



## “Literary Milk: Breastfeeding Across Race, Class, and Species in Contemporary U.S. Fiction”

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### Abstract

*Although all infant mammals require mothers' milk, very little breastfeeding appears in U.S. literature. Why is this ecological and foundational part of early life so frequently backgrounded or made invisible? and why would this topic be significant for feminist ecocritics? To explore these questions, this essay discusses the few texts in 20th century U.S. literature that depict breastfeeding, pairing them by era--John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath (1939) and Meridel LeSueur's The Girl (1939), followed by Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon (1977) and Beloved (1987)--and concludes with a contemporary novel, Emma Donoghue's Room (2010). All of these texts depict breastfeeding in conditions of captivity and restricted freedoms. Under such conditions, breastfeeding and breastmilk take on added urgency as food, as emotional and psychological nurturance, and often as self-worth for the nursing mother, whose milk seems to be the only material she can control. Narrative texts providing examples of free mothers, from diverse races, classes, and species, able to choose whether, where, and how long to breastfeed their own offspring, do not yet appear in U.S. literature, possibly because the conditions for such cultural and economic freedoms have yet to exist.*

In Chinese-American author Maxine Hong Kingston's short story, "No Name Woman" (1975), the narrator-daughter receives the cautionary tale of her paternal aunt's suicide from her mother, who retells the aunt's story to warn her daughter about the dangers of sexual excess. In 1924, seventeen "hurry up" marriages took place in their family's village, ensuring that the young men leaving for Gold Mountain would send home money and eventually return to China, or send for their new brides. Although the aunt's husband did not return, the aunt became pregnant a few years after their marriage, a clear outcome of adultery that Chinese villagers believed would bring harm to their village. On the night her aunt was due to give birth, the villagers masked themselves and punished her family by destroying their home, crops, dishes, clothing, and slaughtering their animals. To imagine that night, the

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narrator-daughter had to weigh the different possibilities—was her aunt’s lover a relative or a stranger? Was her pregnancy a result of rape or of love? And what went through her aunt’s mind after the raid, the labor and childbirth, culminating in the aunt’s decision to drown herself and her infant in the family well? The most poignant moment of the story is not the aunt’s decision to deliver her child in a pigsty, nor her decision to drown: rather, it is her decision to nurse the newborn, to button the infant inside her shirt, where “it found her nipple . . . [and] made little snuffling noises” that made her “clench her teeth at its preciousness” until “full of milk, the little ghost slept.” Before morning, she took the baby with her to the well, for as the daughter/niece/narrator understands, “mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys.” In Kingston’s story, breastfeeding offers a moment of “preciousness” that connects and nourishes both mother and child in an otherwise hostile, violent, and patriarchal context.

What role does breastfeeding have in U.S. literature? Searching for texts to address this question, I found the answer in their astonishing absence: although all infant mammals require mothers’ milk, very little breastfeeding appears in U.S. literature. Why is this ecological and foundational part of early life so frequently backgrounded or made invisible? And why would this topic be significant for feminist ecocritics?

As an embodied form of “women’s work,” lactation and breastfeeding define the human species “mammalia” in Linnaean taxonomy (Schiebinger 1996), reminding humans of our animality. But Linnaeus was no posthumanist: his term participated in a larger eighteenth-century project to distinguish the “man of wisdom” from women and nature. Just a few years before creating the term *Mammalia*, Linnaeus wrote a treatise on the evils of wet nursing as a practice that violated the laws of nature—particularly for upper-class European women—and aided by Rousseau’s influential novel *Emile*, breast-feeding and “the maternal breast became nature’s sign that women belonged only in the home . . . [and] should be barred from citizenship and the wielding of public power” (Schiebinger 148). Understandably, then, feminists and ecofeminists alike have been wary of literary, cultural, and “ecomaternalist” celebrations of breastfeeding as either direct or covert strategies for essentializing women’s “nature,” equating biological capacities with restrictive gender roles in arguments that have led to compulsory motherhood, including social or ecological caregiving, and reduced participation in the public spheres of business, economics and citizenship (MacGregor 2006).

But the literary response to the biological fact of breast feeding seems to be an overwhelming silence with few celebrations, a particularly curious omission given the context of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, when competing cultural movements of antifeminist backlash—“postfeminism,” Operation Rescue, and the Mommy Wars<sup>1</sup>—and pro-feminist trends in motherhood activism (including ecological motherhood), writing and scholarship have made breastfeeding a frequent discussion topic in scholarly as well as popular media. Environmental feminist science sources such as Sandra Steingraber’s *Having Faith* (2001) and Maia Boswell-Penc’s *Tainted Milk* (2006) address the health and nutritional benefits of breastfeeding for mother and child, despite the body-burden of environmental toxins transferred through that milk, and celebrate Katsi Cook’s Awkwesasne Mothers’ Milk project (LaDuke 1999) for challenging the environmental racism that allows industry to dump toxic chemicals in waterways, polluting the breastmilk and health of indigenous people, aquatic animal species, and ecosystems. Unlike Cook, Steingraber and Boswell-Penc’s focus of concern is limited to the dominant species (humans), while other species seem valued only as indicators of environmental health, and early warning systems for humans. But human mothers and other mammal mothers’ milk alike is used to

feed human infants, and when toxins such as radioactivity and rocket fuel appear in cows' milk (Environmental Working Group 2004), feminists and environmental justice activists have opportunities to make connections across gender, class, species, and environmental health.

