

Fiona Giles

Fountains of Love and Loveliness

In Praise of the Dripping Wet Breast

If babies had a language and a script we would have been in possession long ago of a manual of polished love techniques for use between adults and babies. Clinical care and pedagogic concern would be cast onto the rubbish-tip of civilization.

—Barbara Sichtermann, “The Lost Eroticism of the Breasts”

It's often speculated in the breastfeeding literature that one reason breastfeeding has been such a hard sell in the post-industrial West is that we prefer to think of the female breast as the most sociable of sex aids, rather than as a customized food delivery system for babies and young children. It is not just that the breast is considered by some to be too sexy for motherhood, hence the property of adult males, and an object that must be protected from the wear and tear that breastfeeding is sometimes reputed to involve. Instead, if you look at this argument more closely, the breast in question—which is an idealized, deodorized, and denatured breast—promises a certain kind of Disneyfied, cartoon sex that is free from many of the risks relating to real, grungy, grown-up sex. While on the one hand this breast is being protected from the hard yakka of long-term lactation, it is also being straight-jacketed into a particularly narrow concept of nooky, a kind of second-base substitute for the real thing.

Not just adult males, but women too, have been seduced by this notion of the breast as both exquisitely refined, yet erogenous, a part of the sexual body that can be adored without the ambivalence or horror that the genitals are apt to inspire. This is sex with arrested development, safely packaged in broderie anglaise, and draped by a cashmere twin-set, awaiting its first grope in the secure darkness of cinema or car. It is the same breast that might now be bared on certain beaches, and has gradually become acceptable in women's magazine

spreads and commercial TV drama.

Unlike the penis and vagina, the idealized breast holds no problematic associations with excrement, or with the blood of menses and childbirth. The idealized breast does not carry the same risk of unpredictable emissions or excretions, the echoes and traces of birth and death. Breasts are neither cataclysmic nor smelly. If they have the same magical power as the genitals to change when touched, these idealized breasts do not hold the threat of gushing tumescence found in those humid lowlands that are apt to flood. Instead, the breast's gentle perkiness acts as a decorous marker to turmoil elsewhere, remaining as calmly distinct from its torrid groundswell as is a daisy to the compost on which it is nourished. This fantasy of the breast as hermetically sealed, warm and dry, modest and constant, is a masterwork of PR spin promising a kind of chocolate-box sex free of pregnancy, disease, or the free-falling humiliations of erotic love.

The western breast has been tuned to such a breezy, playful niceness, that its sexiness is almost in doubt. If it weren't for the crinkly, sometimes hairy or asymmetrical properties of the nipple, the breast would have slumped into Doris Day quaintness long ago. But thankfully, all that lace and spandex, all those colors and textures of bras and camisoles, are pressing, skimming, pinching, and above all, referring the eye to the tiny nub which mustn't be viewed without the closing of the curtains, the dimming of lights, the drawing of gauzy veils. Only the nipple threatens to disturb the breast's peachy innocence. It has the wrinkled, knobby demeanor of an old witch, hinting slyly of darker things.

While the breast as a whole fails to age much, merely losing fullness or sloping gently downward over time, there is something undeniably prehistoric about the nipple. Although it is the defining feature of the mammal, it has a spookily reptilian aspect. In the nipple are to be found the references to birth and blood, along with the traces and echoes of milky eruptions for those inclined towards bottle-free mothering.

But for most, the idea of the breast remains a dry one, exemplifying containment, neatness and the promise of a sexuality that coexists with exquisite manners. As the early 1970s feminists knew well, the brassiered breast symbolizes the reconciliation of desire and order. If the concept of justice can be represented by scales, then the over-arching social order could do worse than to adopt the Wonderbra as its monument to the containment of sexual chaos by the rule of law.

