Breastfeeding in Public: Disgusting Bodies in the Bodiless Public Sphere*

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Abstract

While breastfeeding mothers generally possess an official legal right of access to public places, the lived experience of breastfeeding mothers in public is marked by inequality and lack of autonomy. The motivating question of this paper is: from the perspective of a breastfeeding mother, what characterizes an ideal—that is, equal and autonomous—public sphere in a liberal society? I argue that public and private spheres must be accessible in certain ways: first, every person must be able to occupy public space and the public sphere while embracing all significant aspects of their personhood; second, the comfort of others cannot weigh more than an individual’s own needs in public; finally, all people must be able to opt for privacy in a way that does not entail invisibility or coerced exclusion. In making this argument, I describe three main ways in which breastfeeding mothers in the United States respond to the antipathy of the public sphere: exclusion, accommodation, and affirmation. I end with an exploration of the ideal of public and private spheres defined by equality and autonomy and offer concrete steps that can improve the position of breastfeeding mothers in public.
"A simple burp rag over the child and the problem goes away," muses a commenter. But the "problem" of public breastfeeding cannot be solved with a burp rag. Bystanders in the public sphere might think that breastfeeding mothers can abide by public norms, but most do not grasp the enormity of what it means to navigate public space as a breastfeeding mother. While grocery shopping, a mom's fussing baby needs to eat; she realizes that there is not a single chair to sit in. Stopping for a bite to eat, she nurses her screaming baby, only to be asked to leave or to nurse in the restroom. She heads to the mall, stopping to breastfeed her hungry baby on a bench, only to receive contemptuous looks from each passerby. She tries to use a breastfeeding cover, but the baby throws it off. She meets some acquaintances, but when she starts breastfeeding they begin stammering, exhibiting discomfort—they do not know how to act, where to look, what to do.

In the United States, the legal right of a mother to breastfeed in public is clear. And yet, public norms—standards of public behavior shared by members of society—prevent breastfeeding mothers from navigating public space in an equal and autonomous manner. Public spaces like parks, malls, restaurants, buildings, and offices present challenges to breastfeeding mothers. Breastfeeding makes others uncomfortable, evokes disgust, and triggers paternalistic moralizing. It "forces [bystanders] to look and notice, or to suffer self-consciousness about not looking or not not looking" (Miller 82). The case of public breastfeeding reveals the extent to which norm-defying actors are subject to demands to experience public life in a circumscribed way—they can only experience public life from a disadvantaged position, as an actor for whom public life was not designed. When breastfeeding mothers are expected to cover themselves under obtrusive nursing covers, are they still "in public"? Does that count as "equal access" to public space or to public life? It is unimaginable that members of other groups marked by difference—queer people, people of color, disabled people—would be explicitly asked to erect a
physical cover in a public place under which to enact their difference, for the sake of the comfort of bystanders. The demands on breastfeeding women to tone down their difference, to prioritize the comfort of others, to discount their own needs, and to leave public areas are problematic in unique ways. And while breastfeeding mothers generally possess an official legal right of access to public places, the lived experience of breastfeeding mothers in public is marked by inequality and lack of autonomy.

The aim of this chapter is to consider what characterizes an equal and autonomous public sphere in a liberal society. If the public sphere—the spaces, activities, and deliberations that are open and available to all—were to be structured to grant equality and autonomy to breastfeeding mothers, what would have to change? I explicate the case of breastfeeding in public because a breastfeeding mother represents one of the most difficult cases for the public sphere; understanding the experience of breastfeeding mothers therefore provides a nuanced knowledge of the impediments to equality and autonomy in public. Breastfeeding bodies challenge the idea that social equality can be found through equalizing access to the public sphere; the “access to” framework is not enough. An “access to” framework leaves open the possibility of allowing breastfeeding mothers to be in public, but not in an equal and autonomous manner—allowing them to be in public, but only insofar as they abide by male norms. But if an “access to” framework is inadequate, what should the liberal goal be?

I argue, following Nussbaum (2004), that social equality and autonomy for all persons require that public expressions and actions cannot be legally prohibited on the basis of their causing disgust in others. But in addition to this background legal requirement, I argue that equality and autonomy of public and private spheres require that certain conditions are met: first, every person must be able to occupy public space and the public sphere while embracing all
significant aspects of their personhood; second, the comfort of others cannot weigh more than an individual’s own needs in public; finally, all people must be able to opt for privacy in a way that does not entail invisibility or coerced exclusion. If these conditions are not met, public and private spheres suffer from domination and oppression.

To support these claims, I first examine the position of norm-defying actors in the public sphere, drawing on the queer theory of Michael Warner. I focus on the issue of actors, like breastfeeding mothers, whose very presence may evoke disgust in others. I consider the theories of philosophers, including John Stuart Mill, William Miller, and Martha Nussbaum, who have interrogated the puzzle of granting equality to actors who evoke disgust in others. I then turn to an exposition of the issue of breastfeeding in public, drawing attention to the ways in which breastfeeding mothers in the United States today lack autonomy and equality in their lived experience of public space. I describe three main ways in which breastfeeding mothers respond to the antipathy of the public sphere: exclusion, accommodation, and affirmation. In the final section, I outline an ideal of public and private spheres defined by equality and autonomy, offering a tentative answer to Michael Warner’s question: "What kind of world would make the values of both publicness and privacy equally accessible to all?" (2002: 21).