Yet among the burgeoning literature of politicized motherhood, liberal feminist sources such as Ann Crittendon's *The Price of Motherhood* (2001) ignore ecology entirely, and give breastfeeding only two pages; both Crittendon and the feminist movement her work inspired, MomsRising.org and *The Motherhood Manifesto* (Blades & Rowe-Finkbeiner 2006), focus on the economic costs of motherhood and the social changes needed to correct these costs. Another feminist and founder of *Mothering* magazine, Peggy O'Mara (2012) has argued for monetizing breastmilk and the nursing relationship, thus seeking inclusion in an industrial capitalist system rather than interrogating the anti-ecological impacts of capitalism, as Marilyn Waring does in *If Women Counted* (1988). And while early environmental feminist work such as Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) and feminist ecocritical work such as Louise Westling's *The Green Breast of the New World* (1996) address the cultural construction of nature as both female and mother, both say nothing about women's breastfeeding, or the ethics of appropriating the nursing milk of other mammal mothers. How might a feminist ecocritical perspective on breastmilk and breastfeeding illuminate shifting and historically specific cultural notions about race, class, nature, and species?

To explore this question, I first examine two texts from the Depression Era of the 1930's, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1939), describing the ways that celebrations of women's breastfeeding often draw on essentialized notions of femininity, and thus fail to transform the oppressive structures these texts seek to challenge. Next, I discuss breastfeeding and breastmilk in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987), exploring the ways that race, class, and the history of slavery—particularly that cultural and economic institution's vicious disregard for the Black family—have shaped African-American women's experience of breastfeeding. Finally, I examine a more contemporary novel, Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010), a narrative that addresses the perpetual threat and reality of sexual violence and its impact on women and children, paralleling Morrison's depiction of mothers under slavery, and referencing contemporary debates about breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and attachment parenting.

Taken together, these texts confirm that breastfeeding and nursing milk have been "backgrounded" in U.S. literature and culture, denying our animal dependence on the relational nurturance we first receive from our mammal mothers, and the eco-political contexts that shape possibilities for mothering and nursing children. This backgrounding and denied dependence are two of the five functions in what Val Plumwood (1993) calls the "Master Model." Both Plumwood (2002) and Vandana Shiva (1997) have pointed out the ways that dualistic thinking and the instrumental reasoning of the "Master Model" have constructed nature, gender, the body, the indigenous, and the animal as "other" to specific human (elite male) needs. From a standpoint that recognizes connections across the systemic and structural expropriations of labor, energy, nourishment, and selfhood from all those ontologized as mindless/natural/resources subordinated to a small group of human elites—a system that transmutes biological, ecological, and sociopolitical health for the many into economic wealth for the few—this essay explores the symbolic and material meanings of milk for feminist ecocriticism.

## Depression-Era Breastfeeding: Mother's Milk as Food for Survival

Depression-era literature clearly presents U.S. culture's ambivalent views of breastfeeding: either glorifying the intimacy and nurturance between a Madonna-like mother and child, or vilifying the infant's prolonged dependence on the mother's breast, and fearing the mother's erotic attachment and engulfment of the child. An example of the latter can be found in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), a coming-of-age novel describing the European immigrant experience in New York City in the first decades of the twentieth century. Like other literary texts describing the working classes, Smith's popular novel compares the proliferating Irish immigrant community to the trees that flourish in poor tenement districts, growing out of sidewalks and alleys, boarded-up lots and trash heaps. Immigrants and trees are vital forces of nature—but evidently prolonged breastfeeding is not. In a scene that many U.S. youth readers remember well into adulthood, six-year-old Gussie is finally weaned when his mother takes a can of stove blackening and "blacken[s] her left breast with stove polish" then uses lipstick to draw "a wide ugly mouth with frightening teeth in the vicinity of the nipple" (195). Gussie's mother had tried to wean him at nine months of age, but he refused, and become a "tough little hellion" who refused all food but breastmilk until the age of two, and by age six must stand up to nurse, looking "not unlike a man with his foot on a bar rail, smoking a fat pale cigar" (195). When the neighbors' gossip reaches such a point that the husband refuses to sleep with Gussie's mother because she "breeds monsters," the mother concludes that her son must be shocked in order to give up breastfeeding. This short scene addressing Gussie's prolonged breastfeeding and traumatic weaning encapsulates the public censure, the hetero-male's sexual fears, and the grotesque images that are associated with breastfeeding—particularly breastfeeding beyond infancy.

In contrast, both Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* conclude with a celebration of breastfeeding that evokes proletarian Madonna-like imagery. Both treat breast milk as food, and they do so within a framework that foregrounds class analyses as well as reinforcing strongly gendered roles for women. In both texts, breastfeeding is empowering to the women who offer their milk as food in a context where human survival hangs in the balance. Both narratives clearly show that such feminine empowerment does little to transform culturally-restrictive gender roles or oppressive socioeconomic structures.

Le Sueur's *The Girl* is narrated from the viewpoint of a Wisconsin farm girl whose father has mismanaged and subsequently lost the farm, and with five siblings and no food at home, the Girl travels to St. Paul, Minnesota, looking for work during the Depression.<sup>2</sup> The Girl waitresses at the German Village, a bar that sells bootleg liquor and hosts sex workers, since impoverished and uneducated girls in the Depression have few options for making money, and unemployed, illiterate young men have little money to spend. Tutored by her friends Belle, the bar-operator, and Clara, a sex worker, the Girl learns about survival and falls in love with an unemployed and unlucky man, Butch. When the three men—Butch, Clara's husband Hoinck, and their ringleader, Ganz—plan and execute a bank robbery, their plans go awry: Ganz shoots Hoinck in the back for taking part of the money from the bank, Butch shoots Ganz in retaliation, and Ganz shoots Butch as he flees the bank. Driving the getaway car, the Girl takes Butch south to rural Iowa, where she hides him in a riverside shack and he dies from the gunshot wound that no hospital would tend without payment. Pregnant and alone, the Girl hitchhikes back to St. Paul, where she is warmly received by the community of women who struggle and starve together, first in a public relief tenement building, and then in an empty warehouse in downtown St. Paul. There, the

narrative culminates in a triply-layered conclusion bringing together the death of Clara, the workers' massive protest demonstration demanding milk, and the birth of the Girl's infant daughter, whom she immediately breastfeeds.

Several themes in the novel augment the meaning of this final breastfeeding between girl-turned-mother and newborn daughter: the shifting analysis of oppression, the sustaining presence of nature, and the power of women's community.

