Vintage Breast Milk: Exploring the Discursive Limits of Feminine Fluids

By Penny Van Esterik

What are feminine fluids – fluids consumed by women or fluids produced by women? Fluids that enter female bodies or fluids that exit female bodies? Breast milk is clearly a fluid that leaves one body and enters another. No fluid is more feminine than breast milk. No fluid carries with it as much complex symbolic baggage surrounding what it means to be female. This article explores the material and symbolic dimensions of breast milk in North America, building on the provocations of a Toronto performance artist whose work has transformed breast milk from a fluid produced by women to a fluid consumed by women.

The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar was performed in July 2006 by Toronto-based performance artist Jess Dobkin in a beautiful studio space at the Ontario College of Art and Design (Professional Gallery). The performance was presented as part of FADO's show, Five Holes: Matters of Taste, curated by Paul Couillard. The press release for the show invited audience members to "quench [their] curiosity" at the breast milk bar during the cocktail hour, 5 to 8 p.m. (Dobkin). Tastings of pasteurised breast milk, donated by six women in the local community, were offered at a softly lit white wine bar decorated with coasters, bar snacks (Cheerios), a bar menu listing six flavours of breast milk, and a sign reading, "We can't serve minors." On a tray, Dobkin placed a unique set of serving vessels made to order for the donors, based on the kind of containers they envisioned their milk being served in. These included vessels reminiscent of pink plastic nipples, earthenware chalices, a teacup, and a champagne glass filled with curdled milk and a submerged Lact-Aid tube (a nursing aid). As in a vintage wine tasting, Dobkin arranged and paired tastings of pasteurised breast milk, each vintage sample named provocatively: *passion's legacy* and *sweet fall harvest*; *temple of the goddess* paired with *truth serum number nine*.

A server took names and called people when there was a seat available at the bar. Dobkin, the bartender, introduced the tasting samples and listened to the intimate stories of the bar patrons as they sampled the beverages. Videotaped interviews with the donors were screened on the wall at the other end of the room and played throughout in the

background. Breastfeeding support pillows were scattered around the space for comfort. Some people "dropped into the bar for a drink" and left quickly, followed by curious murmurs of, "How was it?" after the tastings. As the artist–bartender observed, "Not everyone will be comfortable at the milk bar" (Dobkin, Interview with CBC).

The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar, Jess Dobkin, 2006
Photo by David Hawe

The Tasting

I was one of the first called to taste the vintage brews, and I did so along with several other young women. The first sample was called *passion's legacy*; we were asked to smell, swirl the product, and sip. Jess led us through the tasting, telling us that the donor of this sample had craved chocolate during and after pregnancy, accounting for the milk's sweet taste. From the video, we learned that the donor's baby was eight months old when she gave the samples. The donor spoke of the emotional and physical pleasures of breastfeeding and the release that she experienced when milk was removed. The tasters differed in their reactions to the small cups of breast milk. I was relieved to have no feelings of disgust when drinking the milk; I just tasted a light, mildly nutty fluid. Others thought it tasted like almond milk, honey or ice cream.

The second sample, *sweet fall harvest*, tasted quite different: fruitier and heavier. The donor was a vegetarian who began craving and eating meat during her pregnancy but was concerned that meat would alter the flavour of her breast milk. An articulate animal rights activist, she spoke in the video of her dismay that we, as humans, claim that a child has a right to its mothers' milk while at the same time denying the calf's right to its mother's milk. We take the calf's milk for ourselves with no hesitation, she said. Why should we hesitate at drinking human milk? Of course, standard infant formulas are made with cow's milk and chemical additives, a fact unknown to many users, who rarely think about the source of the milk in the can. The conversation on the video revealed the difficulties that emerge from drawing inappropriate analogies and false equivalences between breast milk and cow's milk, products that are in no way commensurate.

Straight up with a twist, the third sample, was considered sweet by some tasters, while *truth serum number nine* was reported as sour. *Temple of the goddess* left "an angry aftertaste" as the donor mother had a penchant for highly spiced foods. Others felt the sample tasted medicinal. We searched for analogies, but since so few people had ever tasted breast milk, our comparisons were inadequate, fumbling, imprecise.

Publicity photo for *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*, Jess Dobkin, 2006
Photo by David Hawe

Differences of opinion at the bar reinforced the artist's argument about the diversity of the taste of breast milk. Each donor's experience is embodied in the taste of her milk and its unique place of production: the mother's body as terroir. The artist's intentions were clearly to celebrate but unsettle the intimate act of breastfeeding in motherhood and project a playful, non-judgemental gaze onto breast milk. This sense of play was obvious on Jess's flyer advertising the event. Here, she stands against a hot pink background; she gazes into the camera, nude, squirting breast milk into a wine glass.

But Jess's own experience with breastfeeding her daughter was anything but playful. On the bar in a cowhide frame, we encounter a photograph of the artist grimacing in pain while she was nursing her daughter. During the performance, Dobkin spoke of the feelings of shame that overtook her when she failed at breastfeeding as a new mother. In an interview that I conducted following the show, Jess revealed some of the motivations for developing the performance. Denaturalizing the romantic relationship between mothers and their milk, she lamented, "The things I thought would be easy were so hard and the things I thought would be so hard were easy" (Personal interview). Breastfeeding was supposed to be the easy part, but without adequate support, it was a real challenge. After trying everything she could to breastfeed successfully and after being told just to try harder, she was later criticized for (eventually) bottle-feeding her daughter. The Lactation Station was, in this sense, more than food for thought; it was also a ritual of healing for the artist. By recording and listening to the stories of the breast-milk donors, Dobkin realized that she did do her job as a mother, just with a different kind of feminine fluid.

