

Mathilde Cohen and Yoriko Otomo (editors)

Making Milk: The Past, Present and Future of Our Primary Food

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Reviewed by Iselin Gambert, 2018

Iselin Gambert is a professor of legal writing at The George Washington University Law School, where she teaches courses in legal communication and rhetoric. Iselin's current research is in the field of critical animal studies at the intersection of law, rhetoric, culture, and politics. She was part of the US Feminist Judgments Project, for which she wrote a commentary in *Feminist Judgments: Rewritten Opinions of the United States Supreme Court* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). Her article *Got Mylk? The Disruptive Possibilities of Plant Milk* (co-authored with Tobias Linné) will be published in 2019 by the Brooklyn Law Review.

Quote: "The separation of mother and child that is built into the very fabric of the dairy industry is disturbingly absent in virtually all representations of milk as a product fit for human consumption."

The weeks I spent reading *Making Milk: The Past, Present and Future of Our Primary Food* were surreal to say the least; many of the themes of this academic text were brought to life in popular culture and on the global political stage in a decidedly dystopian way.

Containing thirteen chapters by eighteen authors representing a wide range of countries and disciplines, *Making Milk* is an ambitious, fascinating, and often disturbing read. It is divided into four parts--Drinking Milk, Making Milk, Queering Milk, and Thinking about Plant Milk¹--but I understood the chapters relating to one another somewhat differently, each telling a story that fit into one or more of three broad themes: milk as connector, milk as separator, and the norm-shifting possibilities of milk.

Milk as connector

Milk does nothing if not connect: bodies, generations, species, and so much more. In chapter 4, "Unreliable Matriarchs," Melanie Jackson and Esther Leslie describe milk as "a bridge between bodies" that "disrupts the dominant motif of the bounded body, of sovereign individuality" (72). Milk is a bridge beyond bodies too. In chapter 5, "The Mechanical Calf: On the Making of a Multispecies Machine," Richie Nimmo explores milk's other bridges, noting that today's mass-produced milk "is not simply a natural substance, but is something enmeshed in a deeply heterogeneous assemblage interweaving humans and animals, reproduction and production, bodies and technologies, organisms and commodities, states and markets, 'culture' and 'nature'" (81). Nimmo follows the evolution of cows from mere objects whose "absent presence" filled early designs of the modern milking machine to beings whose resistance and agency "shapes, constrains, and conditions the technologies that can act upon them even as they are subjected to those technologies" (98). The modern machine operates "so exactly like a real calf" that

advertisers declared "that in effect it is a calf . . . albeit an efficient and mechanical one" (94). In this way, milk connects--no, intertwines--nature with technology, life with machines.

Milk also connects people to notions of cultural and national identity. In chapter 3, "Growing a Nation: Milk Consumption in India since the Raj," Andrea S. Wiley describes how milk and dairy culture in India were used as a tool of anticolonial rhetoric (41). Linking the "Mother cow" image and cow protection to the ideal of "Mother India," Gandhi transformed the cow into a nationalist icon; cow's milk symbolized "purity and strength of the nation" (48). But rhetoric implying Western superiority over "traditional" Indian culture persists, with everyone from Gandhi to modern-day dairy advertisers favoring Western cows like Holsteins to either "scrawny" South Asian zebu cows or buffalos, who, despite producing the majority of India's milk, are considered "unclean, unlucky and a bad omen" and whose milk is thought to make people dumb and lazy (50, 55, 57).

Examples abound in *Making Milk* of milk reaching across boundaries--between people of different ages, races, cultures, and classes; between humans and other animals; between humans and plants; between nature and technology; the list goes on. Milk is a conduit not only of love and care but also of exploitation, power, and control. And somewhat paradoxically, it is milk's power as a connector that makes it a particularly chilling separator as well, as many of the chapters explore and as current-day cultural and political references make clear.

Milk as separator

During my weeks reading *Making Milk* I also watched *The Handmaid's Tale*, the television show inspired by Margaret Atwood's near-future dystopian nightmare about women whose lives, bodies, and babies do not belong to them. The story takes place in Gilead, a fledgling nation with a brutal societal structure that rips fertile women from their families and forces them to serve as "handmaids" to elite men whose wives have been unable to become pregnant. Those men rape their handmaids monthly in highly choreographed "Ceremonies"; resistance of any kind--and the story is full of brave and heroic acts of resistance--is met with draconian punishment: women missing eyes, fingers, even clitorises are commonplace.