Initially, as the Girl learns about the ways men and women court, flirt, fight, and fall in love, the narrative depicts men as oppressors of women, and hetero-patriarchy as the most immediate system of oppression. Trapped by their own heterosexual desires, the women can envision no change in their relations with men. But as the story unfolds, the analysis develops: on their final day together, escaping the bank robbery, the Girl and Butch stop at a Standard Oil service station to get gas. Running a gas station has been Butch's dream, and when the Girl and Butch learn from the gas station operator that the company overworks the station owners, starves their families, and then turns them out cold, Butch realizes there has never been a future for him through hard work and employment in a capitalist system—but he can envision no alternative, other than death.

In the book's narrative, Butch's bank robbery counterpoints the girl's "heist": her theft of the seed precedes his, and her outcome is the birth of new life:

I had to smile. I had already robbed the bank. I had stolen the seed. I had it on deposit. It was cached. It was safe (85).

...I kept thinking—what did Butch want? He was playing the wrong game. They were all trying to win—what? It was the wrong hold up, the wrong home run. It was funny but I kept thinking and feeling like I had just outfoxed the cops, the whole shebang, cracked the vault, made my get away with the loot under my belly. And I am the Treasure (134).

As Constance Coiner (1998) argues, "the bank robbery is an artificial structure on which to hang the real story—that of the Girl's pregnancy, the brutality of men and the Depression, and the generative power of women" (117). For the Girl, true wealth is relational: her life is enriched by her sexual experiences with Butch, and by her bodily capacity to gestate another life. Yet her self-esteem is circumscribed by patriarchy: she values herself only in relation to men and to her capacity to give birth ("I am the Treasure"). After Butch's death, the Girl's class consciousness begins to grow along with her pregnancy, since her poverty brings her into a maternity relief home, through a case worker's evaluation for welfare, and finally to a grassroots women's housing community where she spends more time with Amelia, the Workers' Alliance organizer. In this second half of the novel, women's assertions about men's irresponsibility, narcissism, and unreliability are countered by Amelia's analysis of class, as in the following dialogue:

Clara said, O, a man can always be raising some dough for whiskey or ten bucks for those pills for an abortion, but no money to have it.

Belle said, And they're at you day and night. You can't lie down in the daytime the way it is.

We're dumb. We're fools, Clara cried bitterly, taking all their filth one way and another, getting poisoned with it.

Amelia said, It isn't the man. A man is a mighty fine thing, there is nothing better than a man. It's the way we have to live that makes us sink to the bottom and rot (112).

With Amelia providing an interpretive context, the Girl is able to recognize the pervasive institutional oppression of workers and in particular, poor women: hospitals deny birthing facilities and care to laboring mothers who aren't "registered" (124), and force poor women who survive by sex work to undergo shock treatments that "take away anxiety" (138); social workers deny food payments to impoverished pregnant women, yet tell them they should consume "a quart of milk per day and oranges" (117); relief payments are leveraged to control women's sexuality and reproduction ["You've been immoral" the case worker tells the Girl, and writes "sterilization would be advisable" after her baby is born (128-129)]; even a policeman feels free to molest her, seeing her as a pregnant unmarried girl (130). As the Girl's working class identity emerges after her escape from the relief maternity home where they plan to sterilize her after childbirth, Amelia encourages the Girl's awareness of nature and women's ideology of motherhood as integral to that class consciousness:

...You can't just cry for yourself. You got to cry for all. Some face has got to shine with every other face. We must know that our suffering is together... the same enemy after us...the same mother over us, she said (134).

I knew then that I was one of them.

We were standing beneath a great cottonwood tree that leaned green over us like a mother. Yes, she said, putting her hands on my shoulders, a new heart is growing (136).

Through the Girl's viewpoint, the themes of class oppression and the sustaining power of nature are linked with the material, embodied pleasures of sexuality, reproduction, and milk.

In the context of these themes, milk takes on material and symbolic meanings: it is the nourishing food needed by Clara after the shock treatments she receives from the Hastings Mental institution, and the food needed by the Girl to "make bones" (123) for her growing baby; it stands in for the female Workers' Alliance vision of a caring society ["O, a breast for all, I cried, and milk for all" (143)]; and it affirms the relationship between mother and child. As Stacy Alaimo (2005) argues, "Le Sueur's emphasis on pregnancy can be seen as a way of asserting the value of reproduction and motherhood against both capitalism and Marxism, which ignore or degrade them" (62-63). In the novel's final scene, the Girl gives birth with Amelia's help in "a little cave in the corner" of the abandoned warehouse building, and the baby girl is welcomed by the women's community. But even though the Girl names her child Clara after her deceased friend, and calls the baby "girl" while "giving her my full breast of milk" (148), the continuity and regeneration of life offered by the women's community is still circumscribed by the impoverished, emasculated (since masculinity is equated with economic success) and thus angry, unemployed men, and the larger failure of a capitalist economy to create living-wage jobs. In other

words, milk, maternity, and women's community are necessary but not sufficient materials for a genuinely democratic society; they may temporarily sustain a women's separatist utopia (Coiner 118-121), but do nothing to transform women's material conditions. To be fully enacted, reproductive justice requires economic, ecological, and politically democratic structures for all (Gaard 2010b).