So you can see, quite apart from the practical difficulties of breastfeeding that are so often listed—paternal jealousy, workplace intolerance, maternal fatigue, inadequate antenatal education and post-natal support, misplaced modesty, shopping mall inconvenience, and the inability to measure its volume—the project to revive the wet status of the breast, that is, the lactating breast, pushes up against fundamental cultural barriers whose job it is to painstakingly separate erotic adult sexuality from all other forms of human

interaction. Unbeknownst to themselves, lactation consultants and other breastfeeding advocates are drilling holds in the fragile dike that is holding the monstrously threatening wet zone at bay.

Thinking of the human body as less self-contained than our culture wishes to believe, I began to draw up a taxonomy of The Stuff That Comes Out of Us, and to order it into categories. Firstly, starting at the bottom (of both the list, and the body), are the excretory fluids, such as urine and feces. This is waste matter for which there is little use and some danger if not disposed of thoughtfully. Into this category, which we might call the base category, should also go pus, phlegm, and vomit since these are a diseased form of discharge requiring eradication. Such things must be hidden, buried, and burnt—or if you live in any number of cities around the world, flushed to the rivers and beaches.

In the second category, occupying a middle-ground, belongs blood and other useful fluids which require retention and care, and may be recycled. Sweat, saliva, and ear wax also belong to this category of neutral usefulness. Although some would see cause for squeamishness in handling these fluids, this has more to do with preserving safety between bodies. There is no need for personal banishment, and some room for auto-celebration, particularly amongst those who think God invented car keys to remove earwax, or people who have trouble leaving their scabs alone. Amniotic fluid might also belong in this neutral category since it is useful but ultimately disposed of.

Blood can seem alarming, and our relation to menstrual blood might be ambivalent at best, so that menstrual blood is closer to the base category. But this is not because blood is itself a dangerous fluid, except in more recent HIV and Hepatitis C times. (Indeed, of all the bodily fluids, blood is the one most readily recycled, in transfusions.) Rather, the fear of blood traditionally stems from it being evidence of calamity, its appearance caused by a breach in the integrity of the human frame.

Then there is the third category, which is somewhat on a pedestal since it enables procreation: semen and vaginal lubricants. Clearly semen is king here, but anyone who knows their Billings Method will appreciate the role of vaginal secretions in enabling or blocking conception. This category begins to take on a heavier cultural load, since it has magical properties worthy of worship, fetishization, and ritual concealment. The successful regulation of these fluids determines not only the viability of the species, but also its mental faculties if you consider that herd IQ is diminished by incest. Other public health considerations are necessary due to the risk of transmitting disease, so the elaborate moral customs surrounding their use makes perfect sense, even today.

What all these fluids have in common, is that they cause anxiety if they appear in an unregulated fashion within our culture. They undermine the social order, they pass through the membrane between inside and outside the body, between private and public, and between individuals, as we interact socially, familiarly, and sexually. In short, they justify rules.

Finally, there are two fluids that have a category each their own, although

related to each other. These are milk and tears. They are different from the other categories in that there is not the same risk attached to their promiscuous expression, yet regulatory customs continue to exist, and one wonders why.

Of these, milk is a food, which is somewhat prosaic, yet as important as semen to the sustaining of infant lives, even in this post-Nestle, and HIV/AIDS era. It may take on a supernatural significance in maintaining species viability, hence its cultural loading, yet apart from rituals that might support the mother's health and well-being, there is no logic to any constraints in its disbursement to that mother's child or, if she chooses, her other kin. There are a small number of reasons for constraint within the family, but these are economic rather than health-related. For example, where the mother is required in the workforce and having her baby with her might not be convenient to her employers; or where increased fertility rates are paramount, and early weaning seen as a means for the resumption of ovulation. Outside the immediate family, where cross-nursing might be considered, constraints are necessary for regulating the diet of the substitute breastfeeder. But such arrangements are usually self-regulating between consenting mothers.