My orientation here is a liberal one, but a liberal one that is critical of many previous liberal attempts to grant equality and autonomy to groups marked by difference. The main contribution of this chapter is to join together feminist literature on public and private spheres with the literature on the political theory of disgust, and to put both of these literatures in conversation with cultural theory on breastfeeding in public, which hasn’t been given enough systematic attention by political theorists.
Part 1: Disgust and Discomfort in the Public Sphere

The public sphere generally refers to “that which pertains to the people as a whole, the community, the common good, things open to sight, and those things that are accessible and shared by all” (Landes 1-2). The public sphere is traditionally conceived as being marked by certain (male) norms and activities: rational, individualistic, and civic approaches to work, the market, the government. The types of activities that define the norms of the private, on the other hand, are those that are traditionally female: emotional, relational, and familial experiences related to caregiving, nurturing, and bodies. “Public,” for many feminists, signifies a sphere from which women have been formally or informally excluded. As Adrienne Rich notes, “the systems men have created are homogenous systems, which exclude and degrade women or deny our existence; and the most frequent rationalization for our exclusion from those systems is that we are or ought to be mothers” (210). That is, women, due in part to their actual or potential maternity, are interpreted as closer to nature and to the messiness of bodies, and as such are seen as fitting poorly into the rationalistic, bodiless public sphere. The liberal feminist project of the has been a slow progression toward erasing the exclusion of women from the public sphere.

But though participation in the public sphere is no longer tied to being a man, functionally the public sphere is still male. The legal project of guaranteeing access to traditionally male spheres has been undertaken while leaving in place the sexual of division of labor and women’s subordination. Women have access to traditionally male spheres, but that access is often contingent upon acting male. As Wendy Brown points out, public norms demand that women can be “women in private and humans in public” (35, 28). Women can enter public spaces. But if they act too emotional, or not emotional enough, or if they cannot follow norms because of family commitments, they are sanctioned. Public norms demand that women
disembody, filter, and repress what is related to their body. The liberal project is incomplete—
women cannot be considered equal public actors as long as they are subject to these demands.

The problematic imperative of the public sphere, policed through public norms, is that
anyone is welcome—so long as they act like the ideal public actor: a heterosexual, white, able-
bodied man. This imperative is especially pernicious for those people who are not in a position
to distance themselves from their bodies, leading Adrienne Rich to muse, “The body has been
made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a
disembodied spirit” (40). Breastfeeding mothers, pregnant women, disabled people, people of
color, and queer people are all conspicuous in the public sphere because of their bodies and their
bodily performance. Breastfeeding mothers are necessarily embodied: because newborns nurse at
least every two to three hours, breastfeeding mothers cannot abstract away from their bodies to a
public demeanor in which "mind alone matters" (Brown 27). They are tied to their bodies, to
their motherhood, and to their children in an especially intense way. Because of this,
breastfeeding mothers cannot practice their breastfeeding while abiding by the norms of the
public; even if they wanted to, they cannot act like the ideal public actor in order to appease
public norms. It is quite simply impossible to act male while breastfeeding.

These “publics”—“the public sphere,” “public breastfeeding,” “public norms,” etc.—
do not refer to exactly the same concepts. I use the phrase "public sphere" to indicate norm-
governed spaces, activities, and deliberations that are open and available to all. The public sphere
thus comprises a family of "publics": public space," public norms, public deliberation, being "out
in public," the workplace. The “public” of public breastfeeding, on the other hand, generally
refers to breastfeeding that occurs in the presence of other people, usually but not always outside
of the home. Public breastfeeding can take place in spaces that are usually designated as private:
homes of friends or even one’s own home, depending on who is present. Feminist thinkers have urged us to remember this complex nature of public and private; Susan Gal, for example, argues that the public/private dichotomy is a fractal relationship. Public and private “can be projected onto different social objects—activities, identities, institutions, spaces, and interactions—that can be further categorized into public and private parts” (265). This sense of the concept of “public” is distinct from the public sphere of, say, Habermas or from narrowly political conceptions of what defines “public.” The “public” of public breastfeeding, in fact, often refers to spaces like the mall, the park, or restaurants—not places traditionally thought of as sites of public political importance. But, as feminists have maintained, women cannot be conceived of as equal peers in political and other important contexts if they are not treated as equals in the mall, the park, or restaurants—they cannot be equal participants in public deliberation and government if they cannot take up space in public without difficulty, if their concerns are chastised as being "inappropriate" for public forums.

We have seen that breastfeeding mothers do not conform to public norms; a result of this is that a sizable proportion of people are unsupportive of and uncomfortable with public breastfeeding. In 2011, a population-based public opinion telephone survey asked New York City residents whether they agreed with the statement “Mothers who breastfeed should do so in private places only”—more than half, 50.4%, agreed (Mulready-Ward and Hackett 196-7). An unscientific survey in 2011 revealed that 44% of women report discomfort when they see a woman breastfeed in public, with 10% choosing the response “Ewwwww, in private please!” (TheBump.com and Breastfeeding.com 2011).

Public discomfort with breastfeeding creates a context in which women are regularly, if not frequently, asked to leave public places or to cover themselves when breastfeeding their
Because mothers hear stories about women being antagonized for breastfeeding in public, they anticipate hostility and change the way they navigate public space. “There is a perception of a hostile public environment,” notes Cindy Stearns, so “women proceed with their breastfeeding as if it were deviant behavior occurring within a potentially hostile environment” (312). Breastfeeding mothers are subject to social sanctions of varying severity when they engage in public breastfeeding, and these social sanctions affect their standing in public space.

Breastfeeding mothers today generally possess official access to the public sphere through legal protection; for example, laws in forty-five states allow breastfeeding mothers to nurse their babies in any public or private location, and laws in twenty-eight states specifically exempt breastfeeding mothers from public indecency laws (National Conference of State Legislatures 2013). North Carolina N.C. Gen. Stat. §14-190.9 (1993) provides that “notwithstanding any other provision of law, a woman may breast feed in any public or private location where she is otherwise authorized to be, irrespective of whether the nipple of the mother's breast is uncovered during or incidental to the breast feeding” (National Conference of State Legislatures 2013). But breastfeeding mothers continue to be subject to censure in public. I turn next to an examination of why breastfeeding evokes such intense reactions from onlookers in public: namely, because breastfeeding exposes women to the indignity of being manifestly sexual beings, and because breastfeeding evokes awkward discomfort and disgust in others.

