

White Gold: Stories of Breast Milk Sharing

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Reviewed by Sevasti-Melissa Nolas

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Susan Falls' ethnography charts the surprising, and little-known, practice of breast milk sharing amongst what she calls a 'counternetwork' of women-mothers based predominantly in the southern states of the United States. The practice of breast milk sharing, however, extends across North America and beyond, and is often described as 'nurture kinship' (viii).

Reminding us that the particulars of breast-feeding have varied across space and time, the women-mothers who feature in Falls' ethnography engage in a counter-economics of care that is of the moment and of anti-capitalist counter-cultural practices: surplus breast milk is collected, frozen and shared for free with mothers or other primary care-givers who, for various reasons, are unable to produce their own. 'White gold' is how sharers in the network talk about breast milk, signalling their beliefs about its value. The book sets off to understand 'how milk moves, what it does, and what we can learn from looking at it ethnographically' (16).

Social networking sites have played a key role in bringing families together across distances and have made the practice of milk sharing more visible and more accessible. Nevertheless, Falls finds that the majority of both donors and recipients in the network are white, middle-class and, to her surprise, tend towards political conservatism; many of the participants are practising Christians and/or members of the US military. Nevertheless, and according to Falls, the network in its practice achieves an assemblage of families across the political spectrum in a time of political division, when many feel like 'strangers in their own land' (Hochschild 2016). This is a fascinating example of stepping out of one's bubble to encounter (an)other, though, as I reflect on below, the possibilities of political transformation seem limited.

The ethnography is organised around an introduction, six chapters and six visual interruptions. The ethnography *White Gold* was the result of Falls' own experiences and encounters with this 'peer-to-peer exchange' network, and her experiences are used to drive the narrative, which is constructed out

of the very best of ethnographic practice (archival work, interviews with donors and donees and significant others, and visual research). The use of images throughout the book, but in particular in the spaces between chapters, is especially noteworthy, and successfully creates what Falls describes as 'purposeful interruption' to the more linear ethnographic narrative: it is a disruption, a pause and counter-pose to the making of maternal subjectivities, and it is an ethics that encourages the reader to (re)think other lives. Indeed, the images are arresting: a couple of them, such as the Lactating Madonna and the depiction of the Romana Caritas story, insinuated themselves into my mind's eye and stuck with me from the first browse. The ethnographic material is analysed through a range of anthropological lenses including kinship, exchange, agency and infrastructure, and drawing on the interface between anthropology and art, and architecture in particular, Falls uses the concept of 'free space' to grasp the meaning of the emerging practice.

For me, the book achieved its goals of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Before encountering it, I had no knowledge of milk sharing as described in the book and my knowledge of peer-to-peer exchange was limited to things such as time banks, freecycling, and open-source computing. In this sense, this book is an ethnography that deserves to take a place in the growing literature on everyday activism and other 'experimental forms of dissent' (24) which have burgeoned since the financial crisis and which still largely focus on conventional politics and political struggles while ignoring gendered aspects of everyday life. What Falls' ethnography brilliantly illustrates is what Nancy Fraser (1990, p.61) has described as 'idioms' of public life, the ways in which women participate in the public sphere, especially, as in the case of many of the women who are sharers, those women who choose to leave the workforce once a mother or those who never joined.

I was also arrested in my hetero-normative and formally lactating steps and forced to think about the many situations that might mean being a non-lactating mother, or a family, and to rethink the options available where women-mothers and/or men-fathers are committed to breast-feeding. In this respect, Falls' ethnography is both a moving and a welcome discomfiting read. There is rich description of the many ways in which this 'counternetwork of strange bedfellows' (25), which includes families across the political spectrum and involves men as well, trades not only in milk but in mutual support and solidarity, something that often goes amiss in contemporary child-rearing and the current neoliberal moment in which all so-

cial angers, hopes, fears and failures are projected onto women-mothers alone (Rose 2018). Most poignantly, this is illustrated through stories of mothers' deaths.