Tears, too, can cause consternation if expressed in public. Being wet, they are a suspect element. Yet there is no survivalist imperative for their strict regulation or concealment. No virus has been transmitted, to my knowledge, via this saline solution. (Although care needs to be taken, and breast milk may be usefully applied, in cases of conjunctivitis.) The restriction of tears rests more on the need for the division of private and public zones, rational and irrational behavior, and the categories that set different behavioral standards for infants, children and adults. Like the argument about dope smoking leading to heroin addiction, it could be argued that the display of tears without averting the face or emanating shame would be the thin edge of the wedge, leading to emotional chaos and social anarchy. In this way tears suffer from the same taboo that applies to public breastfeeding of toddlers and older children. Although lachrymose youngsters and breastfeeding babies are tolerated, this merely reinforces the need to maintain a strict division between adult and infant behavior.

If civilization rests on the separation of wet from dry in human bodily function, with metaphysical thought at the arid pinnacle, and excrement in the swampy pits, then the role of the breastfeeding advocate takes on an intriguingly problematic cast. It's true, milk is up there with tears, close to God. Like tears, it is the physical manifestation of an affect—in each case love, joy, and sorrow can inspire release, while depression and anxiety can inhibit it. And human milk holds onto its appearance as a mystical food whose nutritional components are immeasurably perfect, and still in the process of being documented.

But sadly enough, milk is wet. It is prone to gush at inopportune moments. Worse still, it is not only Stuff That Comes Out, it is Stuff That Goes In as well, and in a sexually suggestive manner that rocks against the cradle of the incest

taboo and the fear of the sexualized minor. As Barbara Sichtermann observed over 15 years ago, in “The Lost Eroticism of the Breasts,” the whole procedure can be likened to adult sexual intercourse. She writes, “The tip of the breast, a highly sensitive, erectile organ pushes its way into the baby’s warm and moist oral cavity. While the lips, jaws and gums close around the organ, massaging it in a rhythmic sucking motion, it discharges its special juice into the child’s deeper oesophageal region.” (1986: 64) And that’s without mentioning the shadow of cannibalism that breastfeeding also casts.

The leakiness of motherhood in general swirls around the fact that birthing is itself the ultimate mechanism for the catastrophic evacuation of one body from another. A baby is itself Stuff That Comes Out. Hence motherhood is forced to uncomfortably straddle the two zones, being mystically dry and supernaturally abstracted by its religious representations, while needing for its rights and practical support to insist on the physical tumult of its daily circumstances. Hence the importance of the breast as maternal icon. Its apparent dryness is perfect for the first, ennobling spin; but its forgotten wetness must necessarily be revived if the practical support, for mothers to perform as fully as they wish in our culture, is to be provided.

Looking afresh at impediments to the free expression of human milk in our culture, we can lay aside theories of the sexual breast competing with the maternal breast and repressing its functionality. For it turns out that the existing, over-hyped eroticism of the breast is a somewhat tamed and unsexual thing. We need to recognize that the breast is *incompletely* sexualized, that its intrinsic wetness has been repressed, and that there is a sexual component to breastfeeding and motherhood whose art might be celebrated and passed on within families. Rather than beating Daddy off with a stick while wailing imprecations against the patriarchal misrepresentation of female body parts, mothers should be inviting fathers in for a taste of the art of motherlove. Women (and men) could not only be enjoying their milk and their leaky breasts, and holding super soaker distance spraying competitions, but considering how the father might offer his own breasts to comfort his baby. Barbara Sichtermann again:

We women can and must put pressure on men, force them to take on some of the duties involved in looking after children. It is essential that these duties are shared if women are to win equality in any other field. But we can also *win over* men by offering them a share in pleasure. Babies are looking for food and comfort from the breast—and they could get comfort just as well from the fine and sensitive breasts of men.” (1986: 67)

Because a fluid is involved in breastfeeding, and this fluid is exchanged between individuals, certain cultural regulations are necessary. Needless to say, we don’t wish babies’ milk supply to be threatened by excessive demand from

over-excited gourmandizing adults—although this problem might also be solved if chilled, pasteurized breastmilk were available at the corner store. But laying aside our moral panic about paedophilia, and the fashion for policing parent-child intimacy, it should be acknowledged that the celebration of the body and its functions within the family need not inspire incest, and may in time be shown to thwart it. As author of *The Eros of Parenthood* Noelle Oxenhandler argues,

