centered
pleasure. We offer two extended illustrations of these differing possibilities and show
how they constitute the contemporary romance of the natural mother as a conserva-
tive force, reinforcing prevailing pro-natalist, heterosexual, pro-family, and pro-
capitalist social and moral orders. The first focuses on the advocacy representations of La Leche League and the second draws on popular media images.

The single largest organized advocate for breast-feeding in the U.S. is La Leche League, a woman-centered international organization that offers information and social support for breast-feeding mothers. The League articulates a naturalistic, essentialist view of mothering and breast-feeding that celebrates the moral superiority and natural reproductive capacities of women (Blum; Blum and Vandewater, “Mothers Construct Fathers,” “Mother to Mother”; Gorham and Andrews; Weiner). As Blum points out, La Leche League’s primary text, *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*, tends to collapse distinctions across womanhood, good mothering, and breast-feeding. Motherhood is often represented as the ultimate expression of womanhood while breast-feeding is represented as the ultimate experience of motherhood. As illustrated by this passage, the text implicitly argues that a woman’s natural and essential capacity to mother is actualized by breast-feeding:

One explanation of breastfeeding’s effectiveness lies in the fact that a nursing mother is physically different than a non-nursing mother. She is in a different hormonal state. Because she is breastfeeding, she has a high level of prolactin—the ‘mothering’ hormone. (48)

The League is not alone in celebrating the “mothering” hormone. It is prevalent in popular culture more generally and is often invoked in the mainstream media, as illustrated by this passage from *Parenting* magazine:

Believe it or not, nursing actually stimulates ‘mothering’ hormones. Each time the baby suckles, the mother’s body releases prolactin and oxytocin, which researchers believe enhances [sic] maternal intuition. (Sears 132)

This condensation of breast-feeding, maternal intuition, and maternal biology elevates “nature” as the medium of a moral order in which mothers naturally (hormonally) fulfill their maternal potential. La Leche League’s manual, *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*, makes the maternal duties in this moral order quite clear:

Along with whatever else you are doing during the day, you will want to have your baby close to you as a matter of course. You don’t have to have him in your arms every minute, although you will be holding him often, both when you are nursing and between times (he needs this contact). But you will want to be there because what your baby needs most of all is you. No one else can take your place. To him, there is nobody quite like his mother. (105)

Rousseau’s moral vision is appropriated by a woman-centered discourse that celebrates women’s relegation to the private, familial sphere and their reduction to maternal functions and hormonal nature. It also appropriates the debased alterimage of the mother who denies her moral and natural duty to breast-feed (see Bacher; Bokat; Fullerton).

On the other hand, the League’s woman-centered discourse is also set in the context of and articulated to discourses quite antithetical to Rousseau’s patriarchal, bourgeoisie vision. For example, the League joins with pro-women discourses that advocate women’s control of their own bodies (Blum and Vandewater, “Mothers Construct Fathers,” “Mother to Mother”; Gorham and Andrews; Weiner). In areas of childbirth, lactation, and childcare, the League argues for knowledge
grounded in women’s shared experiences against institutionalized male and medical authority. Accordingly, the League implicitly encourages natural childbirth, promotes the pleasurable (but asexual) bodily experience of breast-feeding, and encourages personal, woman-to-woman support (Blum; Weiner). In addition, League discourse articulates to anti-capitalist critiques by encouraging women’s resistance to the “happy housewife” image promoted by consumer culture (Weiner 1372). In this way, the romance of the natural mother is politically fragmented, drawing upon and drawn into contradictory political and moral discourses.

Our discussion illustrates why a mother’s decision to breast-feed is not an innocent choice. Rather, it is contextualized by complex and often contradictory articulations. By casting that choice in terms of the romance of the natural mother, breast-feeding advocates like La Leche League resolve the contradictory tensions in a discursive complex of moral, social, and natural forces that elevates a preferred image of the breast-feeding mother. Yet, as Stallybrass and White point out, the social and moral force of such exalted images depends on our fascination with the debased:

Again and again we find a striking ambivalence to the representations of the lower strata (of the body, of literature, of society, of place) in which they are both reviled and desired. Repugnance and fascination are the twin poles of the process in which a political imperative to reject and eliminate the debasing “low” conflicts powerfully and unpredictably with a desire for this Other. (4–5)

The elevation of the “natural” and “asexual” mother draws out and depends upon a political-cultural fascination with debased images of breast-feeding, notably excretory or eroticized representations.