Moreover, the workers' public milk demonstration and protest that take place during the Girl's private labor and delivery, along with the repeated calls for milk to nourish Clara and the Girl, both rely on the backgrounded oppression of other animal mothers: milk as a material commodity is obtained from the anguished process of separating nursing mother cows from their newborn calves, and thus the category of species oppression functions as a further subordinated underclass below the human poverty class (Kemmerer 2011). The narrative's implicit awareness of species subordination surfaces in the opening chapter's introduction of "Suzybelly," the pregnant stray cat that Belle has adopted and put out a collection jar beside her at the bar, where customers can place bets on how many kittens she will have. "She's a female like us," Amelia comments, "she don't know the father, she gives all she's got to make them come out whole healthy full of seed" (6). Later, walking the streets with the Girl, Amelia rages at the capitalist system while handing out leaflets, and compares workers to food animals:

...They wear you out, they work you to death, they wear you out on the belt, in the mill, the factory. They get your blood and bones one way or another. What are we? Just goods to be bought and sold? Yes, she answered herself cursing, that's what they think buy and sell you and then use your body after you're dead! It's too bad, it's too bad they can't kill our babies and eat them like suckling pigs. What tender meat that would be! Stuffed babies with mushrooms. Why not? (135)

Despite her class-based outrage, Amelia does not develop or politicize her awareness of the structural similarities between classism and the oppressive structure of speciesism, which would require her to consider that eating the workers like baby pigs might be as ethically horrific as eating the baby pigs themselves.

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) also begins with a farm crisis that propels its characters to seek wage labor: though Dust Bowl residents blamed the weather for depriving them of water for their crops, cycles of high rainfall alternating with drought are common to the Plains. However, the ideology of land ownership, cash-cropping, alienated and mechanized labor, water diversion, and beneath it all, the view that "the rapidly growing U.S. can expand indefinitely within its present boundaries" created an impossible paradox for small family farmers in the Depression (Cassuto 66). After Plains farmers plowed under all the region's grasslands and planted high-yield monoculture cash crops, depleting the soil year after year, their farms had no natural defenses to keep the topsoil intact during the droughts of the 1930s. When the crops failed, the farmers borrowed from the banks, accumulating debt year after year, until the banks foreclosed on their farms and sent these barely-literate farm families on the road.

Steinbeck's narrative follows the Joad family from their foreclosed farm in Oklahoma (acquired via colonization of the indigenous inhabitants), through the journey west via Route 66 to California's migrant labor camps. Initially a family of three generations—Granma and Grampa, Uncle John, Ma and Pa, and their children the young men Noah, Tom, and Al; their married and pregnant teenager Rose of Sharon ("Rosasharn"), and the younger children, twelve-year-old Ruthie and ten-year-old Winfield—the

older generations do not have names but rather family roles, suggesting their function as archetypes, in contrast to the younger, named individuals. The family loses members on the journey west—Grampa dies after the first day, unable to live apart from the land he cultivated, and Granma dies at the California border; the eldest son Noah decides to remain at the Colorado River, where he can fish for a living, and Rosasharn's husband Connie soon deserts her, contrasting Al's decision to move with his fiancé and her family. The remaining family—Uncle John, Ma and Pa, Tom, Rosasharn, and the younger children Ruthie and Winfield—are trapped in a cycle of diminishing returns as they seek work, food, and shelter within California's migrant farm worker community. In the novel's final scenes, the two oldest remaining Joad children, Tom and Rosasharn, reach their epic and gendered conclusions.

As a representative of labor organizing, Tom goes on the road to bring a spiritual fervor to collective action, because "a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one" (463) and, like Le Sueur's Amelia, Tom has realized he is part of a larger collective spirit. Because he has broken parole by leaving Oklahoma to follow his family, Tom must flee at the novel's end, but he tells Ma Joad that he plans to organize workers so they can "all work together for our own thing—all farm our own land," and that she need not worry about him:

I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat. I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. ...I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there (463).

It's this epic soliloquy that ends the novel's 1940 filmic adaptation directed by John Ford, with Ma Joad saying goodbye to Tom, affirming that "We ain't gonna die out. People is goin' on—chargin' a little, maybe, but goin' right on" (467). Such an ending gives Tom as labor organizer the dominant narrative, and Ma Joad the stereotypically supportive mothering role, but just as *The Girl* uses two gendered narratives, so does *The Grapes of Wrath*: the book's second paired conclusion begins after Ma Joad's soliloquy, in the raindrops that sympathetically mirror her tears at Tom's departure, and leads to Rosasharn's labor, childbirth, and breastfeeding. Omitting these scenes from the film shows U.S. society's aversion to the "private" foundations of mammal life: sexuality, childbirth and breastfeeding.

Like *The Girl's* pairing of the public labor demonstration for milk and the private childbirth and nursing scenes, *The Grapes of Wrath* pairs labor plots in Rosasharn's conclusion. Now deluged by the rainfall they have yearned for throughout the novel, the men labor outside in the rain, trying to build retaining walls against the rising water and keep a dry shelter for the women, children, and laboring mother, Rosasharn. Forced to move from the boxcar two days after Rosasharn—undernourished throughout her pregnancy—delivers her stillborn infant, the Joads find shelter in a barn, where a boy is huddled in a corner for warmth with his starving fifty-year-old father. "Says he wasn' hungry, or he jus' et. Give me the food. Now he's too weak. Can't hardly move," the boy tells the Joads (500). "Las' night I went an' bust a winda an' stoled some bread. Made 'im chew 'er down. But he puked it all up, an' then he was weaker. Got to have soup or milk. You folks got money to git milk?" the boy begs Ma Joad. Through a steady gaze, Ma Joad asks Rosasharn the unspoken question, "and the two women looked deep into each other. The girl's breath came short and gasping. She said 'Yes'" (501). Ma Joad hurries



everyone out of the barn, and in the novel's final scene, Rosasharn breastfeeds this starving father like an infant:

Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously. (502)

Numerous commentaries on this conclusion have explained it as Biblical, as mythic, or as gendered motherhood: i.e., "Rose of Sharon achieves her full womanhood through Other-commitment" (Ditsky 121). Katherine Rogers-Carpenter (2009) sees the final scene as "tragic but hopeful in its implication that the Joads, and others like them, will endure, and that women can sustain these communities" (526). But this "temporary matriarchy" created by Ma Joad and Rosasharn merely glorifies traditional gender roles and is not capable of permanently "alleviat[ing] the emergency created by capitalistic individualism" (Rogers-Carpenter 526).<sup>3</sup> Even if the dual endings suggest a combined and gendered solution of labor organizing and matriarchal communities, such solutions do little to alleviate the oppression of women or migrant workers of color—workers who both preceded the "Okies" and, once the laboring whites shifted to the munitions industries in World War II, replaced the Okies in California's corporate farm fields. As Charles Cunningham (2008) explains, "*The Grapes of Wrath* is both an exemplary radical analysis of the exploitation of agricultural workers and the culmination in the thirties of an implicitly racist focus on whites as victims.... [omitting the fact that] Mexican and Filipino migrant workers ... dominated the California fields and orchards into the late thirties" (59).