We were in denial about the reality of child abuse for so long that it's understandable that we have reacted with a black and white mentality. I think it's time to find a middle ground where we can acknowledge that the erotic pleasure that propels us to reproduce is part of the same pleasure that propels us to nurture our children, and that's something to be celebrated, not denied. It's a truism of psychology that what we can't acknowledge is what causes problems. (cited in Lewin, 2001: 2)

To conclude the first half of this essay, the problem is not in the sexualization of the breast, but in the narrowness of our current ideas about sex, and the limited role of the breast as a sex object. It's also in the desexualizing of the mothering process overall due to an over-heated anxiety about the incest taboo, and a squeamishness regarding the continuity between the act of sex, the drama of delivery, and the mechanics of the ongoing relationship with the child. From diaper changing and spoon-feeding, to toilet training and beyond, physical intimacy between parents and their children involves the gradual ritualizing of our relationship to wetness, as a feature of our relationship to each other. As the novelist Ginu Kamani (2001) puts it, "All the bodily fluids are erotic. Full stop."¹

I would now like to discuss four images that I have collected while researching my book on breastfeeding, *Fresh Milk* (forthcoming, 2003), and which show some of the different ways in which breastfeeding has been depicted in western culture. (This is not an exhaustive art history of the subject, however!) The first is a painting by Picasso; the second, a photograph of a European tombstone; the third is from a soft porn website; and the fourth is a photograph of Naomi Campbell by David LaChapelle (1999) entitled "Have You Seen Me?"

The first image is Picasso's *Mother and Child*, a twentieth-century rendition of the Madonna and child, showing the Christian semi-deification of the feeding mother, who is focused on her baby. The baby is securely wrapped and reveals only his head and one side of his face. The child takes on religious, Christ-like attributes, since he is sanctified through her gaze, and bears none of the cherubic, sexualized Cupid imagery of classical mythology. Contrary to Picasso's ribald images of women, this one is extremely Victorian, with its almost bowdlerized version of the nippleless bosom.

The breast is globe-like, just as in Renaissance paintings, it glows mysteri-

ously white, and is literally the center-piece of the painting. In some ways Picasso's image is more naturalistic and romantic than the Renaissance genre of *maria lactans* paintings which it echoes. But with the flower in her hair, which has tendrils floating free, and her lips slightly parted, this is a demure sexuality. The hands of the baby and the mother are "on the table," in the light, and proper. The flower in the mother's hair, as well as on her shawl, are in this case signifiers of innocence, nature and virginity, with no trace of the bordello about them.



The second image is of a nursing mother outside a crypt, with her baby and older child. I don't have a source for this, as it is from Maureen Minchin's private collection of breastfeeding images, but I believe it is from a volume of photographs of European tombstones; and this is from a nineteenth-century French example. It shows a woman with a baby at her breast while she is pushing open the door of the crypt, as if to follow the dead, and take her newborn with her. Sitting inside the fence of the memorial, is the figure of a young boy looking out as though he longs for the freedom of a happier past. The mother is dressed in informal robes, and has bare feet. Her baby reaches up, holding onto her dress, while clasped to her partially exposed breast. It is unclear who has died here: the children's father, the mother, the baby, or both. Whoever it is, the survivors are trapped by grief, wanting to follow their loved-one into death as the nursing baby obviously continues to suckle. The older child yearns for escape from this cage, he alone, attached to life's pull.

My own reading of the image is that the father has died, and his family is represented in their grief. The mother's role as mother, partner, and lover is made explicit, and the connection between sex, mothering, and death is also allowed to be forged here in an unusually graphic way. Although the image of breastfeeding is decorous, the mother's bare feet, and the social context given to breastfeeding while doing other things, indicates a certain level of fevered chaos. She is not focused on her child, nor calm, as in the Renaissance and Picasso paintings; and her sexuality, expressed through longing for death, has become continuous with her act of feeding the baby. This is an extremely unusual image of breastfeeding, and one that raises many questions about why



the images we are most familiar with are so narrow, and blandly domesticated.