For example, we have noted that historically breast-milk has been associated with menstrual blood, both fluids of female reproductive capacities (Fildes). This association reproduces the contradiction of breast-feeding between love and defilement and casts the interplay of those tensions as a force of masculine fear and desire (see Martin). Morse documents the defilement of breast-feeding as an “excretory function” with an image from a 1983 book on breast-feeding strategies. In it, a mother in a uniform is sitting on a toilet while expressing her breasts. Morse comments, “We are teaching mothers to prepare their infant food in the room reserved for evacuating bodily wastes” (227). These associations of breast-feeding with excretion and pollution reproduce familiar dualities in contemporary social and moral orders: public/private, upper/lower, love/defilement, madonna/whore. The romance of the natural mother is a conservative force in maintaining these distinctions and normalizing secrecy and embarrassment as performative features of breast-feeding.

Eroticized images of breast-feeding mothers and breasts also operate as conservative forces in the popular imagination, reproducing dominant social and moral orders. The eroticized breast pervades popular images of breast-feeding, reclaiming the breast as an image of male fantasy and an object of desire and marking it as an object for socio-political control as well (see Bisset; Davidowitz). Hence breasts, as Young puts it, are “a scandal,” “undecidable” signifiers problematizing the patriarchal split between motherhood and sexuality. Motherhood may be exalted in the quasi-religious image of the breast-feeding mother as a madonna, but the undecidability of the female breast continually problematizes the madonna, creating a suspicion that the asexual madonna is always open to re-presentation as the eroticized mother.

This tension is clear in popular images of breast-feeding, our second extended
example. In her analysis of formula ads, Dettwyler claims that breast-feeding mothers are popularly depicted in "quasi-sexual" ways. The preponderance of images in her sample depict breast-feeding as an intimate and private act involving a young infant and a negligee-clad woman. Only one image counters these representations—a woman breast-feeding in the kitchen while her husband cooks. Dettwyler argues that this image depicts breast-feeding as a time-consuming activity that interferes with a woman's household labor. We note that it also reinforces the patriarchal property rights of the male as head of household and family provider.

We found similar representations of breast-feeding in a special edition of the popular news magazine *Newsweek* titled "Your Child." The edition contains thirteen advertisements: eleven for Johnson & Johnson baby products, one for the Ad Council on Immunization, and one for the "I am your child" campaign. Only one of the thirteen ads contains an adult man (for Johnson & Johnson diaper-rash ointment). Of the eleven Johnson & Johnson ads, eight depict naked babies or babies clad only in a diaper. Of the three remaining ads, one depicts a sleeping baby's face and two depict older, fully dressed children with their mothers (respectively, the ads are for sensitive skin lotion, band-aids, and the Safe Kids Campaign).

Private and quasi-sexual imagery are found in the "I am your child" ad and seven of the Johnson & Johnson ads. Six of the Johnson & Johnson ads represent young, attractive, adoring women in negligees or very "feminine-looking" tank tops engaged in close physical contact with an infant. The seventh ad portrays another attractive young woman in a soft-looking cream sweater bent over her naked baby. The "I am your child" ad depicts a woman in an unbuttoned nightgown holding her baby to her breast. Except for one, all of the women have long, unbound or loosely bound hair. The single ad for a breast-feeding product—nursing pads—involves the desirability of the exotic by depicting an Asian woman in a lace-trimmed negligee nursing her naked baby on an embroidered sheet. The ad is a monotone rust, giving it a sense of romanticized distance. The caption begins, "Breast-feeding is perfect nutrition, the most natural way to feed your baby" (70–71). The ad's signifiers—color, posture, clothing, ethnicity—invoke a colonial discourse articulating the erotic Other with the natural order. Without doubt, this ad addresses itself to male, heterosexual desire. Taken together, these images represent breast-feeding as a private, reproductive activity contained within the patriarchal household and as a visual spectacle of the consumption of the female breast, where the androgynous infant merely serves as a substitute for the male viewer whose heterosexual desire has dictated the camera angles, poses, and color tones of the images.