Thus, both Le Sueur's and Steinbeck's Depression-era literary portrayals of breastfeeding under an oppressive system begin with the industrial and economic exploitation of nature that precedes and underscores class oppression. However, they do so with an awareness of gender that celebrates and simultaneously essentializes women's roles, and offers only a nascent awareness of species oppression. Moreover, these texts lack an awareness of race and its contextual influence on breastfeeding.

## Breastfeeding in the Shadow of Slavery

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the theft of a mother's breast milk is portrayed as one of slavery's many cruel assaults on African-American women. The violence Sethe endures on the misnamed Kentucky plantation, Sweet Home, is so extreme that like Kingston's "No Name Woman," the most loving act of resistance a mother can offer her child in this repressive cultural context is death. Named "Beloved" for the word engraved on the baby's tombstone, Morrison's novel is inspired by historical fact,<sup>4</sup> and events unfold through the perspectives of multiple narrators, the most harrowing incidents being told and retold in the ways that memory reviews trauma. Eighteen years after Sethe and her children have fled slavery, been recaptured by slave-hunters and Sethe is tried for infanticide, freed, and haunted by the spirit of her murdered child, Beloved returns as a young woman to live with Sethe and her daughter Denver, a reunion that is initially mysterious, then joyous, and finally all-consuming.

Breastmilk and the nursing relationship between mother and child are primary forces shaping the novel's events. After planning their family's escape from slavery, Sethe's husband Halle hears the signal—"a rattle that is not bird or snake" (224)—in the shoulder-high corn, and leaves on a dinner break to tell Sethe where to meet the caravan. Sethe must have received the message from another

source: she sends their three children—the two five-year-old boys, Howard and Buglar, and a nine-month-old baby girl—ahead with “the woman who waited in the corn” (198), but cannot find Halle and waits an extra day to search for him. That afternoon, the slave-owners, Schoolteacher and his nephew-pupils, assault Sethe: as Schoolteacher watches and takes notes, the “two boys with mossy teeth” take turns holding her down and sucking her breastmilk (70). Sethe reports the assault to the slaveowner’s recently widowed sister-in-law, Mrs. Garner, who has always been kind to Sethe, but her benevolent husband is no longer the patriarch making the rules; now, when Schoolteacher finds out Sethe has complained, her assailants whip her back, but not before digging a hole in the ground to accommodate her pregnant belly, which is considered their future property. After this triple assault, Sethe is determined to leave with or without Halle, focusing on the urgency of bringing her breastmilk to her nursing baby girl. On her arduous journey, dripping breastmilk on the front of her dress and oozing blood on her back, Sethe goes into labor and delivers her child with the help of a poor white girl named Amy Denver, who massages Sethe’s feet and puts spiderwebs on her lacerated and bleeding back. Eighteen years later, one of the Sweet Home men, Paul D, seeks her out and they become lovers; from him, Sethe learns that Halle witnessed her assault from his hiding place in the barn loft and, and it “broke him” (68). As Paul D explains, “Last time I saw [Halle] he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face” (69), and Sethe sees the connection between mother cows’ milk and her own: “the milk they took is on his mind” (70).

The few scenes with Sethe nursing her own daughters are both poignant and horrifying. When Sethe reaches the home of Halle’s freed mother, Baby Suggs, who has safely sheltered the grandchildren, Sethe is washed, her wounded feet are tended, and her crusted nipples are softened with lard and then cleansed so that at dawn, when “the silent baby woke” Sethe is able to nurse her; afterwards, the newborn falls asleep, “its eyes half open, its tongue dream-sucking” (93). Then Sethe’s “sleepy boys and crawling-already? girl” are brought in and the family enjoys a blissful reunion in bed, Sethe kissing the boys until they resist, and finally cradling the crawling-already? girl in her arms: “She enclosed her left nipple with two fingers of her right hand and the child opened her mouth. They hit home together” (94). This nursing daughter’s need for Sethe’s breastmilk has been the strongest sustaining force in motivating Sethe’s pregnant, whipped and lactating body to run for freedom. Sethe values herself primarily as a mother; she does not run for her own freedom, but for her daughter.

Just 28 days later, it is this same daughter whose throat Sethe cuts first, to keep her safe from the sexual violence women suffer under slavery: “she had to be safe and I put her where she would be” (200). When Sethe recognizes the Schoolteacher’s hat on the road in front of Baby Suggs’ house, she is described as a powerful raptor, acting to protect her children: “how she flew,” recalls Stamp Paid, the man who ferried Sethe and her newborn across the Ohio River, “snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected them every which way” (157). The slave-catchers find her in the shed with her boys bleeding in the sawdust, another blood-soaked child held to her chest, and an infant swung by the heels toward the wall planks. Stamp Paid is the one who catches Sethe’s arm and saves the infant Denver’s life; only the crawling-already? girl’s throat has been cut with the saw, and while the sheriff sends for a wagon, Sethe will not put down her dead baby girl until Baby Suggs tells her, “it’s time to nurse your youngest,” and trades “the living for the dead” (152). Though Baby Suggs battles Sethe, she slips in the pools of blood, and Denver nurses “her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister” (152).