The third image is from a free website of lactating porn images, which raises the question of what a good definition of pornography really is. (Unfortunately, this was emailed to me without a reference, so I can't credit the website.) It is such a wholesome depiction of a natural act, which does good for babies, it's almost purely due to its context, that it qualifies as pornography. If I hadn't been told it was from a soft-porn website, I might not have guessed.

An attractive African-American woman, with a model-size body and small breasts, is hand-expressing milk into a small milk bottle, not unlike those issued by milk pump manufacturers. She is naked but for white stockings and fuschia colored nail polish on well-manicured hands and a touch of matching lipstick. She too is looking down at her breast in a demure manner, her eyes almost closed due to the downward angle of her face. The aversion of her gaze is typical of pornography, since it allows for the unchallenged intrusion of the viewer. In this case, it shows her complete absorption in the process of expressing, and—apart from her concentration on the task—her face gives away little. Her expression, in both senses, is shown as a simple, private act.

Only her black pubic hair, highlighted by white stockings, emphasizes her sexual potential.

Although there is a desecration of a sacred act here, since the woman's milk is going into a bottle rather than a baby's mouth, such bottles have become stand-in symbols of motherhood anyway, so this is barely jarring. (Even those who eschew bottle-feeding will allow for expression under certain circumstances.) In the background, lying on the floor, is a pair of weights, giving the scene a wholesome, health-conscious cast, as though the woman might be expressing



for the good of her own health. (If a copy of Sandra Steingraber's new book *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood* were also lying on the floor, we would know it was to eliminate toxins!)

This image contrasts to wilder lactation porn where the milk is being sprayed into a man's mouth or over his body and genitals. And it could be assumed that this milk will perhaps be saved for the baby. The sexualization of the woman, with her stockings and pubic hair, is muted by the fact that her legs are demurely closed and her stockings are white. There is a clinical air about this photograph, but it counts as perverse in our culture since it portrays a swerving away from milk's "proper" use, together with the implied pleasure of model and viewer. It could also be classed as pornographic since it sexualizes lactation in an explicit, if muted way. But there is very little that could be labeled offensive about it; and I'm inclined to think it's the sort of image that could usefully be co-opted to help in the loosening up of our views about the place and meaning of breastfeeding.

The last image is a photograph of Naomi Campbell taken by David LaChapelle. Here the model is seen lying on the floor, naked, with her legs in the fridge, while pouring a carton of her own commodified breastmilk over her body. There are ice cubes spilled on the floor around her, together with an open milk carton with the words "Breast" and "Milk" clearly printed on the side—as well as the image of a cow's face. The carton she pours milk from also bears an image of her face, with the words, "Have you Seen Me?" and "Naomi Campbell."



Naomi has turned her face directly to the camera, so the whites of her eyes are visible, and her mouth open. She has a crystalline perspex collar around her neck, echoing the ice, and adding to the sense of her being a captured exotic animal, challenging her captors by trashing the kitchen and turning them on.

The athletic black supermodel is easily portrayed as animalistic, close to nature, exotic, and wild. She is trapped in a suburban domestic setting of tamedness, if not enslavement—perhaps echoing unconsciously the association between slavery and wetnursing for African American women—something Linda Blum refers to in *At the Breast* (1999: 147). However, her relationship to her milk results in an acknowledgment of the inevitable excess of all female bodies, and their relationship to the abject, which Julia Kristeva has so eloquently written about in *The Powers of Horror* (1982). No matter the ice cubes, the cool blue light from the fridge, or the use of marketing aids such as milk cartons, *milk spills out*, and the body refuses to acknowledge any boundaries forced upon it by culture. In this image, milk refuses to be regulated. (Just as in heterosexual pornography, semen refuses to be regulated.) The implied answer to the question of the title, is “No, you haven’t seen me. Not ’till now.”

