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The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics by Robyn Lee AND Wild Child: Intensive Parenting and Posthumanist Ethics by Naomi Morgenstern

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This Self Which Is Not One: Parenting, Posthumanism, and Intersubjectivity

***Wild Child: Intensive Parenting and Posthumanist Ethics* by NAOMI MORGENSTERN**

University of Minnesota Press, 2018 \$33.33

and

***The Ethics and Politics of Breastfeeding: Power, Pleasure, Poetics* by ROBYN LEE**

University of Toronto Press, 2018 \$65.00

Reviewed by **GINA GRANTER**

The cover of Robyn Lee's examination of the ethics and politics of breastfeeding bears an arresting image: that of a painting by Helene Knoop, of a pink-skinned mother and similarly pink-skinned infant in the act of nursing, the baby's round head echoing the rounded breast of the mother, and the baby's arm folded so that its close-fisted hand meets the source of its nourishment, while the mother's arm, similarly bent at the elbow and wrist, clutches the baby's naked body to her own. A delicate lace veil over the mother's hair is the only garment in the picture; the mother's blue eyes stare to a point beyond the frame. It is an image that simultaneously reinforces and disrupts the conventional imagery and rhetoric of breastfeeding. This makes it an appropriate one for Lee's book, which provides a brilliant examination of the ways in which the practice has been discursively constructed in Western humanist culture. Lee exposes the autonomous liberal subject of that cultural tradition for its gender and racial bias and other limitations, including its lack of obligation to others. In the chapter "Breastfeeding, Subjectivity, and Art as a Way of Life," she notes that "[w]ithout examining the development of the mother's subjectivity during breastfeeding, we miss an opportunity to formulate an essential corrective to the liberal, implicitly male, autonomous ideal of selfhood" (19). Lee takes that opportunity to consider breastfeeding as "subjectivity-as-encounter," a term she credits to Bracha Ettinger. Drawing upon such thinkers as Foucault and Irigaray, Lee makes a strong case for the consideration of breastfeeding as a creative act: an "art of living" through which "[t]he breastfeeding subject must be reconceived as responsible for the vulnerable other and also capable of creative self-transformation through embodied practices of the self" (19, 25). Lee deconstructs the rhetoric of the natural promoted by such organizations as La Leche League, which places a moral obligation on women to breastfeed and in doing so, denies women subjectivity. Lee uses the work of Levinas to look at ethical relations not just between infant and breastfeeding subject but between individuals within a society: breastfeeding, she argues, can be the basis for a new conception of the relation of the self to other in which one understands the needs, such as hunger, of others beyond one's family as a shared responsibility. Lee critiques the ways that conventional discourses around breastfeeding further marginalize trans, nonbinary, racialized, and poor populations; the reader is forced to reflect on how the cover image of the text represents a particular kind of subject: notably a white, cisgendered woman. An intersubjective ethics of breastfeeding, Lee suggests, needs to consider nursing parents beyond this Western humanist ideal.

Morgenstern, the author of *Wild Child*, shares with Lee a concern with the ways in which the notion of the child has been inscribed in Western humanism, and a desire to reconfigure its meaning in a posthumanist context. In Western humanist thought of at least the past 200 years, Morgenstern notes, the child has functioned to “preserve and protect the border between the ‘natural’ world and the world of the rational and independent adult human being” (3). How better to examine this idea, and introduce the titular “wild child” of her analysis, than with reference to Max in Spike Jonze’s filmic adaptation of Maurice Sendak’s iconic children’s book, *Where the Wild Things Are*? Through readings of such works as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, Emma Donoghue’s *Room*, Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, and Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Morgenstern considers the ethics of the decision to become a parent and those of being a parent in a posthumanist age. The new “wild child” is, according to Morgenstern, one “of the border between a liberal-humanist ‘world’ that might be coming to an end (a world that usually imagines itself doing so in apocalyptic terms—as *the end of the world*) and a posthumanist, democratic future” (15). Her examined works offer myriad opportunities to explore the possibilities for the self beyond the liberal humanist model, and to see the damages of that model.

Both Morgenstern’s and Lee’s texts are innovative, feminist, and urgent. Morgenstern’s work does for the examination of parent-child relationships in contemporary cultural production what Cary Wolfe’s *Animal Rites* did for the question of the animal, and she appears aware of her position at the forefront of exploration of this rich territory; she references Wolfe in her introduction and acknowledges her reliance, like Wolfe’s, on Derridean ideas. Lee’s work similarly builds on the ideas of others to find a thrilling alternative to polarized discourse on the nursing of children. Lee and Morgenstern masterfully consider parent-child relationships in a way that not only equally acknowledges these subjectivities but also considers them, like subjectivity itself, inextricable from relation to an other.

Works Cited

Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2003.

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