Beloved's return from death as an eighteen or nineteen-year-old fixated at the nursing stage allows Sethe and Denver to confront the guilt and grief at losing this daughter/sister, emotions that are heightened by the institutional context of slavery and its disregard for family ties. When they recognize Beloved has returned, Sethe and Denver immerse themselves in this renewed relationship, skating together and speaking together in the most passionate, exuberant language of the novel. Their three monologues and intertwining dialogue "echo the biblical Song of Solomon," writes Edith Frampton (2005), "giving voice to the intercorporeality and intersubjectivity achieved between Sethe and her two daughters" (156). "I am Beloved and she is mine" expresses their inter-identity; "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own" says Beloved, "I am looking for the join" (210, 213). Their material, intercorporeal connection is manifested in milk: "I have your milk" and "I brought your milk" and "I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (216, 205). Passionately re/memembering their intensely corporeal connection is a necessary precedent for Sethe and Denver to heal from the loss of Beloved and move forward as whole selves.

In the institutional context of slavery, women's experience of motherhood takes on an intensified, desperate edge of necessary hypervigilance and self-sacrifice; the cost to enslaved mothers like Sethe and Baby Suggs involves being deprived of opportunities to develop full selfhood and self-knowledge.<sup>5</sup> On her way to freedom, Baby Suggs reflects on "the sadness [that] was at her center . . . . Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like" (140). With this realization, Baby Suggs rejects her "bill of sale" name, Jenny, and takes her husband's last name (Suggs) along with what he called her (Baby). Similarly, Sethe has had to struggle so hard for her children that she regards them as "the best thing she was," and the cost and urgency of her sacrifice is what she tries to get the revived Beloved to understand before she leaves:

...what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life—Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than that—far worse.... That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. ...she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean.... not her daughter (251).

An unmothered daughter, Sethe was nursed by another enslaved woman, Nan, who had to nurse "the little whitebabies" first, while Sethe's mother was "in the rice." Nan and Sethe's mother survived the sea voyage together, and were "taken up many times by the crew. 'She threw them all away but you,'" Nan tells Sethe (62), letting her know she was a wanted and loved child, even though slave-work prevented her mother from nursing her longer than a week, from sleeping in the same cabin with Sethe, or even from having time to fix her daughter's hair. No wonder that Sethe has vowed "nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children" (200).

The institution of slavery intensifies the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism and speciesism: women under slavery are treated not like humans but like cows, separated and sold away from their offspring, and their nursing milk stolen. As Sethe describes of her assault, the white boys “handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable” (200). Racism, classism and speciesism intersect in slavery as subordinating both men and women involves *animalizing*<sup>6</sup> them: witness the frequent use of the horse bit resulting in Sethe’s mother’s permanent “smile,” and Paul D’s feeling that even roosters have more freedom and manhood than he does, wearing the bit, neck iron, and chains. As Edith Frampton observes, Sethe’s full subjectivity and self-worth emerge by the end of the novel, in context with the return and nurturing partnership of Paul D, who has suffered the male counterpart to Sethe’s journey out of slavery. Finally understanding Sethe’s fiercely loving motivation for keeping her children “safe,” Paul D returns to her and finds her hopeless, depressed, and awaiting death in Baby Suggs’ bed. Seeing the compassion in his eyes, Sethe speaks her sorrow: “She left me. ...She was my best thing” (272). Remembering the words of his brother Sixo describing his own woman—“She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order”— Paul D gives Sethe back to herself:

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” His holding fingers are holding hers.

“Me? Me?” (273)

*Beloved* ends here, with the mother’s selfhood mirrored back to her. Sethe’s final words—“Me? Me?”—suggest a self-identity that both encompasses and exceeds her mothering and her milk.

Morrison depicts motherhood in the contexts of increasing freedom versus that of institutional oppression; the self-sacrificing motherhood, the nursing that is a mother’s only source of power, and the male-identified mother are all contrasted with the enlivened potential of mothers with whole selves, capable of nurturing themselves and others equally well. Like Paul D in *Beloved*, in *Song of Solomon*, the mothering capacity is available to and practiced by men and by women who are not biological mothers, implicitly articulating Morrison’s rejection of essentialized motherhood.

*Song of Solomon* is set after slavery and its narrative shows that good mothering includes not just breastfeeding but also wisdom and affectionate support, as seen through the paired mothering from Milkman’s biological mother, Ruth Dead, and from his paternal aunt, Pilate. Ruth breastfeeds Milkman but is unable to provide the other part of mothering, the wise and affectionate support, possibly because she has never received it herself: there is no mention of Ruth’s mother, and Ruth spends her entire life within tightly controlled patriarchal family systems (first with her doctor-father, and then with her husband) so that she is unable to nourish or value herself. Ruth continues breastfeeding Milkman to age four because nursing was “fully half of what made her daily life bearable” (14). But in contrast to Ruth’s experience of nursing “as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold,” and her milk “a thread of light,” Milkman is “bored by the flat taste of mother’s milk” and feels a mix of “restraint ... courtesy... [and] indifference” (13). Ruth’s overly-attached biological mothering subordinates the child to the mother’s needs. When a janitor discovers them breastfeeding, Milkman is abruptly weaned and his nickname is born, replacing his given name, Macon, until Milkman’s quest takes him South to Shalimar, Virginia where he uncovers his ancestral roots.

Divided into two parts, the novel opens in Michigan and chronicles Milkman's growth from childhood to young adulthood, describing his family and offering clues about his paternal great-grandparents, Solomon ("Sugarman") and Ryna, and his childhood friend Guitar's participation in "the Seven Days," a seven-man collective resistance of retributive justice against white racism. Milkman becomes lovers with his cousin Hagar—Pilate's grand-daughter-- and crudely ends their relationship a decade later, indifferent to her feelings and ready to move on. From his father Macon Dead, Milkman learns about the cave where Macon and Pilate hid as children after their father's death, and the bag of gold they uncovered there. Milkman believes it is the gold that motivates his quest, and tells Guitar he is going South in search of his great-grandparents' home, but the real gold Milkman finds is his self-identity and empathy for others, both emerging through his connections with community, family, and the environment of his ancestors.