Groups whose difference is rooted in sexuality are often subject to public shame. Michael Warner, analyzing the experience of queer people and queer identity groups, claims that public shame is imposed on anyone whose sexuality is predominant, noting how hard it is to “assert any dignity when you stand exposed as a sexual being” (1999: 21). Thus, while the public sphere discounts and disadvantages all actors who do not conform to the norm of the ideal public
actor, the worst treatment is reserved for those actors whose difference is rooted in bodies and sexuality. Breastfeeding mothers are pushed down what Warner calls the social “hierarchy of shame” by the disapproval, indignation, and moral righteousness of others. And the politics of shame is not always overt, but also involves “silent inequalities, unintended effects of isolation, and the lack of public access” (1999: 7). This insidious unequal treatment constitutes a fundamentally unequal experience of public life. Warner argues that in a context of “sexual domination, publicness will feel like exposure, and privacy will feel like the closet” (2002: 52). That is, norms of sexuality and the politics of shame deprive groups that are defined by sexuality, including breastfeeding mothers, of the experience of free and equal publicness and privacy, distorting their experience of public and private space.

But even bystanders who are not consciously inflicting shame on breastfeeding mothers can contribute to their unequal position; in fact, the awkwardness that most people feel in public upon witnessing a breastfeeding mother can affect the mother's experience of public space. She is subject to the gaze, she feels visible and vulnerable. Bystanders do not know what public norms demand, in large part because breastfeeding has been increasing over the past decades and, therefore, most people were not socialized to witness public breastfeeding. The situation is marked by social awkwardness. This awkwardness is understandable, but from the perspective of mothers this means that, when they are lucky enough not to experience outright hostility, a barrage of awkward encounters defines their experience of public space.

Relatedly, a disadvantaged place in the public sphere is reserved for those who evoke not just discomfort, but disgust. Some people respond to the sight of a mother breastfeeding with disgust, as evidenced by the 10% of women who responded to the question about breastfeeding in public with the choice “Ewwwww, in private please!” As William Miller describes in The
Anatomy of Disgust, the disgusting is a moral and social sentiment that operates to hierarchize; disgust “ranks people and things in a kind of cosmic ordering” (2). Why, though, would the sight of breastfeeding evoke disgust in others?

Miller presents four main points about the content of the disgusting. First, at the most basic level, the disgusting is likely to be the human, the body. Skin can “disgust as well as titillate,” especially if the bearer of the skin is female and immodest (53). “There is nothing,” says Miller, “quite like skin gone bad; it is in fact the marrings of skin which make up much of the substance of the ugly and monstrous” (52). Second, Miller notes that the disgusting is often related to orifices, breaks in the seal of the skin, and those things that confuse “the boundaries of the self” (50). A third main category of disgust is evoked by fertility: “What disgusts, startlingly, is the capacity for life…The generator of disgust is generation itself, surfeit, excess of ripeness” (40, 42). Finally, disgust is evoked by things that defy expectations in the social order: “Disgust,” Miller says, “tends to focus its moral work on moral issues that involve the body…. those bodily failings which indicate insufficient attention to the duty to make the social order as uneventful as it can be” (205). On this basis, “any serious breach of norms of modesty, dignity-maintenance, and self-presentability can be disgusting to behold” (80). These four main categories define the characteristics of the disgusting; when confronted with one of these disgusting objects, the universal response is a desire “to have the offending item removed” (25).

With Miller’s explication of the disgusting in place, it becomes easy to understand why breastfeeding disgusts. Breastfeeding mothers are showing skin in a culturally unacceptable way; they are challenging boundaries of the self and reminding us of orifices and of the exchange of bodily fluid; they are evoking images of ripeness, fertility, and excess; and they are defying expectations and disrupting the social order. Though Miller mentions breasts surprisingly
infrequently, he makes one literary reference to breasts that is notable in its ability to highlight the distinctiveness of the disgust of breastfeeding: in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Gulliver sees a wet nurse feeding an infant in Brobdingnag. “I must confess no object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous breast, which I cannot tell what to compare with so as to give the curious reader an idea of its bulk, shape, and colour” (Swift cited in Miller, 56).

The lactating breast, then, is perceived as monstrous. It is sometimes even treated as dangerous or contaminating. Recall this instance of the pop culture trope: in *Look Who’s Talking* John Travolta’s character accidentally consumes breast milk. When informed, he spits it out dramatically. In scenes like this, breast milk is treated in a manner that would generally be reserved for poison or urine. Indeed, public breastfeeding is often likened to public sex, public masturbation, or public elimination. Ken Schram, a news reporter for Komo News 4, expounds: “It's natural. Well, so is urinating, but most folks don't up and pee in a glass jar in the middle of the mall” (Schram). Since, most basically, public elimination constitutes a public health hazard and public breastfeeding does not, the likening of public breastfeeding with public elimination assigns a malignancy to breast milk that has no basis in fact.

Of course, breastfeeding imagery is also evocative of the heavenly, the pure, the angelic. But if American culture simply viewed public breastfeeding as a present-day incarnation of da Vinci’s *Maddona Litta*, the disdainful public treatment of breastfeeding mothers today would be a puzzle indeed. It is also clearly true that not all breasts are monstrous, and that some breasts are more monstrous than others. Non-lactating breasts that are displayed in a heterosexually available way are prized, not disdained. Even among lactating breasts there is a hierarchy of shame. Women with larger breasts and those nursing older children bear a larger burden of shame, as do those whose lactation intersects with other forms of difference, such as
race, disability, homosexuality, or nonconforming gender presentation. Women who are conventionally attractive are likely to be perceived as being hypersexual while breastfeeding, or as flaunting their breastfeeding. So while lactating breasts generally fit into Miller’s definition of “skin gone bad,” some lactating breasts go worse than others. The breasts of the Madonna feeding infant Jesus do not qualify in our cultural consciousness as “bad,” though most terrestrial lactating breasts in public are deviant to some degree.