The "scandal" of breasts and the tensions organized around exalted and debased images of breast-feeding reproduce not only the dominance of masculine, heterosexual desire but also the material and social distinctions under patriarchal, capitalist orders. For example, social science research documents material, class distinctions that differentiate women's decisions to breast-feed or not (Gutman and Zimmerman, "If I Could", "Mixed Messages"; Retsinas). The middle-class woman who has the luxury of remaining at home with her child, who can take extended maternity leave or work a flexible schedule, and/or who has access to a private space for breast-pumping while at work, is more likely to breast-feed (see Retsinas). Working-class women are more often employed in gender-stratified fields (i.e., pink-collar labor) characterized by less worker autonomy, less break time, and less
economic flexibility (Glass and Camarigg). In other words, breast-feeding performs class as well as gender.

Not surprisingly, La Leche League attracts a largely middle-class group of women, the same women who are most likely to breast-feed (“Breastfeeding by New Mothers”). In contrast, working-class mothers are inclined to regard breast-feeding as a luxury, an inconvenience, and as distasteful. In their study of breast-feeding choices among women in different income categories, Guttman and Zimmerman report that one lower-income woman described a breast-feeding mother as someone who “has a lot of time on her hands” (26). The comment reproduces a social distinction that allocates the sensual and material luxuries of breast-feeding to middle-class mothers. By contrast, lower-income women who wanted to breast-feed reported little social support among their family and friends, thanks to a collective perception that breast-feeding was inappropriate, even, in the words of one respondent, “nasty” (29). The association of maternal devotion with breast-feeding marks a middle-class privilege; set in the context of their own lives, the defiled associations of breast-feeding dominate lower-class perceptions. White, married, middle-class women may find breast-feeding just as distasteful, yet their decision to breast-feed or not, set in the conditions and aspirations of middle-class experience, is a “real” choice; whereas for minority, lower-income women whose reproductive capacities are socially suspect as “out of control” (Farquhar 90), breast-feeding is not “really” a choice.

We have shown how a high-low duality permeates images of breast-feeding and mothers in the romance of the natural mother, casting that discourse as a conservative force reinforcing prevailing pro-natalist, heterosexual, pro-family, and pro-capitalist social and moral orders. We argue that a woman’s choice to breast-feed is complicated by the contradictory tensions of this romance. But it is not only the romance of breast-feeding that complicates this “choice” for breast-feeding is performed in the context of historically embedded scientific and medical discourses as well. We turn now to a discursive complex we call the science of breast-feeding.

Science, Medicine, and Commerce: The Science of Breast-feeding and the “Normal Mother”

Scientific, medical, and commercial discourses converge upon the topic of breast-feeding to constitute a complex we term the science of breast-feeding. This discursive complex is often set in counterpoint to the romance of the natural mother. Historically, it has exalted rational discipline, institutionalized knowledge, and commercial interests over nature and the natural mother. Not surprisingly, breast-feeding is represented as a subject for scientific and medical control and an issue of market economics.

For example, Apple shows in Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding, 1890–1950 how representations of “scientific motherhood” dissuaded women from breast-feeding. Through her analysis of historical medical literature and advertisements, she illustrates how formula companies promoted formula as more “scientifically” adapted for babies than breast-milk (also see Palmer). For instance, one ad for Nestle’s milk titled “An anti-rachitic polycarbohydrate milk modifier” reads:

The Improved Nestle’s Milk Food, prepared with equal parts of fresh cow’s milk and water, provides an ideal feeding for the normal infant—properly balanced in fat, protein,
carbohydrate and mineral salt—and of excellent digestibility. The carbohydrate—being a mixture of lactose, saccharose, maltose, dextrin and starch—modifies the milk ideally. (cited in Apple 42)

