



Review: White Gold. Stories of Breast Milk Sharing

written by Michael Costello
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Those of the general public who have heard of milk kinship usually regard milk kinship as a feature of “primitive”, “tribal” lineage-based societies, often semi-feudal, with residues almost confined to today’s Middle East and Central Asia. In this volume Professor Susan Falls presents detail of her research on a kinship network of human breast milk sharers in a capitalist society today in the southern USA. Her fieldwork is “at home” among women who share breast milk in variously-structured networks, and she discusses many aspects of the practices,



and the social and commercial barriers erected against this that include so-called common sense, feelings of disgust, prejudice and pressures from commerce and the state. These often give rise to breast milk sharers finding defence in self-imposed anonymity to hide themselves and the networks from public view. Falls discusses a topical phenomenon which is very much alive, that goes beyond occasional feeding another mother's baby. It goes beyond the practice of hiring wet nurses, where the milk shared is often sought in the expectation that strong qualities in the mother will be passed onto the child through the milk. Falls examines the social networks of milk sharers that have arisen.

How companies exert pressures against breast feeding mothers includes 'inducements' given to doctors, midwives and health workers to recommend their factory-produced substitute products, as *The Guardian* (27.2.2018) reported: "Formula milk companies are continuing to use aggressive, clandestine and often illegal methods to target in the poorest parts of the world to encourage them to use powdered milk over breastfeeding."

The discussion is an anthropological one which ranges across sources of ideas within the discipline and tackles the many different ways breast milk sharing is organised. The chapters are each part of an interlacing web of evidence, ethnological, historical, cultural and commercial, covering notions of and the practices of breast milk sharing and buying, pulling them all together in lengthy narrative fashion. She considers the argument among sharers and others as to whether donated milk should be free or paid for, but shows that today's principal contentions are between social/personal wishes among mothers' preferences and the drive by companies to commercialise and regulate breast milk sharing through the promotion of substitutes by "the profit-driven formula",





in the words of one of her informants (p.19). She herself adds: “the history of ideas [...] is important, but I am interested in a more pragmatic question: How and why do tokens of ‘liquid gold’ matter?” (p. 19).

The imposition of state regulation works against individual milk sharers’ perceptions and creates difficulties in sharers constructing social networks among themselves.

It is the telling of these conflicts that runs as a thread through the work, and lead to her describing human breast milk as in danger of being looked on as a trading commodity, one interpretation of the “White Gold” of the title. Despite the complication, she finds: “As a patterned socio-techno-material practice that is reproducing itself, milk sharing becomes ever more mainstream each day but still promises an array of undiscovered critical possibilities and outcomes” (p. 189).

Susan Falls’ partisanship in her advocacy of the merits of breast milk sharing as against buying substitutes is clear: “A refusal to participate in the commodification of breast milk using an unregulated sharing infrastructure is a way of refusing to reduce life to capital, and I cannot help but to (sic) wonder what legal, cultural, or economic techniques might soon make informal sharing more difficult” she muses (pp. 23-24). She returns to these ideas many times in the course of setting out and interpreting the wealth of findings from hers’ and others’ fieldwork, with theoretical elaborations on them.

Hers is fieldwork “at home”, and was stimulated by her discovery in her own family of an extensive network of children related through women who shared their milk and their constructing milk kinship through cross-breastfeed babies was a stimulant to embarking on the research. It draws on interviews, conference discussions and an impressively extensive literature which carries the reader through time and across the world, through the views of multiple scholars, providing a wide range of references for researchers while commenting on them herself.



The whole makes for a challenging wealth of information for scholars who are interested in the topic and others who are finding their way through actual practice of breast milk sharing, as the author does not disguise her commitment to further study.

Indeed, she finds examination of the width of horizons to be opened up by further investigation imperative if people are to stem what she sees as the drift to total commodification of the milk of human beings to what some regard as cannibalistic, being sold in ice-cream, pies, pâtés etc.

It is her conclusion that “Milk sharing is a model for the circulation of material culture and ideas of many kinds, and it lends texture to the body politic a surprising, empowering, and diverse form of civil society.” (p. 24). As to the contention of commercialisation and resisting it, Professor Falls allows for possible compromises: “Perhaps relationships enabled by commodified versus donated breast milk could work on a continuum, some participating in it strictly for the money while others do it for the emotional satisfaction, or for some, a bit of both” (p.197).

Some non-specialists might find this volume something of a medley that makes it difficult to fathom what could appear to them at times as somewhat “crowded”. A book for reference, a possible warning, a promotion of more social interactions between people based on sharing human milk and, certainly, stimulating for thought and research.

Susan Falls. 2017. [*White Gold. Stories of Breast Milk Sharing*](#). 270 pages. Pb: \$25.00. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press. ISBN 978-1-4962-0189-8