Part 2: Moral equality and disgust

A problem, then: how can the liberal ideal of moral equality coexist with a public sphere that interprets certain groups of people, like breastfeeding mothers, as disgusting or as out of place? Liberalism is tempted to declare victory once public rights are secured, absent considerations of the lived experience of oppressed groups navigating cultural norms. But cultural norms, which are intertwined with the politics of shame and the politics of disgust, discipline norm-defying actors, threatening their equality, autonomy, and ability to lead authentic lives.

A conservative approach to this puzzle is to reject the idea that moral equality must be sought for groups who evoke disgust in others; conservative Leon Kass argues for the “wisdom of repugnance,” claiming that disgust is a sentiment that should be respected. “Revulsion is not an argument; and some of yesterday's repugnances are today calmly accepted—though, one must add, not always for the better. In crucial cases, however, repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it” (Kass 20). In this formulation, it is easy to see how a bystander’s disgust at the sight of a woman breastfeeding can be taken as evidence of the act’s impropriety, and indeed even as grounds for her removal. But Kass is right to point out that revulsion is not an argument. Indeed, though there is some extent to which
disgust operates at a universal human level (there seems to be a universal disgust with feces and incest), the specific content of the disgusting is subject to cultural context (Miller 15). Kass’s admission that “some of yesterday’s repugnances are today calmly accepted” surely questions the primordial wisdom of the sentiment; at the very least, one wonders how to determine if an instance of revulsion is a “crucial case.”

In contrast with Kass’s un-nuanced argument, liberals attempt to wrestle with the problem of disgusting groups, but often encounter trouble of their own. Indeed, the problem of disgust is implicit throughout much of the liberal canon. John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty is devoted to discovering when society is justified in restricting the liberty of others, whether by law or by norms. In many ways, On Liberty is an eloquent defense of the importance of difference, and therefore has direct implications for the question of dealing with difference based in disgust; to wit, “the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service” (74). To protect difference (or “eccentricity”), Mill proposes the harm principle: that the “only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others….In things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself” (14, 63). That is, when an action does not harm others, it is permissible. Mill’s is, moreover, a fairly circumscribed notion of “harm”: the “mere displeasure” of others does not itself constitute a harm (70). There are some, says Mill, who “consider as an injury to themselves any conduct which they have a distaste for, and resent it as an outrage to their feelings….But there is no parity between the feeling of a person for his own opinion, and the feeling of another who is offended at his holding it” (93). These people, offended in their distaste, impute “moral delinquency” to what is uncustomary; they “teach that things are right because they are right; because we feel them to be so” (76, 93). Mill demands
that liberals guard against this situation. Distaste, says Mill, is not a reason for prohibition.

Mill, though, admits of certain restrictions on liberty that diminish his claims about the importance of difference. There is a non-trivial chance that breastfeeding mothers could be interpreted as falling under the purview of Mill’s description of “the fool” (85). The fool is marked by “lowness or depravation of taste,” “want of personal dignity and self-respect,” or “defect of prudence”; he or she compels us to judge and evokes distaste in others (85-7). Mill says that the fool, as long as his or her actions do not harm another, should not be denied liberty, but that social sanctions, the “natural consequence of his faults” may be “very severe” (86). It is a fair assumption that Mill did not intend these passages to be wielded against groups like breastfeeding mothers, but it is notable that the descriptions he provides seem easily applicable to mothers who breastfeed in public. Why is the case of the fool not just another case in which “mere displeasure” does not constitute harm? But perhaps more troubling from the perspective of my argument is Mill’s discussion of “offenses against decency” and the “objection to publicity”:

Again, there are many acts which, being directly injurious only to the agents themselves, ought not to be legally interdicted, but which, if done publicly, are a violation of good manners, and coming this within the category of offences against others, may rightfully be prohibited. Of this kind are offences against decency; on which it is unnecessary to dwell.... (109)

One wishes that Mill would have dwelt. Why is a violation of good manners classified as an offense against others that may rightfully be prohibited, when earlier he claims that “mere displeasure” does not constitute harm? What offenses against decency does Mill have in mind, things that are acceptable in private but demand prohibition in public? Perhaps he is thinking of public displays of affection? Or of public sex or masturbation? Or of public nudity? The significant point here is that this logic—indeed, this very language—is used to oppress marginalized groups in the public sphere. Breastfeeding mothers are routinely accused of
“violation of good manners” by virtue of enacting their breastfeeding in public. As such, allowing prohibition of acts which offend decency is problematic, since decency is a contested concept that is context-dependent, and because it is subject to definition by dominant groups.

William Miller (1997) takes disgust more seriously as a political problem, arguing that disgust is a “powerful anti-democratic force, subverting the minimal demands for tolerance” (206). Miller explores the problem of equality and disgust at length in a chapter on Orwell’s socialism. Orwell, in The Road To Wigan Pier, discusses frankly his experience as a middle-class social reformer, experiencing disgust toward those beneath him who he would like to help. Orwell claims that the basis of class inequality is that the bourgeois “cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal...It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class-distinctions, but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class-distinctions....To get outside of the class-racket I have got to suppress not merely my private snobbishness, but most of my other tastes and prejudices as well” (Miller 240, 249-50). The problem of disgust, for Miller, is that rational desire is often overcome by the senses: by the physical manifestation of the disgust response. So, concludes Miller, disgust “works against ideas of equality” (251).