Analogies

Anthropologist Mary Douglas once wrote, "The meal is a kind of poem, but by a very limited analogy. The cook may not be able to express the powerful things poets can say" (*Implicit* 240). Analogies matter, particularly when it comes to food. And this was especially the case at the Lactation Station, as few people had tasted breast milk and even fewer had been to a milk bar. Analogies can intensify meaning and draw mind and memory back to past traditions and experiences. But how do we develop analogies for products like breast milk that are unique? Tea is quite like coffee. Fruit juices can be compared to soda pop. But what is an appropriate analogy for breast milk? What is breast milk really like? Is it a food? A drug? Or perhaps like a vaccination, as it provides an infant with its first immunity against disease.

As anthropologists and psychoanalysts remind us, analogies also set up new and paradigmatic opportunities to explore basic natural processes. The dominant analogy for breastfeeding in North America is urination, something best done in a bathroom. This is especially true for those who grew up without the experience of seeing a mother breastfeeding her child. Urination is an inappropriate and insulting analogy, meant to humiliate women and devalue the production of this precious fluid. And very effective it is, as any woman who is banished to the bathroom to breastfeed knows.

But human milk is secreted not excreted, in spite of the spate of analogies to the contrary. And more importantly, as performance theorist Rebecca Schneider might say, it is "secret-ed" – it is the repressed that the male gaze fears to see (57). What Dobkin has done in Lactation Station is force us to confront this secreted/secret-ed fluid by thinking through an additional analogy, an improbable one perhaps. Her work moves us away from using a private excretory act as an analogy for breastfeeding by developing, with the audience, another unique analogy: wine making and tasting. The analogy connects a fluid secreted by a body to another culturally valued fluid that is squeezed from grapes, an analogy that elevates taste, discrimination, nuance and pleasure, as experienced at the Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar.

Dobkin nursing daughter; presented in a cow print frame on the milk bar

Intimacy and Disgust

Mary Douglas makes an important distinction between food and drinks, and suggests that the consumption of drinks is generally a less intimate event. Drinks may be shared with

relative strangers, as compared with, say, food shared at dinner parties with close friends (*Deciphering* 40). Not so, when breast milk is on tap. Drinks flow and shift – are difficult to pin down – because they take the shape of what contains them, a point captured by Dobkin in the set of vessels created for each sample of donor milk. (This reminds me of my collection of breast beer mugs, perhaps designed for frisky frat boys, which are considered slightly obscene. But are the plastic, breast-shaped containers designed to hold expressed breast milk any less so?) Certainly, several critics, and even spectators, responding to the performance, have used the term obscenity to describe the show (women's explicit body art routinely attracts this label). Having drinks at the Lactation Station Milk Bar means participating in an exceptionally intimate consumptive act, one likely to evoke feelings of disgust as so many boundaries are being transgressed. Disgust arises from the loss or removal of distance. Elspeth Probyn writes, "[I]n disgust, things, categories, people are just too close for comfort" (133), and you cannot get much closer to the other than by consuming milk from its breast.

Perhaps the most successful aspect of the show was its ability to bring to light the intense revulsion that surrounds breast milk, a substance that is inextricably linked to the feminine body. This was particularly obvious in the disgust expressed by men writing about the show. Several male reporters simply dismissed the art performance as a waste of taxpayers' money. One particularly offensive report by John Strobel in the *Toronto Sun*, published prior to the opening, made fun of the show by proposing his own Fluids Fest: "I would bring heaping platters of phlegm sandwiches and eye gunk pies … Care for a mixed drink? Blood, sweat and tears." But strangely, he made no jokes about semen. Strobel also expressed surprise that the Tories had "held their fire" about the Canada Council's support for the project and, accordingly, the taxpayers' support of the performance through a grant to Dobkin.

Partly in response to the performance, Health Canada issued a press release on the day of the show, warning against buying or consuming breast milk from strangers. The press release, published in papers across the country, warned of the possibility of Hepatitis B, HIV, bacteria and legal or illegal drugs passing through the breast milk. They warned that cross-nursing and purchasing breast milk online is not controlled in any way. This lack of regulation may be due to the fact that authorities can't decide whether to regulate it as a bodily fluid or as a food. Maybe they need a new category: feminine fluids.

Mary Douglas would have loved the show. Consuming an intimate bodily product like breast milk, she would say, arouses a feeling of disgust as it breaks down differences between self and other, inside and outside, pure and impure. One female reporter got it. She saw the performance as a critique of cultural discourses that present the "mother as untouchable," lauding Dobkin for highlighting the "complexities of breastfeeding by openly and creatively recognizing the sensual, ordinary and even comical aspects of this act" (Sasha). Of course, the humour elicited by this performance is very different from the cheap laughs extracted from mainstream audiences in movies like *Meet the Fockers* or *Little Men*, when a male character accidentally drinks breast milk stored in the refrigerator.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice complains that "it is impolite to eat food that you've been introduced to" (Probyn 135). This might explain the discomfort I felt when speaking to a donor mother whose milk I had just consumed at the milk bar. And this might also explain why another donor mother spoke of feeling strange to be breastfeeding her own child while she was also drinking her own breast milk at the bar, rather like sneaking out and having a glass of wine when she should be abstaining during breastfeeding. Much like Annie Sprinkle's signature performance, *Public Cervix Announcement*, where she invited the audience to view her cervix through a speculum while she sat spread-eagled onstage, Dobkin's performance forces us to confront the judgemental, suspicious gaze that we project on women's bodies, particularly the bodies of breastfeeding women.

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