Ads like this one were typically addressed to physicians rather than directly to mothers: this ad was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. As Apple explains, physicians did not view breast-milk as nutritionally deficient but did view breast-feeding as suspect, under the belief that many women were unable or unwilling to nurse their children effectively because of insufficient milk, fatigue, or lack of motivation. Together, then, the medical and formula industries articulated a discourse about the science of breast-feeding that promised to regulate the unruly practice of (medically unregulated) breast-feeding and thereby normalize infant nurture. As a Mead-Johnson ad published in 1930 in the JAMA proclaimed to its medical audience:

> When mothers in America feed their babies by lay advice, the control of your pediatric cases passes out of your hands, doctor. Our interest in this important phase of medical economics springs, not from any motive of altruism, philanthropy or paternalism, but rather from a spirit of enlightened self-interest and cooperation because [our] infant diet materials are advertised only to you, never to the public. (as quoted in Greer and Apple 284–285)

The exaltation of scientific enlightenment promoted a collusion between the medical establishment and commercial interests, whether any particular physician promoted formula feeding or not. Further, as Apple notes, the guidelines set by medical experts for “proper” feeding of the “normalized” infant involved such rigid schedules and lactation practices that breast-feeding did become suspect, as women could not sustain adequate milk supplies to maintain “normal” infant growth and often suffered discouragement, frustration, and lack of motivation in maintaining either the schedules or breast-feeding itself. Not surprisingly, breast-feeding declined through the twentieth century (Apple).

In more recent years, the formula industry and the medical establishment have promoted breast-milk as scientifically superior to formula. Yet formula feeding remains institutionalized in the growth charts that pediatricians use to assess “normal” infant growth patterns during the first year of life, patterns that are based on formula-fed growth curves (Cordes). In contrast, breast-fed babies exhibit more gradual weight-gain curves in the first year, ending up more lean than the established charts indicate as normal by twelve months (see Cunningham). Accordingly, doctors often interpret the breast-fed baby as abnormal and recommend formula supplements. In the science of breast-feeding, there is intrinsic value in correcting deviations from the institutionalized indices of normalcy and in controlling maternal inefficiencies.

These scientific goals of correction and control are premised upon a discursive reduction of breast-feeding to the nutritive benefits of breast-milk (Dettwyler) that promotes “a disembodied, mechanistic view of the breastfeeding experience” (Blum 302). For instance, a recent special issue of *Newsweek* dedicated to “Your Child” included only one article on breast-feeding. The article “Rooting for Intelligence”
links the scientifically established nutritive benefits of breast-milk to increased IQ. The claim is couched in clinical terms:

And each ingredient has a purpose. Specific fatty acids found in breast-milk have been shown to be critical for neurological development. Certain amino acids are a central component for the development of the retina, which could account for breast-fed babies' increased visual acuity—another way of measuring advanced brain development. (Glick 32)

The nature of breast-milk is cast as an object of scientific knowledge and breast-feeding is instrumentalized as a medium of cultural capital through its capacity to increase intelligence. For a post-industrial society normalized around the fears and desires of the middle class, the science of breast-feeding offers an economics of enlightenment and breast-feeding becomes an investment in future capital (quite literally, in the value-adding capacity of future knowledge workers).

Both breast-milk, as a disembodied commodity, and breast-feeding, as an instrumentalized medium of cultural capital, enter into the public circulation of goods and services as economic and political issues. For instance, an essay on social policy in the journal Governing advises, "Breastfeeding also makes good economic sense for states interested in keeping a lid on health care and welfare costs. Florida, for example, requires an emphasis on breast feeding in nutrition programs for welfare recipients" (Mahtesian 54). Likewise, an essay entitled "Employer Support for Nursing Mothers Yields Numerous Benefits" in HR Focus stresses that breast-feeding reduces absenteeism and health-care costs (Gibson). The unruly materiality of breast-feeding is governed by these policy calculations at the juncture of capitalism, bureaucracy, and science.