Martha Nussbaum, following the general line of thought in Mill and in Miller, explores the role of disgust in the law in Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law. Because of the hierarchizing effects of disgust, Nussbaum argues that “the cognitive content of disgust is deeply problematic...and its social operation poses dangers to a just society” (70). Indeed, she argues that disgust cannot be a basis for law or public policy. “The use of disgust as criterion has no legal value; the appeal to disgust would be better replaced by other notions, especially notions of damage or harm” (126). Nussbaum argues for a modified Millian harm principle focusing on actual harm done, and refusing to consider disgust as “harmful” merely because it causes
displeasure. Nussbaum discusses alleged cases of “disgust-as-harm,” but shows that even in these cases, disgust is not the relevant criterion for legal impermissibility—a person’s disgust cannot be a “legally salient factor” in a liberal society (163). Disgusting actions cannot be banned because they are disgusting; they can be banned only if they are shown to produce harm. If a disgusting action causes harm, it can be banned on the basis of that harm rather than on the basis of the disgust. I follow Nussbaum’s formulation of the harm principle; indeed, it is imperative because, as we have seen, the social operation of disgust is fundamentally illiberal.

From this theoretical foundation, it is clear that the content of the disgusting is socially constructed within the context of the oppression of women, queer people, people of color, and disabled people. This forges the disgusting into a sword that can be wielded against oppressed groups with the moral superiority and sure-footedness of natural, universal law. Because of this, the conceptualization of public and private spheres absent domination and oppression must use as its “starting point of departure the perspective of those at the bottom of the scale of respectability” (Warner 1999: xi). The experience of breastfeeding mothers and of others who evoke disgust is therefore of primary importance in conceptualizing ideal manifestations of public and private spheres. The goal is to create a public sphere marked by equality and autonomy in which disgust no longer distorts people’s experience of public space (1999: 39).

Part 3: In public with the monstrous breast

In order to theorize the ideal of an equal and autonomous public sphere, we must understand the current lived experience of breastfeeding mothers; how exactly do breastfeeding mothers today encounter domination and oppression in the public sphere? I identify three responses of breastfeeding mothers to their poor fit in the public sphere. The first is exclusion, through which
mothers are removed from the public sphere and public visibility despite their legal right to be there. The second is accommodation, through which mothers discipline or manage their own behavior in order to accommodate their deviance within the norms of the public. The third is affirmation, through which a small portion of mothers challenge the norms excluding them.

Exclusion is a response in which the mother either removes herself from the public sphere for breastfeeding or in which the mother is functionally excluded from the public sphere to do so. The logic of exclusion maintains public-space-as-usual. The most basic form of the logic of exclusion occurs when a mother decides to stay home or leaves the public sphere when her baby gets hungry. Cindy Stearns, in a series of interviews with women about their experience breastfeeding, found that many “went to great lengths to make sure that they were not seen breastfeeding outside their homes. Women would nurse in department store dressing rooms and cars” (314). In this view, public life is antithetical to the enactment of breastfeeding.

Because of this, many liberal feminists and others have advocated for lactation rooms in public places, special private rooms in which women can comfortably breastfeed their babies out of sight. Lactation rooms are found in public places like malls, museums, and churches. I argue that the rise of non-workplace lactation rooms is merely exclusion masquerading behind a benevolent veneer. That is, while lactation rooms do provide choice to breastfeeding mothers, they provide choice within a public context of discomfort and disgust. Lactation rooms provide choice, but the primary beneficiary is not the mother, it is the bystanders who no longer have to see her breastfeeding. As Alison Bartlett notes, some “women would no doubt be grateful for such consideration, saved from the hostile public gaze. But I feel insulted, being locked away out of sight” (181). Lactation rooms offer the appearance of deep care for breastfeeding mothers, but functionally isolate and remove women from the public sphere. Moreover, lactation rooms deny
women the one publicly acceptable reason for feeding in public: that it is necessary for their babies. If feeding in private is available, women who want to feed in public without being excluded or isolated have no publicly acceptable excuse for doing so. Thus the “choice” that the lactation room provides actually operates to restrict choice by defining the appropriate place for the activity. And in this definition of the appropriate place, lactation rooms function to “conceal the lactating body from the public eye,” allowing the public once again to forget that breastfeeding mothers exist and have needs (Lane 10). In themselves, lactation rooms may provide women with welcome choice; in cultural context, however, and especially to the extent that they render public breastfeeding even less acceptable, they are troublesome.

Accommodation, on the other hand, occurs when mothers breastfeed in public in a way that attempts to abide by the norms of the public sphere. While some people think breastfeeding in public is never acceptable, others believe breastfeeding in public is acceptable if the mother enacts a requisite set of accommodations. The most common qualification placed on women’s public breastfeeding is discretion. Discretion—the demand to hide the act from view—“is how the contradiction between the intimacy of breastfeeding and the antithetical ideals of public space are reconciled” (Lane 7). The discretion of the accommodating breastfeeding mother takes two forms: invisibility and signals of apology.

Many women attempt to be invisible while breastfeeding—that is, they attempt to pass as if they are not breastfeeding (Stearns 313). In order to approximate invisibility, mothers engage in a number of practices, such as wearing special clothing, or nursing the baby in a carrier. Women frequently “speak with pride about no one even knowing what they were doing, when, in fact, they were really breastfeeding” (Stearns 313). The goal of invisibility has political implications—unsurprisingly, invisibility. To achieve invisibility, the mother must go out of her
way not to draw attention to herself. If she engages in discussion with someone and they approach her, they are likely to realize that she is engaged in breastfeeding and to burst her tenuous invisibility. In this way, the goal of invisibility forces the mother out of active participation in public life—one cannot be an active participant and also invisible. Moreover, if she is successful in achieving invisibility, the outcome of her success is to reinforce the idea that the public sphere is a disembodied place and to render maternity politically invisible.