A pregnant handmaid's diet and daily activities are highly regulated and controlled. After giving birth she must relinquish her baby immediately; sometimes she is allowed to breastfeed the child, sometimes not. Sometimes she pumps her milk remotely, sometimes she is allowed near her child. Whatever her circumstances, they are wholly out of her control: her milk and her child are not her own.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is fiction, many *Making Milk* chapters reveal the grim reality that there has long been--and still is--a Gileadesque regime controlling every aspect of the private, sexual, and reproductive lives of millions of female bodies, human and nonhuman alike. Milk acts as a tool of oppression, subordination, and separation, the agency and autonomy of those who produce it stripped away by those seeking to consume and profit from it.

As Carol J. Adams discusses in chapter 2, "Feminized Protein: Meaning, Representations, and Implications," the oppression and exploitation that women, cows, and other female animals face are inextricably interconnected (20). Using images of yogurt and steakhouse ads depicting a

cow's head atop the iconic female nude Venus as examples, Adams discusses how visual representations of female bodies in art and advertisements practice *anthropomorphography*: "the furthering of oppressive attitudes by the feminizing and sexualizing of animals and the animalizing of women" (21). She argues that "a conversation about female sexual availability" is ongoing in society, most often in animal-industry and pharmaceutical-company advertising (33). "As reproductive rights for women are being rolled back," notes Adams, "advertisements like these seem to be discussing the reproductive expectations for both cows *and* women" (33-34). Adams's analysis reveals a world we already inhabit that is eerily akin to Atwood's Gilead: "women sexualized, men as authorities, women as animals" (35).

"[S]eparation happens," notes Adams, reflecting on the heartbreaking reality behind "strange noises" that prompted small-town residents to call their sheriff (27). The noises, from cows recently separated from their young, were deemed "a normal part of farming practices" (27). "We've been informed that the cows are not in distress," stated an article about the phenomenon, giving no further explanation (27).

The separation of mother and child that is built into the very fabric of the dairy industry is disturbingly absent in virtually all representations of milk as a product fit for human consumption. And the process of obtaining that milk is chillingly similar to the experience of Gilead's handmaids: Adams quotes a researcher who found "relentless 'sexually violent commodification of the female body'" in the dairy industry (23). Like Gilead's handmaids, cows who can't reproduce, keep up milk production, or are otherwise deemed troublesome are culled from the herd (24-25).

"Separation is our situation," reflect Jackson and Leslie in chapter 4, identifying some of the many ways in which separation is a capacity within milk (66). "Milk flows across the political body," they argue, "its stream an emblem of progress and the perfectibility of modern times," its very being "an abstraction from its associations with female human and non-human animal lactation, and transformation into an industrial staple" (66-67).

Although breastfeeding is an act of connection, it is also one that has long reflected "separations and divisions of class and status" (67), with the breasts of poor, working-class, and nonwhite women "whose bodies were deemed closer to those of animals" being used to feed children of the elite, sparing wealthy women's bodies the burden of becoming milk machines (67).

Examples of ways in which "[p]atriarchal institutions have long controlled women's property rights and the economic rewards from their productivity, including their reproductive work--fertility, lactation, and child rearing" (119) are discussed by Julie P. Smith in chapter 7, "Markets in Mother's Milk: Virtue or Vice, Promise or Problem?" Smith highlights the social stigmas faced by wet nurses in the 1800s--virtually all poor or working-class women--whose milk was deemed by medical experts to be "contaminated by [their] moral failings" (123), reminiscent of the buffalos in India whose milk is thought to confer negative qualities they are thought to possess (see chapter 3). Hannah Ryan discusses the devaluing and invisibility of wet nurses in chapter 9, "'Cow's Milk is for Calves, Breastmilk is for Babies.' Alfred Bosworth's Reconstituted Milk and the Women who Innovated Infant Feeding amid an American Health Crisis," noting that the very image of wet-nursing is one of "separation, in that wet nurses . . . were necessarily

separated from their own children in order to care for those of upper classes" (180; see also chapter 8 at 158).

