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**MAMA-ING**

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**ABSTRACT**

This collaborative photo essay follows an auto-ethnographic methodology to reflect and reject the shaming of nursing bodies in public. Polaroids are used as a medium to capture everyday life situations between a mother and a son, where sexualization has simply no place to be.

**KEYWORDS**

auto-ethnography, nursing, public space, polaroid, visual archive

**BIO**

Dina Benbrahim is an Endowed Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Arkansas. She graduated from the University of Florida with an MFA in Design and Visual Communication. She also holds an MS in Marketing and Communication from the Université Internationale de Casablanca and a Bachelor in Business Administration from Al Akhawayn University, Morocco. Dina has 8 years of industry experience in NYC and Casablanca, working with clients including the National Women's History Museum and Absolut Vodka. She also taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo and University of Florida.

Kári Björn is an Icelandic photographer, currently based in the United States. Björn is inspired by his naïve childhood conception of "America the great!" In parallel, he is fascinated by its most blatant flaws such as wealth inequality and mass incarceration. His works have been exhibited on both sides of the Atlantic, at Aperture Gallery in New York City, Eastern State Penitentiary Museum in Philadelphia and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Björn's series have been awarded by Hasselblad and his documentary stories have been published in *American Photography*, *Dazed*, and *States of Incarceration*.

Naël Kárasón is our beautiful and kind son who loves his mama's breastmilk, Lapinou the bunny and bath times.

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**PHOTO 1**

This collaborative, auto-ethnographic project was born out of exhaustion. We felt exhausted by all the efforts that were put together to shame women for breastfeeding in public. Why are we sexualized during a moment of necessity—bonding and feeding our child? Why should I have to breastfeed in tiny

rooms of the size of a closet? During a faculty orientation, I have been asked to breastfeed in a toilet. Why should I feed my newborn between people urinating and defecating? I was in a car dealership full of men to buy a new car and because the process is long, I had to breastfeed my son. A salesperson blatantly took a photo of us and was not held accountable for his deplorable actions. Was that so surprising that I was not wearing any product to hide my breasts when breastfeeding then?

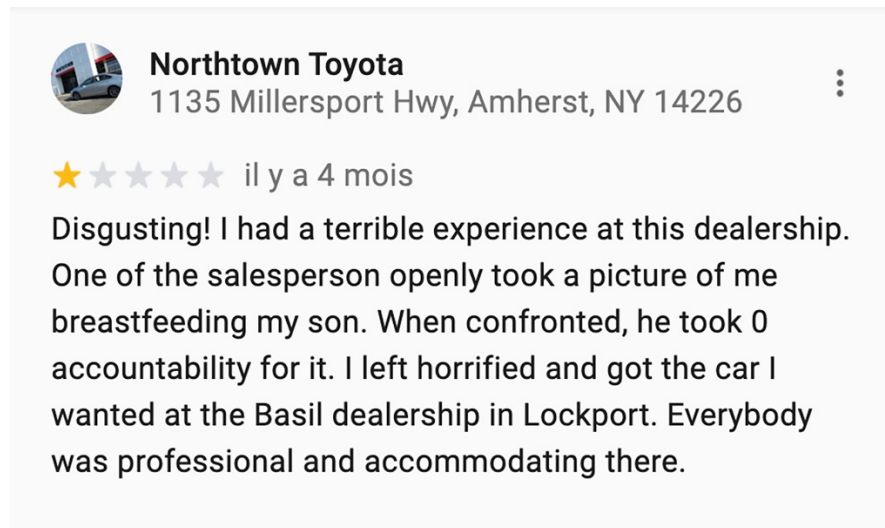


FIGURE 1

Amy Bentley (2014) argues that female breasts became objects of desire when breastfeeding during the nineteenth century which coincides with the rise of processed baby food. This latter was advertised as the most hygienic and nourishing food a baby could possibly have, making lactating bodies unnecessary for feeding. Breastfeeding only became legal in all 50 states until 2018, with Utah and Idaho finally removing it from their public indecency statutes. Women's breasts have been sexualized to sell toothpaste, so is that so ridiculous to think that a breast out in the public is seeking the male's gaze? Yes, it is, and here is why. Women do not belong in the domestic sphere anymore. In nineteenth century American culture, the concept of True Womanhood dictated the behavioral code of a 'good' woman. Barbara Welter's essay *The Cult of True Womanhood* (1966) defines *True Womanhood* with four attributes: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Domesticity centered the lives of women on the home, immersing themselves in domestic tasks of housekeeping, child-rearing among other family-oriented tasks. We have left the nineteenth-century two centuries ago.

Moreover, the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* - CDC (2021) recommends exclusive breastfeeding until at least the age of 6 months because breastfed infants have reduced risks of asthma, obesity, type 1 diabetes, severe lower respiratory disease, acute otitis media (ear infections), sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), gastrointestinal infections (diarrhea/vomiting), and necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC) for preterm infants.



**PHOTO 2**

Additionally, breastfeeding can help lower a mother's risk of high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, ovarian cancer, and breast cancer. Doctor Ruth Petersen, the director of CDC's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, believes that "breastfeeding provides unmatched health benefits for babies and mothers. It is the clinical gold standard for infant feeding and nutrition, with breast milk uniquely tailored to meet the health needs of a growing baby. We must do more to create supportive and safe environments for mothers who choose to breastfeed." If 90% of families breastfed exclusively for six months, the United States would save \$13 billion per year and prevent 911 deaths, all of which would be in infants, each year.

The three of us started this project, *mama-ing*, as a form of silent protest against the shaming of nursing in public. We named it *mama-ing* because I chose to breastfeed in my process of being a mother to Naël, and all ways of mothering are valid. Every time I had to breastfeed in public, Kári snapped a polaroid. The polaroid has been a medium of memory for families since the late 1940s. Edwin H. Land, who was behind the Polaroid Corporation, was inspired by his three-year-old daughter who asked why she could not see the picture he had just taken of her on his camera during their family vacations. This is how the instant camera film was born. As a result, capturing what should be commonly accepted as an innocent family moment could not be done with anything else than polaroids. The polaroid makes it a statement of its own.

At the beginning of this creative journey, snapping a polaroid picture made me feel uncomfortable. I felt the weight of people's looks becoming suddenly heavier and heavier. But as we kept going with this idea, the world around me vanished. In these polaroids, I rarely look elsewhere than at Naël. He has my full attention from start to end and no one else matters. My breast is not a sexual object. My breast is a powerful part of my body that adapts to Naël's needs in a way that no processed baby food can ever replace. And if society wants to sexualize and condemn this natural act, it is not on me. It is not on nursing bodies. It is on those who perpetuate this idiotic shame. We hope this project inspires a visual photographic archive for all to feel safe nursing in public.

**PHOTO 3****PHOTO 4**



**PHOTO 5**



**PHOTO 6**



**PHOTO 7**



**PHOTO 8**



**PHOTO 9**



**PHOTO 10**





PHOTO 11



PHOTO 12



PHOTO 13



PHOTO 14



PHOTO 15



PHOTO 16



PHOTO 17



PHOTO 18

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