When invisibility is not possible, accommodating breastfeeding mothers enact what Lane calls a signal of apology: “The performance of public breastfeeding must involve some sort of gesture or form of bodily comportment that will convey to others the mother’s modesty” (9). A signal of apology can include wearing a nursing cover or blanket over the baby, ending conversation, averting eyes, or “stepping back” (Lane 9). When women enact these signals of apology, public reception to their breastfeeding is usually not hostile, though women often find that others react to them in equally apologetic ways, backing off and giving space (Lane 9).

In recent years, it has become commonplace to buy a specialized nursing cover rather than to cover with a blanket. The nursing cover considers the comfort of others while discounting the comfort of the mother and the baby: Stearns finds that many women will use a cover even if they worry that it is unsafe for the baby due to extremely hot conditions (313). These covers, which look like large tents, have rigid material that keeps the top open so the mother can gaze at her nursing baby even while covered. It is notable that in promotional materials for nursing covers, the mother is generally looking lovingly at her baby, rather than engaged with the outside world. The culture of the nursing cover in this way reinforces the split between motherhood and publicness—while the mother is breastfeeding she is engaged in breastfeeding, not with the wider world. “Looking for a little extra privacy while nursing in public? Only Bébé au Lait
Nursing Covers have a patented open neckline that holds the cover away from mom and baby—allowing them to maintain eye contact so they can continue to bond while breastfeeding on the go” (Bébé au Lait). The nursing cover erects an isolated and isolating private bubble around the mother and her baby. So while she remains in public, she erects a private space around herself; she may as well hang a placard around her neck: “Do not approach! Do not engage!” A mother ensconced under a nursing cover is the opposite of invisible; she is hypervisible. She is calling attention to her deviance, to her unequal treatment in public.

The signals of apology of accommodating breastfeeding mothers are the dunce caps or scarlet letters of the public sphere. Women are made to apologize for being in public, for being women, for choosing to breastfeed. It is an enactment of inequality. Accommodating breastfeeding mothers, though they remain in public, are functionally excluded from active public life. Breastfeeding that is practiced in this way maintains the norms of the public sphere by reinforcing the split between embodied activities and public participation, between motherhood and active public life. The onus here is firmly on the mother to take into account the discomfort of others rather than the comfort of her and her baby.

It is important to note that my argument does not imply that women who exclude themselves, accommodate the public norms, or otherwise discipline their own breastfeeding have done anything wrong or blameworthy. On an individual basis, given the constraints, these actions are understandable. My argument should not be construed as saying that the desire to breastfeed in private is itself blameworthy or necessarily evidence of false consciousness.

The third response of breastfeeding mothers to the poor fit between breastfeeding and the norms of the public is affirmation. Unlike exclusion and accommodation, affirmation represents a challenge by breastfeeding mothers to the norms excluding them. A mother who reacts to the
poor fit between breastfeeding and the public sphere through affirmation refuses to accommodate the norms of the public, does not attempt to be invisible, and does not enact signals of apology. She is often subject to censure, the severity of which depends on context. Others often describe the way in which these mothers perform public breastfeeding using the phrases “whip it out” and “flashing.” “Well, you just don’t want to whip it out in public—you know, whip your boobs out for everyone to see,” says one of the mothers Lane interviews (12). The phrases “whip it out” and “flashing” are notable because they indicate that the mother is transgressing norms of sexuality (showing her breast, at least for a moment while the baby latches).

Women who engage in this type of breastfeeding are not engaging in gratuitous nudity or flaunting anything. In fact, affirmation may often look similar to invisible accommodating breastfeeding—the difference is found in the intention and actions of the mother while doing it, not in the amount of skin she is showing. What is so transgressive about the affirming breastfeeding mother is that she insists on breastfeeding in public in a way that rejects public norms. Affirming breastfeeding mothers refuse to ignore their own desires—for comfort, for participation, or for equality. They could easily meet their babies’ nutritional needs through exclusion or accommodation, but they do not. Affirmation also actively challenges the politics of shame and disgust that marginalize breastfeeding women as described by Warner: affirming breastfeeding mothers may or may not be immune to the pangs of shame that occur when treated as an object of contempt in public, but they have made a decision to privilege their own desires above the comfort of others, to demand equal treatment, and to act as participants in the public sphere.

Though much affirmation is not explicitly political, it can be: nurse-ins have become a commonplace protest against institutions that discriminate against breastfeeding mothers. In
these protests, many mothers gather and occupy a space while nursing their babies. These protests are effective because they make visible what was invisible, and because they explicitly challenge the split between maternal practices and public life. Here are mothers engaged in a female caregiving activity that, when done together, constitutes a political act. Nurse-ins are one of the most tangible ways that mothers have been agitating to challenge the norms excluding women from full inclusion in public life.

Breastfeeding that is enacted as an affirmation challenges norms that would exclude breastfeeding mothers. Affirming breastfeeding challenges public-space-as-usual, making visible the embodied aspects of women’s lives. Affirming breastfeeding stands as a counter-friction to the politics of shame and disgust that operate to rank and to disempower norm-defying actors.

Will affirmative breastfeeding make others uncomfortable? Probably. As we have seen, disgust and discomfort are often implicated in public breastfeeding. Miller writes that the disgusting “force[s] us to look and notice, or to suffer self-consciousness about not looking or not not looking” (82). What does respect demand? There is no answer to fit all occasions, but in an ideal society we should like to see others treat a breastfeeding mother as a fully human actor—one who is entitled to embrace in public all parts of her human life—not as someone who is temporarily circumscribed into a realm of invisibility. In the next section I turn to the theory of an ideal equal and autonomous public sphere.

