

Book Review

Wilson, K.J. *Others' Milk. The Potential of Exceptional Breastfeeding*, New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press. 2018. 286 pp \$27.95 Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8135-9383-8

Others' Milk does not hold back. Opening on a story of a boy 'nursing' his foster sister, it draws the reader right into the world of 'exceptional breastfeeding' which challenges the idea of breastfeeding as necessarily 'maternal'. In Wilson's tremendously engaging book, this vision of individualised breastfeeding, perpetuated by public health discourses and popular media, gives way to a more complex, more nuanced picture. Wilson's retelling of stories of people who variously achieve the status of 'exceptional breastfeeders' 'pushing the boundaries of breastfeeding' either as birth parents and adoptive parents using donor milk, non-gestational breastfeeding parents, breastfeeding grandmothers, fathers and other kin, breastfeeding 'outliers' feeding to term against classed and racialised expectations or breast milk providing strangers weaves a rich tapestry of embodied experiences.

Critical of the dominant messages of breastfeeding promotion, Wilson is lovingly supportive of breastfeeding as a social practice that matters to those who engage in it. Her book is based on 83 in-depth interviews and several years of observation of multiple on- and off-line milk-sharing sites and breastfeeding groups. Written from an insider perspective, *Others' Milk* threads Wilson's stories of her own exceptional breastfeeding right through, making it both a skilled piece of anthropological writing and a gripping tale with a beating heart. Across seven chapters, Wilson considers the ways in which breastfeeding rather than being essential, 'natural', individual and even simply dyadic is framed by its complex social contexts. This is clear from the first chapter, which in its title proclaims that 'Nursing Is Public', and continues through the second chapter 'Cleavages: Negotiating Challenges', which pays close attention to the frictions of self-defined breastfeeding with the social conditions in which it takes place, as it

traces journeys into exceptional breastfeeding. Some of what Wilson draws critical attention to is fairly universal – the sexism, the medicalisation and pathologisation of breastfeeding, little to no provisions for non-binary people, the grip of commercialisation on infant feeding and the pressures of capitalism more broadly. Other aspects are specific to the US, with its pitiful maternity provisions (unpaid and shorter than most developed economies according to ILO data) resulting in an intense pumping culture with output measured in 'stashed' freezer bags of milk, and the specifically racist and classist groves of social oversight of parenting, patterned with subtle difference along dimensions of power elsewhere.

As she charts the development of the exceptional breastfeeders' practices, moving into the third chapter 'The Mother of Invention', Wilson nuances the strands of political critique of dominant visions of breastfeeding in feminist arguments for and critical of biomedical science around breastfeeding. She looks at the ways in which exceptional breastfeeders, embodying what to a medical profession is a conundrum of interconnectedness of people and substance, creatively (re)appropriate the 'cyborgifying' props and protocols of adaptive technologies – the pumps, the tubes, the supplemental nursing systems. Wilson also points to the role pleasure, derived from developing a skill in the embodied practice and interwoven with the developing specialised breastfeeding knowledge, plays in empowering exceptional breastfeeders to quietly sidestep medicalised recommendations and make their own informed decisions regarding the 'risk' of their chosen practices. While much of this negotiating is inflected by privilege, Wilson follows exceptional breastfeeders who engage in a range of strategies to negotiate and manage their immediate contexts of families and work, and the oversight of healthcare professionals. Of those strategies, some are more readily available in a commercialised system predicated on 'consumer power', but it was easy to imagine similar outcomes in a different, universal healthcare context, being achieved using the position

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of expert patient. Wilson's theorising around her core material continues in 'Milking the System' and 'Busting Binaries', where she considers the various political expressions embodied in the practice. The complex interlacing of breastfeeding and politics ranges from procreative justice and recovery from abuses of slavery, through eco-activism and veganism, different hues of 'crunchiness', religious counter movements and various forms of queering of breastfeeding and of breast milk. Wilson carefully considers the ways in which exceptional breastfeeding, whilst it might conform to one sort of social understanding of breastfeeding, disrupts other assumptions, by purposefully centring otherness marginalised by public health discourses. The disruptive potential of these practices is also considered in 'Fluidity of the Family' which looks at *kinnovations* expanding what family means and how familial being, and with it resource use, is practiced. The new connections and affective relations which emerge from breastfeeding entanglements reshape the immediate and the social in equal measures. The focus on community created through breastfeeding continues into the final chapter, "'Outpouring of Support": Embodied Solidarity', which look at the ways breastfeeders – exceptional in many senses of the word – create and seek out non-judgemental, supportive communities to withstand the myriad social pressures and the stigmatisation of their practices. Doing this, they create spaces where current breastfeeding promotion's dogmas are challenged and nuanced through a retelling of their experiences. For

many, Wilson's book will become one of those spaces, where they will see their truth reflected and 'seen'.

Others' Milk is an exceptional work of social anthropology centred on an issue framed by a 'health' discourse. Staying close to the stories of exceptional breastfeeding allows its theorising to emerge from within. It is beautifully written and moving in a way few academic works are – I found myself scribbling tiny love hearts in the margins. *Others' Milk* is also a welcome addition to the growing transdisciplinary field of breastfeeding studies and the many works of anthropology and social theorising that invigorate it and is an extension of the work(s) of Tomori *et al.* (2016). I have no doubt that Wilson's book will be appealing to a non-specialist audience, because what she describes is a reality many of us live.

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Reference

- Tomori, C., Palmquist, A. and Dowling, S. (2016) Contested moral landscapes: Negotiating breastfeeding stigma in breastmilk sharing, nighttime breastfeeding, and long-term breastfeeding in the U.S. and the U.K. *Social Science & Medicine*, 168, 178–185. ISSN 0277-9536