Equally moving and thought-provoking is the attempt to chart the dynamics and experiences of complex gift-giving and the equally complex dynamics of gratitude that are invoked, dynamics from which we are increasingly alienated in transactional, market-driven economies. As I understood the practice of this counter-network, it is what might be termed a 'practice of return' (Jackson 2006) in that many of the women-mothers become long-standing donors and/or actants in the network by taking on different roles beyond lactation (e.g. administration of social media sites, outreach efforts, etc.). Yet, the weight of gratitude, and its labour (Hyde 1979), remain palpable and unresolved in the narratives and analysis, an emotional excess that also operates, perhaps, as an implicit critique of capitalism, much like the milk being exchanged.

Yet, many of the values espoused by members of the network, especially strong anti-scientific views and the network's risk management strategies, pose a problem and illustrate the challenges of binary, oppositional praxis. The critique of these challenges is there in the ethnographic narrative, though it remains underdeveloped, as Falls chooses to take a descriptive approach (I would have loved to see a critical afterword, for example). The counter-network is an excellent example of the merits of what in a different literature is described as 'bonding social capital' (Putnam 2000), but the network's at times strong rejection, or ambivalent position, on science and women's life-styles raises questions about practices of 'bridging'. Movements need allies to create social change and avoid imploding. Ultimately, like Falls strikingly describes in the fascinating chapter on economic matters, the network's ability to survive the increasing commodification of breast milk is threatened by this stance. As one interlocutor, who is critical of the imperative to breast-feed and who also breast-fed her own child, says: 'They need to study these donation babies' (116), an implicit reference to what feminist activists are starting to call the 'gender data gap' in women's health studies (Criado-Perez 2018), and, by extension, children's health too.

Furthermore, as a breast-feeding agnostic and feminist, my main source of discomfort came from reading about the internal dynamics of the network, especially the strong claims about empowerment that participation offers. The ethnography implicitly highlights the thorny issues of membership that all so-

cial movements, publics and counter-publics raise, those between ideology and participants' lived experience. For those women-mothers who described themselves as 'lactivists' and who were committed to breast-feeding, I was convinced that the network offered an opportunity to practice their agency, to feel empowered, and to support like-minded women. Nevertheless, snippets of donees' experiences suggest that within such a counter-network established ways of policing women's bodies by other women are also possible and can be reproduced. For me, this raises key questions about the possibility of a feminist activism that, across the political spectrum, can challenge patriarchal notions of womanhood. It is interesting that Falls, who identifies herself as left-leaning, tells us that she avoided conversations about politics with her more conservative donors. The network is also largely middle-class and white. A critical afterword, further contextualising the network within contemporary US politics and debates in intersectional feminism would be a welcome addition to the book.

White Gold is relevant to those anthropologists and other social scientists interested in contemporary practices of exchange, child-rearing and parenting, but it is also likely to find sympathetic, curious and possibly hostile audiences with members of the network itself and the extended and more established communities promoting breast-feeding. The book would be of interest to the research community on maternal and child health as well as practitioners of women and infant care, especially in disrupting professional notions of 'risk' associated with milk sharing and encouraging them to think about and work with emergent community risk management strategies and tactics (there is an entire section on how risk is managed by members of the network). Policy-makers might profit from reading the ethnography and thinking about progressive protective policies that could be put in place to support breast milk sharers, to challenge its marketisation, and make milk sharing accessible for those who want it beyond the white middle-classes. This is an ethnography with the potential to generate public debate; as such, it also marks an excellent opportunity for engaged social science.

SEVASTI-MELISSA NOLAS is a senior lecturer in sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research areas include human agency and lived experience; childhood, youth and family lives; civic and political practices across the life course; multimodal

ethnography; and publics creating methodologies. She is the principal investigator of the European Research Council's (ERC) Connectors Study and the co-editor of *entanglements: experiments in multimodal ethnography*. Email: s.nolas@gold.ac.uk

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