

Nursing My Way Home

It requires a special set of circumstances—or a certain kind of crazy—to explain a move across the country with a 6-week-old infant. In my family’s case, the circumstance was a fantastic Syracuse University faculty position for my partner. The certain kind of crazy was a delusion particular to brand-new parents that life with a baby will be as easily managed as life before the baby. Sure, we knew life would be complicated and different in a million unimaginable ways—the key word here being “unimaginable.” Precisely because the details of parental life are unimaginable to non-parents, things like picking up your six-week postpartum self and your quite recently fetal child and moving from Texas to Syracuse seem deceptively undaunting.

We arrived in Syracuse in late August, just as our daughter realized the difference between the breast and the bottle. My first month here has been as the nursing mom of a breastfeeding purist, which has made for an interesting introduction to my new hometown. A short list of places where I’ve nursed since moving:

At the first tollbooth on the New York state thruway. (“Hold on, I’ve got exact change here somewhere...”) At Sparky Town. (Having told my crying baby, “Hang on, kiddo, I’ll hook you up as soon as we get to the lesbian joint.”) At the Real Food Co-op. At Green Lakes. Inside Byrd Library on the SU campus. At the bus stop in front of the Hall of Languages. At Metro over some long-awaited sushi. (There is no craving like a pregnant woman’s craving for sushi.) At Dinosaur BBQ. In the parking lot of Temple Concord during family Shabbat services. In the chapel during Rosh Hashanah services. In the choir loft of St. David’s Episcopal Church. (Thanks to the good folks at St David’s for lending their space to Bet Havarim for Jewish high holiday services. That’s a really big organ you have there.) And, of course, in the front yard of our new house while the movers carried our furniture in and neighbors came by to meet us.

Being a queer nursing mom has meant letting it all hang out. It has meant exposing myself in obvious and not so obvious ways. As a femme dyke who could pass as straight if you squint or if your gaydar’s on the fritz, I have always made it a point to mention “my partner, she” in the first few minutes of any conversation with a stranger or new acquaintance. When I was pregnant, I was more conscientious than ever about coming out, since most people who saw my pregnant belly also seemed to see a sticker on it marked “husband.”

Now that I’m walking through the world with this child outside of my body, I’m at once less out and more out. Each day presents a hundred opportunities for personal conversations, a hundred moments to tell the truth: when you have a young child, questions that are typically social taboos become routine. (Imagine being asked your weight, age, and gender identity ten to twenty times a day...) When my partner and I are out together with our daughter, it’s clear that we are a queer family. But when it’s just me and baby Avital, I know that the invisible husband has returned to walk beside us.

And since the invisible husband turns us invisible, turns me invisible as a dyke and my daughter invisible as queerspawn, and erases my partner from the picture entirely, it's my job to do away with him.

It's him or me, really. I'm at a new time in my life, a new place in the world. It's easy to get lost. Who is this person married to an invisible husband, living somewhere wool socks are useful in September, attending playgroups with a roomful of moms, getting through one item a day (if she's lucky) on her list of things to do? Who is this person who doesn't bike everywhere, or swim every day, or make plays, dance at house parties and bailes, or draw a paycheck? Offing the invisible husband only gets me so far. Our family's physical dislocation from the sunny town we called home compounds the dislocation that all new parents feel. Everything about my landscape has changed. The long-familiar faces of friends we've had for over a decade have given way to the kind smiles of new neighbors. No one here knew me before I was a parent.

Surprisingly, it is in nursing Avital that I find a way back to my pre-mama self. Nursing her at home, I can take one-handed notes, breathe some air into writing projects gone dormant, remember that I am writer as well as mama. And out in the world, I find myself claiming breastfeeding as a femme dyke activity. Public breastfeeding is femininity uncontained—a classic way to define femme. It refuses shame around the female body and reclaims the breast from circulation in a heteropatriarchal economy of desire. So brazenly womanly as to be unfeminine, like femme, public breastfeeding is not shy or apologetic about a woman's body in action. My daughter is hungry; I feed her.

This little political epiphany takes me a long way. Suddenly, I'm not embarrassed about nursing publicly; I'm not sorry that this is my introduction to a new community. Instead, it reminds me that when people meet my mama-self they're meeting my whole self. So this is how people will come to know me, a little much and a little out there, newly arrived and still on the journey, making family, making home.

Jennifer Margulies