At the same time, there is an implication of all women’s enslavement precisely through the potential commodification of breastmilk. The photograph plays it both ways: it is an invitation to play with women’s milk and with its potential for both sexualization and commodification; and it protests the enslavement of women’s body that might result from this play. There is a tension—reinforced by the title’s reference to all modeling images—between

the woman's taking pleasure in her own body, including its bodily fluids, and the pleasures others may take from it, with or without consent.

Although Lachapelle has used lactating models in other photos, notably "Milk Maidens" (1996), collected in his volume *Hotel Lachapelle* (1999), this image takes the idea a step further with the suggestion that milk can be packaged and sold commercially, while retaining a transgressive, sexual quality. And it is this, above all, which defines the photograph. Produced initially for *Playboy*, it bears the hallmark of all representations of women as sexually alluring, yet it is liberating in the way it allows for women's milk to be part of that allure. It is as though a hairy armpit had suddenly appeared unbidden in these pages, looking gorgeous. (The image also refers to the U.S. milk advertising campaign which used Campbell, amongst others, to pose with a milk mustache on her upper lip.)

In both of the last two images, there is a suggestion of lactation as an auto-erotic process, expanding the purpose of lactation from infant feeding to include both female and male pleasure. As in many scenes in lactation pornography videos, such as Ed Deroo's *Lactamania* Series (from 1994), the lactating mother occupies center stage, and her milk-producing breasts are the stars of the show. In many of these videos, the woman is both object and subject, and her body shifts from receptacle to agent. Rather than the *tabula rasa* for semen at the point of the "money shot," the lactating porn star eclipses this conventional image of dramatic climax and male satisfaction, by continuing to spray, wherever she pleases, indefinitely. (For more on these videos, see my article "The Nipple Effect," 2001; and *Fresh Milk*, forthcoming 2003.)

Placed end-to-end, these images show the various stages of desexualizing, then resexualizing the lactating breast. I would argue that the sexualized breast is potentially useful to the purposes of lactation support providers, and need not be repressed on the grounds of propriety. I would further suggest that images from lactation erotica might be co-opted to the cause of naturalizing the lactating breast. I'm not recommending that we show entire blue movies to expectant mums, but certain highlights could demonstrate some useful techniques for hand expression, and introduce an element of sensuality and fun in what is otherwise often a clinically pious setting. There is no reason why the exorbitantly—even wastefully—lactating breast should not be acknowledged as part of the spectrum of breastliness. (As with other pornography genres, women could also take charge, and produce some better quality material, such as the work being done by the Bend Over Boyfriend producers in San Francisco.) Rethinking ways of representing breasts to ourselves, and allowing for a freer expression of the fully functioning breast within both maternal and more plainly erotic contexts, might free women to feel more at ease with their breastmilk, and to more confidently take pleasure in the processes of feeding and lactating. Sichtermann argues that breastfeeding

is a partial expression of female sexuality and yet there is no awareness

or understanding of it today, no culture attached to it and not even an inkling of its rank as a sexual potentiality...Even during periods when breastfeeding was in favor—most recently in our [twentieth] century—there has not been the right climate for developing fully the sensuality which centres on the breasts. (1986: 65)

Sichtermann's article was written before lactation erotica and pregnancy porn became a small but significant corner of the fetish market. Perhaps she would be buoyed by knowledge of its current success, and its potential for cooption. Whether or not erotica is the admittedly problematic key to returning pleasure to lactation, the point these images can make for us is surely valid: breastfeeding is not only for the edification of the mother, the nourishment of the baby, or the development of a bond between them—it is also an expression of the embodied self.

Several efforts have been made to find sources for all of the images included in this article and the author would welcome any information in this regard. Any suggestions should be forward to the editors of this volume.

¹Kamani is the author of "Younger Wife" a story about alternative uses of breastmilk. See *Jungle Girl* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1995: 95-100).

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