It wasn't only perceived "moral failings" that led to the wet-nursing industry's decline in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "[w]omen were seen as troublesome and scarce, more costly and less manageable suppliers of milk than cows" (123). But even more significant was the growing unrest of the women who increasingly resisted the pervasive devaluing of their economic work (123, 137). Quoting Gabrielle Palmer, Smith notes that "[c]ows and machines are easier to deal with, because they do not ask for justice" (123).

But *do* cows ask for justice? And if they do, can we hear them? Jessica Eisen considers these questions in chapter 12, "Milk and Meaning: Puzzles in Posthumanist Method." Noting that dairy cows' lived experience is wholly invisible to the laws that regulate every aspect of their lives and protect the property rights of the humans who own, milk, inseminate, and slaughter them (238-39), Eisen argues that "[t]he experiences of cows are at the heart of some of the most profound justice problems associated with milk" (245). Noting the overlapping oppressions faced by women and nonhuman animals in patriarchal and capitalist societies (240), Eisen argues that "the farm may be to animals what the family has been to women within some strands of feminist critique: the arbiter and enforcer of their place, their purpose, their meaning; so naturalized that it is not even worth asking what they might think of it, even if we thought they were capable of answering" (240). And therein, Eisen argues, is a key distinction that "limit[s] the analogy and transferability" of the histories of feminist and other social-justice movements (241) because at bottom those movements have placed great emphasis on oppressed people "[n]aming one's own reality" and giving space to the voices of those who have long been silenced (242).

Cows cannot name their own reality in the same way women and members of other marginalized human communities can (241). But even so, Eisen points out that "we are not without resources for understanding [cows'] lives" (244). Fundamentally, we know that "we harm them and their calves when we separate them" (244). Recognizing the pain of separation is more than enough for us to see the reality of cows' lived experience and understand that "a new account of truth"--both legal and moral--is necessary (245-46).

If *The Handmaid's Tale* was a provocative pairing to *Making Milk*, reality was its own disturbing pairing. As I read, news broke of the Trump administration separating children and parents at the US-Mexico border, keeping children in cage-like detention centers (Domonoske 2018). Then came this *New York Times* headline: "Opposition to Breast-Feeding Resolution by U.S. Stuns World Health Officials" (Jacobs 2018). In an age when milk remains a tool of separation and a political device to reinforce capitalist greed over an ethics of compassion and care, is another world possible? A number of *Making Milk* authors take up this question, exploring the possibilities within milk to shift norms and turn the dominant milk-culture on its head.

The norm-shifting possibilities of milk

Some *Making Milk* chapters describe a real-life Gileadesque dystopia that strips power from the female bodies who produce milk and hands it to the male-dominated power structures who sell and consume it, but some dare to envision another world altogether. In chapter 10, "Plant Milk: From Obscurity to Visions of a Post-Dairy Society," Tobias Linné and Ally McCrow-Young do

exactly that: imagining a "post-dairy utopia" where "alternative possibilities . . . challenging dominant human-animal relations" exist that might "disrupt . . . what is taken for granted" and allow "alternative socio-environmental arrangements" to take hold (210). They chart the history of plant-based milk from the Han Dynasty to the present-day legal and cultural "milk wars" between dairy and plant milk advocates and producers, exploring the tensions inherent in analogizing plant milk to the "perfect" ideal of dairy milk (197-202).

Despite long-established rhetoric proclaiming dairy milk to be the "perfect food," dairy sales have dropped in recent years as plant milk sales soar (202), leading to conflicts that Linné and McCrow-Young argue are about "plant milk challeng[ing] what milk is" (203). As "ideas of the superiority of plant milk seem to have become more mainstream" (205), Linné and McCrow-Young note a radical shift in rhetoric in which "dairy milk is no longer [seen as] an ideal drink" (205). This has rattled the dairy industry, which in Sweden went so far as to bring a lawsuit against a small plant milk company, Oatly, for what it argued were misleading phrases on Oatly's packaging ("Like milk but made for humans" and others) that could lead consumers to believe that plant milk was superior to dairy (204-07). The court sided with the dairy industry, but Oatly's sales skyrocketed; Linné and McCrow-Young's "post-dairy utopia" suddenly feels within reach.