Concordantly, popular advice defers to the authority of the medical establishment. For example, a Good Housekeeping article titled "Breastfeeding Your Baby" advises, "Studies show that 85% of mothers-to-be decide whether they will breast- or bottle-feed before delivery. To make this decision, women should consult with their obstetricians, pediatricians, or other health professionals" (Cassidy 170). In other words, the decision to breast-feed is cast as a clinical decision and not one that mothers should attempt on their own. Yet recent research indicates that breast-feeding is rarely discussed during pre-natal visits (Daniels and Parrot; Guttman and Zimmerman, "Mixed Messages"; Howard, Howard, and Weitzman). In hospital births, breast-feeding is treated as a matter of trained instruction, often accompanied by videos; many new mothers accept the superiority of medical know-how and adopt the proffered identity as inept and unknowledgeable—even Hillary Clinton, in It Takes a Village, confesses that she "didn't know how" to nurse her newborn daughter! Women are trained in distinctions such as "on-demand feeding" versus "by-the-clock" feeding," and the medical establishment stands ready to evaluate breast-feeding effectiveness at regularly scheduled infant checkups (Millard). In short, the science of breast-feeding denigrates women's experiential and traditional know-how and casts breast-feeding difficulties as "normal," offering a de-naturalized repertoire of techniques and substitutions to correct the errancies of "natural" breast-feeding.

Along with redressing the inadequacies of nature, the science of breast-feeding resolves the duality of motherhood and sexuality by drawing upon psychoanalytic
and evolutionary sociobiological discourses that cast sexuality as a "normal" prerequisite and response to motherhood. According to Weisskopf, psychoanalytic discourses construct motherhood as the primary organizer of female sexual desire, either by gratification or suppression. For example, some psychoanalytic theorists hold sexual gratification as an essential accompaniment of motherhood. The nursing relationship is represented as equivalent to sexual intercourse, a precursor for the infant's adult genital love (especially the male infant). The contradiction of motherhood and sexuality is resolved by collapsing the distinction. On the other hand, natural-selection theories of sociobiology argue that breast-feeding, like sexual intercourse, is pleasurable in order to ensure species survival. Infant gratification and the maternal pleasures related through the stimulation of the hormone oxytocin are thus evolutionary strategies. Again, the contradiction between motherhood and sexuality is collapsed as sexuality is contained and controlled through the normalizing auspices of science and medicine.

Feminist scholars counter that these resolutions reproduce hetero-sexist, pro-natalist, and pro-family values and practices (Weisskopf). Weisskopf argues that women who experience sexual arousal during nursing have learned this response through their internalization of "a gender identity which includes images and experiences of erotic arousal associated with their breasts" (779). Likewise, Dettwyler argues that breasts are not especially erotically sensitive and that although oxytocin may contribute to feelings of well-being, it is not clear whether the "surge of oxytocin itself, or its immediate consequences, is recognized as physically pleasurable by the mother" (184) or if any such physical pleasures are necessarily sexual. Further, she cites anthropological evidence indicating that breasts are not viewed erotically across cultures, hence the equation of breasts with heterosexual eroticism is culturally specific and not universally (scientifically) "normal." Still other feminists argue that the natural pleasure of breast-feeding carries with it connotations of female sensuality out of male control and of excessively private, corporeal intimacies. Cultural feminist portrayals of maternal pleasures celebrate the sensual and corporeal pleasures of breast-feeding as woman-centered and transgressive pleasures.