In the novel's second half, Milkman traces his paternal ancestors back to Montour County where he finds Hunters' Cave, but no bags of gold. Believing his grandparents lived in Charlemagne, he inquires at an Automobile office and is directed to Shalimar, Virginia, where his car breaks down in front of Solomon's General Store. Initially irritating the locals with his class privilege, Milkman is finally taken in by some of the older men and invited on a hunting trip. Although he has never shot a gun, he accepts their offer because "he had thought this place, this Shalimar, was going to be home. His original home. His people came from here, his grandfather and his grandmother" (270). And with the night-time hunting party, Milkman learns what it means to be at home in a place, where the men and the dogs speak to each other, and where trees speak to humans too:

It was all language. ... No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse; when a tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each understood the other; when men ran with wolves, not from or after them. ... It was more than tracks Calvin was looking for—he whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them, as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers. ...

Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum's surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather. ... He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say....(278-79).

The tree's "maternal hands of a grandfather" expand Morrison's definition of mothering beyond restrictions of gender, species, and nature; the familiarity and inter-being with place, community, and ancestry are all part of Milkman's flight toward identity.

For flying has been the patriarchal myth of the Dead family, with Solomon flying off to freedom and dropping the only son of his 21 children that he attempted to take along—Jake, who became Milkman's grandfather. The novel opens with the suicide flight of an insurance agent, later revealed to be one of Guitar's "Seven Days" men, and the flight of Solomon permeates the novel through the song of Solomon, sung and danced by children. Around Shalimar, landmarks are named for their family history: Solomon's Leap, where the "flying African" grandfather spun around three times and took to the air, and Ryna's Gulch, where his wife screamed and screamed at his departure, and where her

sighing can still be heard. The novel ends with the flight of Milkman, finally turning towards his attacker and friend Guitar, who pursues him throughout his Southern quest in the mistaken belief that Milkman has betrayed their pact and stolen the cave's gold. But Milkman's flight is preceded by his aunt Pilate's.

Pilate is Milkman's "othermother" (Collins 1900), an aunt who is biologically unable to breastfeed him (though she uses herbs to aid Ruth in his conception) but wholly capable of providing the additional support he needs to grow to maturity. Although their mother Sing died giving birth to Pilate, she was "mothered" by her brother Macon until she was 12, when their father died and Macon began his drive for economic power. Returning to Shalimar with Milkman to bury her father's bones at Solomon's Leap—bones she has been carrying with her ever since his death—Pilate is shot by Guitar, who was surely aiming at Milkman. And at her dying request, Milkman sings the children's song of Solomon, but this time, he changes the word "Sugarman": "Sugargirl don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / Sugargirl don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me" (336). And "now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). Milkman's reconnection with self-identity, place, and community is possible because of the loving guidance and mothering of Pilate. Preceded by Pilate's example, Milkman leaps.

Pilate's mothering capacity is described in matriarchal animal terms—"like an elephant...Pilate trumpeted... 'And she was *loved!*'" (319)—when she demands mercy and proclaims the preciousness of her grand-daughter, Hagar, who has died from a lack of "othermothers" to counteract her gendered lack of self-love misdirected as an obsessive, unrequited love of Milkman. As Guitar understands, Hagar is "not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had. She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousin, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girlfriends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it" (307). Self-love, mothering love, and mothers' capacities to extend that love are linked in Morrison's novels. Pilate's final words are "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (336). Sethe's all-encompassing mother-love parallels Pilate's. As Sethe explains, "I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here [to freedom] . . . I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (162). Freedom and self-worth are crucial to these mothers' capacity to love well. But when have mothers been free from patriarchal constraints on their capacities for self-love and maternal love?

## Breastfeeding in Confinement and in Freedom

Echoing themes of race and class oppression, gender role constraints, and economic control under patriarchy, Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) explores the mother-child relationship under sexual captivity, inspired by the Fritzl case in Austria.<sup>7</sup> Narrated entirely through the viewpoint of five-year-old Jack, the book chronicles Jack and Ma's life inside of Room, a barricaded eleven-by-eleven foot square backyard enclosure with a skylight where Old Nick has kept and repeatedly raped Ma since he kidnapped her from a college campus at age 19. Fiercely protected and nurtured by Ma, Jack knows to sleep in the wardrobe on the nights they expect Old Nick to come, and Jack counts the number of times "Old Nick creaks Bed" (37); Ma never lets Old Nick see Jack. But with Jack's fifth birthday, Ma becomes

ever more aware that their situation is untenable, and together they plot a brilliant escape that relies completely on Jack's ability to play dead and then carry out a plan of rescue. Like a Shakespearean drama, the book follows a five-act sequence of exposition beginning with Jack's 5<sup>th</sup> birthday (titled "Presents"); rising action, where the history of Ma's abduction, some of Nick's abuse, and her plans for escaping are shared with Jack ("Unlying"); the climax, detailing Jack's heroic enactment of their plans ("Dying"); and the falling action, which shows their re-entry into the larger "Outside" world ("After") and their new home together in an assisted living apartment house ("Living"). Jack's passionate attachment to Ma is intensified by their close confinement, and their co-sleeping and extended breastfeeding also support that attachment, highlighting the relevance of this book in terms of contemporary debates about mothering, breastfeeding, and attachment parenting in the U.S. and Europe alike.