**Part 4: Equal and autonomous public and private spheres**

If breastfeeding mothers and other norm-defying actors experience marginalization in the public sphere, the question is how an ideal public could espouse equality and autonomy. The goal is not equal access to the ability to act like the normative actor, but true equality as the ability to
experience public space, to participate in public life, and to opt for privacy while fully experiencing one’s difference. What is needed is an ideal in which “publicness and privacy [are] equally accessible to all” (Warner 2002: 21). As discussed earlier, I agree with Nussbaum that it is impermissible to prohibit acts on the basis of the disgust of onlookers. But legal permissibility (the right to breastfeed in public) is not enough. An equal and autonomous public sphere must achieve more than legal access; in this section I argue that this ideal has three main features.

The first feature of an equal and autonomous public sphere is that every person must be able to occupy public space and the public sphere while embracing all significant aspects of their identity. Thus demands for actors to cover or to tone down their difference would not be tolerated. Individuals are empowered to define what aspects of their lives are significant to their expression. As Iris Marion Young puts it, the ideal of the public must include “persons stand[ing] forth with their differences acknowledged and respected, though perhaps not completely understood, by others” (Young 1990: 119). Breastfeeding mothers would not need to exclude themselves from the public sphere, to discipline their own breastfeeding, or to offer signals of apology for their difference. The ability to experience life in the public sphere will not hinge on the ability to act like the ideal public actor.

The second feature of an equal and autonomous public sphere is that the comfort of others cannot weigh more than an individual’s own needs in public. A breastfeeding mother may reasonably take into account any number of social factors in her decisions about how to undertake her public breastfeeding. But it is problematic if the needs and comfort of others become the primary factors under consideration. It is even more problematic if her own desires and needs and the needs of her baby are actively denied to preserve the comfort of others. What must be avoided are cases like the one Stearns found in which women use nursing covers even
though they worry that the cover is endangering their babies in extreme heat.

The third feature of an equal and autonomous public sphere involves the ability to leave the public sphere—all people must be able to opt for privacy in a way that does not entail invisibility or coerced exclusion. Some women will prefer to breastfeed in relatively more private places than will others. Some women may not be comfortable baring their breast, or they may not be comfortable doing so because of the specific people they happen to be in public with. Moreover, many babies go through phases of being too distractible to nurse in public and may require privacy in order to feed. This is the definition of “autonomy”—that women can freely choose how and where to enact their breastfeeding.

How can we safeguard women’s ability to opt for privacy in an autonomous way? We must keep in mind Young’s definition of privacy as “an aspect of his or her life and activity that any individual has a right to exclude others from. I mean here to emphasize the direction of agency, as the individual withdrawing rather than being kept out” (Young 1998: 441). The important characteristic of autonomous privacy is that it is distinct from invisibility. The problem is that in the context of an unjust reality, we cannot assume that women’s desire to breastfeed privately is an exercise of autonomy. Breastfeeding mothers have not been equal partners in the construction of the norms that regulate public breastfeeding; the choices women make about public breastfeeding are constrained within the current, unequal context. Today, “the carefully managed and often secretive nature of much breastfeeding reveals volumes about women’s status” (Stearns 322). But in a context of equal and autonomous public and private spheres, the use of lactation rooms, for example, can be considered relatively unproblematic. The key difference is that privacy should be privileged, but invisibility should be guarded against.

At this point in the argument, it is necessary to consider whether the ideal I have
defended is generalizable beyond the case of breastfeeding in public. I take it to apply fairly easily to the cases of queer people, disabled people, and people of color in the public sphere. But what about cases that moral intuition may deem impermissible, such as public nudity or public sex? I have no firm conclusion about these cases, but like Nussbaum I insist that the permissibility of these behaviors must not hinge on the disgust or discomfort they evoke, or on custom, but on evidence of harm. It is certain, as my argument shows, that disgust and discomfort are used to marginalize and to oppress. Prohibition of these acts would have to hinge on clear, demonstrable harm. Nussbaum applies her theory to the case of public nudity:

What about public nudity, just walking around without clothes, without any sex acts or other behavior of a sort that might be thought to frighten or threaten children? It seems...innocuous; in many countries it is routine beach behavior. People may think it is a disruptive invitation to sex, but that is their problem…. Reasons supporting laws against public nudity are weak. (303-4)

What is key is that argumentation must not admit disgust as harm; discussion must focus on harm done, not on the fact that some people experience discomfort.

Another question that this ideal raises is whether people should be held responsible for their disgust. Is an agent who feels disgust upon seeing a woman breastfeed blameworthy? What is important is their reaction to the feeling of disgust. A non-oppressive public sphere would be one in which the burden of potentially oppressive disgust is on the person experiencing disgust, not on the person who is evoking disgust. A person can experience disgust, recognize their disgust, inquire into why they are disgusted, and cope with the disgust in a way that does not impose moral indignation on the other. A line of thought such as, “Why am I disgusted by this? Is that valid?” is ideal. Of course, this may not always be possible; it is not expected that every person will be as self-aware as Orwell ruminating on his distaste for the smelly lower classes. In an equal and autonomous public sphere, the person evoking disgust cannot be removed, but the
person who is experiencing disgust is welcome to leave if that is necessary. It must be stressed, though, that a public sphere in which everyone else retreats, leaving the breastfeeding mother alone but “in public,” is still an exclusionary public sphere; the retreat of those who are disgusted is not the ideal outcome, though in sufficiently small numbers it may be a reasonable outcome. Better yet a society that nurtures the ability of people to interrogate themselves in a thoughtful manner, that encourages not the “I must confess no object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous breast!” of Gulliver, but rather a deep skepticism of the disgust response itself.