These feminist arguments suggest that the science of breast-feeding is underscored by a high-low duality quite similar to that of the romance of the natural mother. The science of breast-feeding exalts breast-feeding as a disembodied process of delivery; its value lies in the chemistry of the product, breast-milk. This product has immediate cultural value, both for its science-affirmed and affirming nutritional qualities and as symbolic capital in its association with increased intelligence. Female sexuality is articulated to this representation of breast-feeding as a normal response. Yet the goals of control and regulation are inspired by a fascination with the unruly nature of biological processes and female hormones, women's experiential know-how and maternal traditions, and the escape of pleasure from the normalizing strictures of patriarchal heterosexual order. In periods when the science of breast-feeding dominates public policy and private practice, breast-feeding declines; yet a fascination with images of excess—biological, experiential, pleasurable—continually threatens the stability of the resolutions affected in the discourses of science, medicine, and commerce.
Conclusion

Taken together, the romance of the natural mother and the science of breastfeeding articulate the dualisms confronting women in Western culture in images that circumscribe moral and social stratifications: the natural mother and the normal mother are portrayed as sanitary, physically aesthetic, conversant with the latest techniques (whether natural or scientific) on lactation and infant care, morally compliant, given over either to maternal devotion or scientific nurturing, set on a pedestal in the social imagination, the sign and possession of patriarchal law, and a token of exchange in the cultural economics of capitalism. In counterpoint, another set of images is evoked: a grotesque maternal body, wildly erotic, untamed and exotic, excreting blood and milk; distorting the contours of the normal body with engorged breasts and enlarged abdomens, buttocks, and thighs; a mother careless or ignorant of the latest breastfeeding research, advice, or technologies, an immoral breeder given over to carnal appetites (sexual and otherwise); the “devouring” mother of Eastern and psychoanalytic fame, a constant sign of and threat to the limits of patriarchal control. The policies and practices that maintain the normal and natural are premised upon the tensions between repugnance and fascination, disgust and desire inspired by the deviant and the grotesque. The decision to breast-feed becomes a nodal point, articulating the contradictions of the maternal in Western patriarchal capitalism.

In tracing out these articulations, we may have seemed to sediment exclusive and/or essentialist accounts of mothers and breastfeeding. However, it was not our point to provide neat categorizations. Rather, we hope our analysis problematizes the paradoxical injunctions contemporary women experience when faced with the decision to breast-feed or not. To this end, we propose that breastfeeding be cast, not in terms of relations among autonomous and dichotomously constructed identities, but in the more fluid terms of relational subjectivities. Although this proposal may not resolve any particular mother’s dilemma, it offers an alternative perspective on breastfeeding and its significance for transfiguring our social and cultural performances of mothering. As Stallybrass and White argue, if our bodies are not only constituted in and by social discourses, but our “body-images ‘speak’ social discourses, social relations and values with particular force” (10), then it is possible to give alternative speaking performances that constitute alternative breastfeeding identities and bodily experiences.

We suggest that one way to mediate the idealizations of the exalted maternal body-image and the transgressions of the grotesque maternal body-image is to develop an alternative articulation of corporeal sensuality, one that is neither given over to heterosexual pleasures and duties nor to carnal lusts but that constitutes an eccentric maternal body.6 We wish to premise this articulation of a mediating sensuality and eccentric maternal body upon the sensual interdependence of two bodies, the maternal and the infant, in a particular performance of breastfeeding. However, from the outset, we wish it to be clear that our illustration of a mediating sensuality rejects biological positivism. As Willett rightly points out in Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities, “the pleasures of touch exceed the biological” (38). In contrast with the essential discourse of La Leche League, our view of mediating sensuality affirms experiential possibilities rather than presupposing and/or affirming a priori.
The emotional and physiological responsiveness of the breast-feeding couple can be represented and experienced as denying corporeal autonomy and as transcending patriarchal views of sensuality. For example, the performance of breast-feeding can generate polymorphous sensations of both pleasure and pain for the maternal body that cannot be bound to genital stimulation or penetration. These pleasures include multiple points of bodily contact, moments of caress, enveloping feelings of well-being, and warmth stimulated by the chemical processes in lactation. Included also in our articulation are the pains of milk production in the breast (letdown, engorgement, etc.), bodily fatigue and aches, and the pain of scratches, kicks, and bites. Finally, there exists the possibility for the synchronicity of corporeal sensations that constitutes a dialogic mutuality of bodies.

