

White gold

Stories of milk sharing

Reviewed by Roberto Abadie

Susan Falls, *White Gold: Stories of Milk Sharing*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. Hardcover, 242 pp., \$65.00. ISBN: 9780803277212.

Technological advances in biomedicine, legal arrangements, and the entrepreneurial zeal of ‘biocapitalists’ have made possible the commodification of plasma, hair, eggs, sperm, kidneys, and even the enrollment of healthy paid volunteers in drug safety Phase I trials (Abadie 2010). Body parts, like in a bad fiction thriller, have become commodities. Now thanks to Susan Fall’s engaging and autobiographically inspired ethnography, we learn that breast milk also has an exchange value. In addition to a market for mother’s milk that is procured to nourish babies, a gray trade for mother’s milk thrives on internet sites, where body builders seek it for presumably healthy calories and antibodies, while others acquire it for erotic play (p. 177).

Choosing to forego baby formula to nurture her adopted children, Falls entered a milk-sharing network in the southern United States. Intrigued by what this practice might communicate about ‘contemporary forms of capitalism, motherhood, community and risk’ (p. 3), she decided to pursue ‘ethnography at home’ (p. 10), providing a valuable contribution to the anthropology of reproduction, commodification, and neoliberalism. In typical anthropological fashion, Falls interviewed breast milk donors and donees (recipients), but also other actors involved in these networks, like doulas and medical professionals. This ethnography also follows the ‘social life’ (Kopytoff 1986) of mother’s milk, from production to distribution. In so doing, Falls raises important questions, such as: ‘What are the responses, meanings, and consequences to the push for body farming or industrialized, biocapitalistic milk commodification?’ (p. 169). Her ethnography further invites us to interrogate ‘who is benefiting from its circulation, whether

distribution is fair and equitable, what relevant laws require of participants, how suppliers are being treated, and how issues of class are addressed in resource collection and distribution' (p. 179).

In Falls's study, the majority of donors and donees are white, from a middle-class background, and married mothers. While there is a potential for bias in this sample, Falls surveys other studies on breastfeeding to show that it is this group of women who are 'more likely to initiate breastfeeding, to continue beyond the first few days, and to keep feeding their children breast milk when and if they return to work' (p. 14). Priced at around US\$97,000 a year, hiring a wet nurse is not an easy proposition. And purchasing it from agencies is also very expensive. As a consequence, those pursuing this 'white gold' might resort to sharing networks or internet sites that sell breast milk, such as Craigslist or Only the Breast. Posts on such sites may read: 'Pumped breast milk. . . \$2.50 an ounce. . . have never smoked I don't drink. I don't used [sic] drugs of any kind. I have a healthy one month baby' (p. 176). Some sellers, according to Falls, specify a preference for certain buyers, such as mothers who are unable to breastfeed (p. 177). Many donors want to share any excess they may have, rather than seeing something they consider precious go to waste.

The commodification of mother's milk is seen in corporations trying to enter the market. One such case is Prolacta Bioscience, the producer of a fortifier that provides extra calories, fat, and protein to babies, which pays mothers US\$1 per ounce and processed 2.4 million ounces in 2014 (p. 178). Falls writes that we are 'witnessing the creation of new commodities from existing forms of life', representing a 'fundamental shift in our understanding of boundaries between nature and culture and between human and non-human' (p. 179).

Despite efforts to commodify mother's milk, we learn that this process is fraught with 'debates about whether and how to commodify, regulate, or oversee milk [that] are entertained by those representing scientific, governmental, and corporate institutions' (p. 165). Some of the strongest opposition to the commoditization of breast milk comes from the donors themselves, who resist this form of biocapitalism and choose instead to place milk sharing in the domain of the gift. Falls writes, 'Mothers may be willing to give it to a baby, but will not sell to a company that plans to turn around and sell it at a profit' (p. 175). Interestingly, she notices, in a particular departure from the Maussian (Mauss 1990) understanding of the gift, milk sharing does not incur any obligation to reciprocate (p. 166). Advocates of milk donation suggest that voluntary donation 'is the only way to collect and distribute human milk', and caution against the possibility that commoditization might lead to a higher incidence of 'adulterated milk' (p. 178).

While Falls asks what new forms of sociability and community are embedded in social networks that share mother's milk, and what agency or possibilities for progressive developments might

arise from them, she avoids the easy answers provided by idealized notions of community or gender solidarity. Instead, she suggests that: ‘donating allows lactating women to perform an identity as community member. By receiving milk, donees can perform a style of parenting’ (p. 19). This practice, she argues, ‘creates and maintains social relationships’ and, ‘insofar as it takes place between willing families, [it] does have the benefit of weaving a community together’ (p. 167). Regarding the potential for political transformations arising from this practice, Falls raises the question but does not offer any answers. This might be a good thing considering that progressives everywhere are asking a similar question but are unable to come to any consensus that might lead to meaningful action.

Despite Falls’s recognition that this form of body commodification might be socially stratified, with potential donors in a lower position than donees, or sellers in a lower position than buyers, the data available in this ethnography does not reflect this sort of uneven exchange. This might be, perhaps, the result of Falls’s sample of participants in milk-sharing networks, or due to the fact that data seems to come out more from these networks than from individual buyers and sellers conducting their business online. I wonder if an ethnographic study of mother’s milk conducted exclusively with online customers might produce different results. Local and national cultures might also matter. How might these findings compare to similar studies conducted in other locations in the global North? Furthermore, what does increasing body commoditization say about our desires in a neoliberal era that prioritizes individual responsibility for our health choices, while at the same time undermines the social support we need to live and thrive?

About the author

Roberto Abadie is Research Assistant Professor at the Sociology Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the author of *The Professional Guinea Pig: Big Pharma and the Risky World of Human Subjects* (Duke University Press, 2010).

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