In a post-dairy utopia, would milk become post-gender? Would a post-dairy society also be inherently post-patriarchy? Not likely: Adams argues that anti-dairy advertisements created by vegan activists often mirror rather than challenge the exploitation of female bodies (20), underscoring the ubiquity of such exploitative narratives in modern culture. And as Matilda Arvidsson argues in chapter 13, "DIY Plant Milk: A Recipe-Manifesto and Method of Ethical Relations, Care, and Resistance," commercial plant milk sold today is little more than a flipped script, a masculine milk to dairy's feminine one (249). To Arvidsson, the all-male line of "inventors, risk capitalist investors, and CEOs of plant milk corporations become, as it were, 'lactating men,' but without performing the hard bodily labor, enduring the social ramifications, and performing the relational ethics which come with breastfeeding" (249).

And then there is the problem of capitalism. "[D]espite their visionary rhetoric, producers like Oatly are commercial actors," Linné and McCrow-Young remind us (210). "[C]orporations always look to create new consumer markets," reflects Arvidsson, noting that "[t]here is nothing inherently ethical in that."

If patriarchy would survive into a post-dairy society, would it survive beyond capitalism too? What would a post-capitalist post-dairy society look like? Is that what is needed to escape the patriarchal confines that have been bound up with milk--and exploiting female bodies--for millennia? No *Making Milk* author tackles these questions explicitly, but some reflect on ways in which each of us--individually and in community--can make intentional choices around our relationship to milk that might create a less exploitative, more inclusive and caring world.

"I carefully ponder those relations I wish to engage in through milk and those I want to resist," writes Arvidsson before sharing her recipe for DIY oat milk, noting that while yes, she must still buy the oats, salt, and oil from a store, the slowness that comes from making milk this way "is part of a method of relations, care, and resistance" (248).

In chapter 8, "The Lactating Man," Mathilde Cohen looks at the dynamics of human-to-human relationships bound up in milk and argues that "the road to equality" among people of all genders lies in uncoupling male lactation from male breastfeeding, such that "breastfeeding (here understood as a social practice much broader than the biological fact of lactation) [opens up] to all people regardless of sex or gender" (159).

Adams looks beyond human-to-human relationships and shares the components of a vegan feminist ethics of care for animals that includes the tenets of attention, activism, acceptance of grief, and acknowledgment of interdependence (20, 38-40). In chapter 11, "Critical Ecofeminism: Milk Fauna and Flora," Greta Gaard argues for a more radical shift, writing that "it is time to trans* 'milk[,] exploring its meanings not only among mammals but also working within, across, into, and through the analytical frameworks of gender, sexuality, and species" (220). Gaard imagines utopia as "a queer land of milk and honey" beyond factory farms and rainforest destruction, beyond the separation of mother cows from their calves and all the other suffering inherent in the current food system (232-33). Gaard's utopia is governed not by fear but by "participatory eco-democracy" that would "allow the intelligence and agency of ecological others to develop the fertilities that please them, fertilities that allow human coexistence rather than dominance" (232-33).

Making Milk is an uncomfortable and often enraging read; it pulls back the curtain on many of the truths within milk that have long been shrouded in darkness, that are seldom named or seen or valued, and puts them into historical and contemporary context that anyone who is uneasy with capitalism, patriarchy, and the current political climate will find revealing. It's a book for feminists and vegans, but also for anyone who consumes dairy (or any animal products for that matter): after reading it, they may think twice. It is also a hopeful read, one that offers readers a glimpse beyond the world we currently live in, beyond the Gilead of our past and of our present, and into a future beyond patriarchy, exploitation, and oppression, a future where new ways of relating with each other--men and women, humans and other animals--are possible, if we only dare to create them.

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¹ The full titles of the parts are: Part One: Drinking Milk: Histories and Representations; Part Two: Making Milk: Technologies and Economies; Part Three: Queering Milk: Male Feeding and Plant Milk; and Part Four: Thinking about Plant Milk.