Along these lines, Kahn argues for "maialogical time," a form of temporal consciousness grounded in the "interrelatedness" or "mutuality" of experiences between the infant and lactating mother (27). Maialogical time facilitates what Kahn refers to as the "mixed zoning of the private and public spheres" (31), transgressing the temporal dualisms that reinforce patriarchal control over extant performances of maternity and child-rearing. Set in maialogical time, breast-feeding instigates relational synchronicities that cannot be fixed in the ready dualisms of the madonna/whore, or the natural or normal mother and the grotesque maternal body. If, as Stallybrass and White argue, our "body-images 'speak' social relations" (10), then re-casting these opposed maternal bodies as synchronized temporal relations gives voice to the possibility for radically transformed social performances, relations, and values.

Advocacy of "interactive" and "reciprocal" temporal experience need not lapse into a kind of corporeal essentialism (see Nadesan). Kahn's argument and our description of breastfeeding as a form of mediating sensuality problematize social dualisms instanciated in hegemonic temporal-spatial performances of maternal bodies. We stress that our effort at mediation disavows the nature-culture duality, for the body is not granted primordial significance as brute existence; rather, following Butler, we believe that the body is constructed as a particular body through the performative "reenactment and reexperiencing of" cultural discourses (140). As Gatens concurs: "The human body is not ... somehow external to culture or part of an unchanging nature. The human body is always lived in culture, understandings of its workings are themselves cultural productions, and the values and assumptions of culture inevitably find their way into our theorizations" (31). Thus, our articulation of mediating sensuality is not essentialistic, but instead promotes an alternative articulation of, and performative possibilities for, the breast-feeding mother (and child).

In conclusion, our analyses of the romance and science of breast-feeding illustrate how the possibilities of this material practice are reduced to dualisms that can be accounted for and absorbed into discourses of medicine, advertising, state policy, science, and feminist self-help advocacy. But these discourses do not exhaust performative possibilities. Consider the slogan, "Breast is best." "Breast" invokes a synecdochical reduction of breast-feeding and mothering identities. "Best" is a superlative term that broaches no qualifications. "Breast is best" is an absolute and reductionist claim legitimated in the point-counterpoint of the romance and science of breast-feeding. Without the abstractions and reductions of these discourses, the
slogan makes little sense. In their terms, it casts the decision to breast-feed as a dualistic choice between “good” and “bad” bodies, images, performances, and policies. Further, despite the emphasis in such campaigns on a mother’s “choice,” the slogan does away with such a choice-making subject. “Breast is best” is not a choice over whether to breast-feed or not, but an injunction to perform culturally authorized gender identities.

We hold that campaigns like the Department of Agriculture’s “Breast is Best” campaign are deeply enmeshed in the cultural-political dynamics of maternalism; they are, in effect, cultural campaigns. As such, “breast is best” can be viewed as an opportunity for cultural-political struggle over the value, status, and control of women’s bodies and subjectivities. By problematizing the dualisms of breastfeeding, we contribute to the efforts of other breast-feeding advocates to expand the repertoire of performative alternatives (see Van Esterik, Women, Work and Breastfeeding, “Breastfeeding and Feminism”).

Notes

1 Authors’ names are alphabetized. Each contributed equally to this manuscript. Both would like to thank Patrice Stewart for her editing.

2 Women who were not privately employed but worked through public institutions like foundling homes and hospitals or parishes were particularly suspect (Thurner).

3 Although wet-nurses enjoyed social status in ancient Western culture, the development of Greek and Roman cultures signaled wet-nurses’ decline in status to their eventual denigration as near-prostitutes (Boostrom; Fildes).

4 According to Thurner, “chastity” during this period referred to marital fidelity rather than sexual modesty or celibacy.

5 For original research on the relationship between breast-feeding and intelligence, see Fidler, Huisman, Touwen, and Boersma and also see Lucas, Morley, Cole, Lister, and Leeson-Payne.

6 “See Willett (37) for a discussion of a form of parental eros that differs from the dynamics of sexuality. Also see de Lauretis or Cocks for feminist conceptions of eccentric subjectivity.

Works Cited


