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### Book and Exhibition Review

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**BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW**

**Review of *Spaces and Politics of Motherhood*, by Kate Boyer**

Review of *Spaces and Politics of Motherhood*, by Kate Boyer, London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, £24.95. Paperback, 2018, ISBN: 978-1-78660-308-1

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This essay reviews Kate Boyer's book, *Spaces and Politics of Motherhood*.

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Kate Boyer's *Spaces and Politics of Motherhood* (2018) makes an important contribution to feminist studies of motherhood. Through its focus on space and the breadth of qualitative data on which it draws, from breastfeeding activism to mothers' use of transport, Boyer demonstrates in detail how cities and the built environment enable and constrain women's experiences of early motherhood. She deploys new materialisms—the postconstructionist (re)turn to how material bodies and things matter—as the theoretical framework for much of the book and thus extends our understanding of how things and bodies shape the feminist politics of motherhood.

One of the ways the book shifts our understanding of new materialism is by referring directly, for example, to some of the biological properties of breastmilk, including how its contents change to reflect the baby's health. This made Boyer's account both more convincing and intelligible—qualities which studies deploying new materialist perspectives can often lack. What we find so refreshing in Boyer's new materialist reading of breastfeeding, is the possibility that acknowledging the agential qualities of breastmilk, and the painful sensations that often accompany breastfeeding in its early stages after birth, will help us move away from the language of choice surrounding breastfeeding. The agential capacities of milk and its faculties made, for us as readers, the value of new materialist approaches more graspable. Milk is 'attuned' to the baby's needs and its qualities change depending on the health of the mother, for example, antibodies are produced in response to the mother's exposure to bacteria and viruses that are then passed on to the breastfeeding infant via milk.

This focus on the agential capacities of milk also inspired us to think about the multiple agencies at work in breastfeeding. Boyer's attention to the lively materialism of milk challenges the overwhelming emphasis on mothers' 'agency' in this process. For us, this opened up the question of how to think about the agency of the infant in the process of learning—together with the breastfeeding mother—how to breastfeed well. The infant's process of learning seems to us to be undertheorised in literature on breastfeeding, both in academic scholarship and in the guidelines and recommendations given to mothers—perhaps because breastfeeding is viewed as an 'instinct' or 'reflex' on the part of the infant. This may indeed be an apt way to convey

the capacity of the breastfeeding infant to suckle, which is visible from ultrasound imagery as something infants do before birth. However, it neglects how learning to breastfeed is a mutual process in which both the infant and the breastfeeding mother must adapt to each other's bodies. Boyer's efforts to think breastfeeding via new materialism thus has the potential to offer a new way to think about the multiple agencies at work in the breastfeeding 'assemblage.'

One of the most insightful chapters in the book discusses the patent for a portable lactation module designed in the US: 'a small, opaque enclosure intended to create a private space in public for both breastfeeding and nappy changing (81).' Boyer critiques this design for further concealing and segregating women's breastfeeding within public spaces, and she shows how this spatially reinforces the notion that breastfeeding needs to be safely contained. Here Sara Ahmed's concept of the 'affect alien' is brought in to illustrate women's experiences of discomfort while breastfeeding in public, nicely showing how one might theorise these subtle changes of atmosphere. But at the same time, we wondered while reading the book about spaces where bottle-feeding mothers might feel like affect aliens just as much as those who breastfeed. Reading Boyer's account of the affect alien also provoked us to consider how we might theorise feeding babies itself as something which makes women highly visible and vulnerable in different ways.

There is a real effort in Boyer's writing to engage closely with other maternal studies scholarship, such as Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters* (2008) and Bernice Hausman's feminist politics of breastfeeding, and to speak back to a community of motherhood researchers (see Hausman 2003, 2004). Conducting academic scholarship *relationally* in this way is becoming rarer and is a testament to the scholarly contribution of this book. One notable absence, however, is Charlotte Faircloth's work. Her comparative ethnography of La Leche League *Militant Lactivism? Intensive Motherhood and Attachment Parenting in the UK and France* (2013) offers a contrasting perspective on how women politicise breastfeeding emphasizing how the activism of *La Leche League* sustains moral middle-class maternal identities. Further, recent discussion of how black lactivists have organized against Medolac Laboratories'

campaign to purchase pumped breast milk from African-American mothers in Detroit, Michigan (Morrissey and Kimball, 2017) highlights the significance of asking about race when discussing the increased visibility of breastfeeding in public.

This book will interest all motherhood scholars, and in particular those interested in breastfeeding. We would have welcomed more discussion of how race, class and other markers shape how mothers struggle with and resist the unwelcoming spaces around them. In the Introduction, Boyer discusses the diversity of the samples on which she draws, suggesting that this would have been possible. Extending a differentiated analysis of the 'affect alien' to different mothers and considering how, in some instances, bottle-feeding mothers become affect aliens would have been interesting to explore. Although Boyer acknowledges the importance of these markers in terms of trends amongst some women to breastfeed for longer, there is little elaboration on how these markers shape mothers' experiences of public spaces across the various projects. The last two chapters paid more attention to how privileged mothers orient towards and navigate breastfeeding in public and at work more easily. Chapter 5 discusses how breastfeeding picnics are a particular form of unthreatening activism because they take part in green public spaces which are already feminized and civilized: 'breastfeeding in a public park creates a symbolic link between the civilized nature of the park and breastfeeding as a "natural", but nevertheless civilized activity.' (99) Chapter 6 considers how the reasonable break time policy legislation in the US -which gives lactating workers the right to unwaged breaks to pump and access to lactation rooms-fits with a neoliberal model of breastfeeding where waged work and lactation can be combined via breastpumping, but only for privileged mothers. These chapters offer critical insights into the social and spatial complexities of breastfeeding policy and practice. Further research how breastfeeding publics are classed and racialized is needed to address the current gaps in this literature.

Boyer is committed to feminist new materialism as a theoretical framework, and she is also mindful of its potential for depoliticising gender inequality. Moreover, Boyer always emphasises the labour required of mothers to breastfeed, pump milk or pack a pushchair. This is one of the strongest features of the book, giving us a sense that things and spaces do shape early motherhood but that in turn relationships

with these objects and spaces are also structured by wider structural and cultural practices. Boyer's insights into this co-constituting dimension of mothering practices and spaces make this book both theoretically innovative and situate it as part of a long tradition of feminist theorising on maternity.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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