Conclusion

At the close of this interrogation into the nature of the ideal public sphere, though, the pressing question is: what is a liberal to do? The laws are, for the most part, good. Breastfeeding mothers have legal access to public space. It is not possible or desirable to legislate what people can be comfortable viewing, or how people will respond to a disgust reaction. The fact remains that breastfeeding mothers experience unequal treatment in the public sphere, and that this is indicative of a failure to achieve liberal ideals. This is a case in which culture must change to realize liberal ideals, even as liberalism is for the most part unable to directly challenge norms.

Warner, following Fraser, argues for the potential of counterpublics to effect change. Fraser defines counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” in cases where groups of people are excluded from the dominant public sphere (1990: 67). The ideas of counterculture and difference are an apt response to the imperative of the public sphere that anyone is welcome, so long as they act like the ideal public actor. Warner, expanding on this theory, argues that people in counterpublics are part of a world-making enterprise. That is, the actions, speech, and
embodiment of members of counterpublics attempt to “realize the world understanding they articulate” (2002: 114). Norm-defying actions can begin to create a world with different norms. This is especially significant for norm-defying actions that have to do with issues that are generally thought of as private, like breastfeeding. The public enactment of normatively private behaviors is by definition potentially transformative; in making these private behaviors public, members of counterpublics experiment with a “world-making publicness.”

It is often thought…that the public display of private matters is a debased narcissism, a collapse of decorum, expressivity gone amok, the erosion of any distinction between public and private. But in a counterpublic setting, such display often has the aim of transformation. Styles of embodiment are learned and cultivated, and the affects of shame and disgust that surround them can be tested, and in some cases revalued. (2002: 62-3)

Warner points to the potential of countercultural spaces, discourses, and behaviors to change the very subordination that defines the group as a counterpublic.

What is difficult, of course, is that world-making enterprises directly challenge social norms, and people who engage in world-making enterprises are thereby subject to social sanction. A woman who breastfeeds in public under a nursing cover is not engaged in world-making publicness—she does not have the aim of social transformation. Or, rather, her feeding is engaged in world-making—but the world she is perpetuating through its enactment is the one that already exists, not a transformative one of equality and autonomy. But affirmative breastfeeding can be an enactment of world-making publicness. In this way, the publicness of public breastfeeding can create a world in which the hypersexualization of breasts, and the attendant cultural discomfort with breastfeeding, is diminished.

The transformative potential of Warner’s world-making publicness is the idea that shame and disgust “can be tested, and in some cases revalued” (2002: 63, see also Miller 12, Nussbaum 94-5). People are taught—both explicitly, when told that it is inappropriate, and
implicitly, when they see people leaving the public to breastfeed—that breastfeeding in public is a disgusting act. This is a learned response. In cultures where women breastfeed in public without fanfare, it is treated without fanfare. This is heartening insofar as responses that are learned can be unlearned—or at very least prevented from taking hold in future generations.

Of course, arguments based on generational change are unsatisfying to those who are concerned about the oppression of women today. There is a role to be played immediately by liberal institutions, insofar as they are able to enact changes that will secure equality and autonomy for breastfeeding mothers. But beyond that, we should consider the type of “nudges” that might be designed to support the equality of breastfeeding mothers. For example, when stickers are used to designate that breastfeeding is welcome in a space, wording should be carefully selected. “Breastfeeding welcome here, and anywhere in our establishment” would be a better message than “Lactation Room,” which has the potential to restrict the definition of the appropriate space. Notices in a bathroom that say “Please do not breastfeed here—you are welcome in our space” might help, too, to slowly change public expectations.

The slow pace of change as a result of counterpublic speech is discouraging to feminists. Nevertheless, it points to the importance of women who undertake affirmative public breastfeeding. This is not to say that affirmative public breastfeeding is the only (or most) valid type. What it does suggest is that there is an indispensable role to be played by women who accept the possibility of social exclusion and stigma and breastfeed in public in an affirmative manner. Their “whipping it out” constitutes a type of counterpublic speech that challenges illiberal public norms: norms of public space as male and bodiless, norms of heterosexuality, norms of the objectification and sexualization of breasts, norms of the appropriate use of public space, and the social construction of the content of the disgusting. Perhaps, after all, “whipping
"it out" is as transgressive as conservative critics presume it to be.


iii This list can be expanded ad absurdum. Goffman in Stigma (1963) defined the normative actor as "a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports" (128).


v Courts have emphasized the optional nature of breastfeeding. In Falk v. City of Glendale (2012), the judge ruled that it was the woman’s “desire to breastfeed,” not her pregnancy, that was at issue. The fact that breastfeeding is generally interpreted as a behavioral choice (a “desire” or a “lifestyle”) rather than an immutable status contributes to breastfeeding mothers’ vulnerability in the public sphere.

vi Though there does appear to be disgust with feces cross-culturally, even this disgust is taught. Young children do not exhibit disgust at feces; rather, this disgust is a learned response that appears around three to four years of age. See Miller 12, Nussbaum 94-5.

vii I am not speaking to workplace lactation rooms, because they bring up a different set of issues. Most women are not interested in pumping milk in workspaces. It is conceivable that women could want to pump openly if breastfeeding culture was different or if work culture moved away from the male ideal worker norm, but the current reality is far removed from that possibility.

viii On debate.org, one user justifies his "No" response to the "Should women be allowed to breastfeed in public?" forum with the following reason: "Increasingly, public establishments
have private places for breastfeeding." (http://www.debate.org/opinions/should-women-be-allowed-to-breastfeed-in-public)

"Increasing women’s choices also entails engaging the social construction of desire, in order to understand the degree to which the options that women prefer and the choices that women make are themselves the products of restriction, coercion, and force" (Hirschmann 202).

References


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