Since the 1970s, a more ecological approach to mothering has been advocated through a triple nexus of feminist texts such as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *For Her Own Good* (1979), and books on natural pregnancy and childbirth, such as Suzanne Arms' *Immaculate Deception* (1994); second, the 1958 publication and continually updated editions of La Leche League's *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*; and finally, William and Martha Sears (1993) articulation and advocacy of "attachment parenting," which involves extended breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and baby-wearing to protect the child's safety and nourish the mother-child connection. Indeed, the benefits of breastfeeding are unrivaled, and documented by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2012) as protecting against bacterial meningitis, diarrhea, respiratory-tract infection, ear infection, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), stress-related anxiety, diabetes mellitus, lymphoma, leukemia, Hodgkin's disease, obesity and asthma; moreover, breastfeeding promotes intellectual, emotional, and social developments for the child, and offers benefits to the mother, including a quicker return to pre-pregnancy weight, reducing future risks of obesity, and protecting against breast and ovarian cancer. But liberal feminist rejection of such "Good Mothers"—beginning with French feminist Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and extending to another French feminist, Elisabeth Badinter in her latest book, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* (2012)—denounce such ecological motherhood using the rhetoric of feminist liberation, and at the same time function as backlash texts, since they devalue motherhood in that liberal feminist rhetoric. Undeniably, an institution that is given so much romantic praise in the U.S. is given very little economic value: as Ann Crittendon notes in *The Price of Motherhood* (2001), motherhood—not single-motherhood, but motherhood overall—is an American woman's biggest risk factor for poverty in old age. In such a context, choosing to pursue extended breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and baby-wearing comes with significant restrictions on a mother's time and wage-earning capacities, and as *Room* shows, seems possible only at a cost of the mother's material and economic confinement.

But *Room* also offers strong arguments for the value of extended breastfeeding and the physical nurturance of infants and toddlers, particularly in the second half of the book after Ma and Jack's escape to the world "outside." Ma's extended nursing with Jack is criticized at the hospital, by her own mother, and by the TV interview host, and each time Ma talks right back, most notably in her TV interview after the escape:

The woman nods. 'You breastfed him. In fact, this may startle some of our viewers, I understand you still do?'

Ma laughs.

The woman stares at her.

'In this whole story, that's the shocking detail?' (233)

Here, Ma's derisive retort challenges the patriarchal and ecophobic view that a woman breastfeeding her own child is now more socially abhorrent than a male raping her via prolonged sexual slavery. Clearly, in twenty-first century western culture, erotophobia and ecophobia<sup>8</sup> intersect in the construction of breastfeeding as eroticism or even pornography, and the fear that such feeding produces excessive attachment and may emasculate nursing male toddlers. Echoing Sethe's passionate declarations, Ma calls having Jack "the best thing" she has ever done (233) and says simply "He's the world to me" (226). Like Sethe and Pilate, Ma's experience of mothering opens her heart, and her confinement inspires empathy for other confined beings, crossing socially-constructed divisions of class, race, and species. In her TV Interview, Ma reminds the viewing audience that "slavery's not a new invention. And solitary confinement—did you know, in America we've got more than twenty-five thousand prisoners in isolation cells? Some of them for more than twenty years" (235) and goes on to mention abandoned children in orphanages, and children "getting raped by Daddy every night, kids in prisons" (236). Later, Ma refuses to see animals in zoos, explaining to Jack that "she couldn't stand the cages" (312). Ma tells Jack about Harry Harlow's cruel experiments on baby monkeys (220) and concludes that Harlow's experiments prove both the horrific abuses of science, and the fact that all mammal babies need both nurturing love and milk, not just milk alone, in order to flourish.

Like Ma, Jack has cherished the intimacy they share, making its absence in the "outside" society that much more visible to him:

Also everywhere I'm looking at kids, adults mostly don't seem to like them, not even the parents do. They call the kids gorgeous and so cute, they make the kids do the thing all over again so they can take a photo, but they don't want to actually play with them, they'd rather drink coffee talking to other adults. Sometimes there's a small kid crying and the Ma of it doesn't even hear (287).

These commonplace events of adults' indifference to children are acutely evident to Jack, framing his weaning and separation from Ma that begin as soon as they enter "Outside." A child psychologist, Dr. Clay, is assigned to work with Jack and Ma through their social re-entry, but psychology falls short of understanding the mother-child connection. "You keep talking about separation anxiety," Ma tells the psychologist, "but me and Jack are not going to be separated" (209). Dr. Clay asks, "You know who you belong to, Jack? ... Yourself" and Jack silently reflects, "he's wrong, actually, I belong to Ma" (209). As Jack defines himself, "maybe I'm a human but I'm a me-and-Ma as well. I don't know a word for us two" (274)—possibly because traditional western psychology has given us no language for inter-identity. Instead, it defines mature selfhood as developing through a process of separation and individuation, whereas feminist psychology defines selfhood as fundamentally relational, and ecofeminist psychology includes the relations of place, other animal beings, and ecosystems as connections that actively participate in constructing a mature human identity.



With his inter-connected sense of identity, then, it's no wonder that Jack feels compelled to revisit the place of their confinement, and the novel culminates in a return and revisioning that parallels the reenactments and returns in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. At Jack's prompting, Ma phones Officer Oh, the woman who helped to rescue Ma, and they go back to Room, seeing it from the outside in. They find the hole where Ma's first stillborn daughter was buried and exhumed, a place so abhorrent that Ma has to vomit outside of Room before entering. Now Jack sees where Room is located, how it is hidden, and how very small, dirty, and run-down it is: "it's all wrong" (319). Jack finds the birthday drawing Ma made of him and takes it, checks on their home-made egg-snake toy under the bed, and by naming and saying goodbye to the objects in Room, achieves the reframing and closure he needs in order to move forward with his life. "I look back one more time," Jack says, and he sees "it's like a crater, a hole where something happened" (321). For both Ma and Jack, like Sethe, their lives include but now transcend their earlier enslavement.

## Conclusion

Each of these novels depicts breastfeeding under captivity, in conditions of unfreedom, where mothers are entrapped by economics of the Depression, enslaved by institutional racism and sexism, or imprisoned by sexual violence. Under these conditions, breastfeeding and mothers' milk takes on added urgency as food, as emotional and psychological nurturance, and often as self-worth for the nursing mother, whose milk seems to be the only material she can control. Today, when U.S. breastfeeding rates have fallen to another historic low, with only 12% of mothers still breastfeeding at six months, the AAP-recommended minimum, and with breastfeeding rates varying based on the mother's race, class, and education (CDC 2010); with maternity leave guaranteed only for a federal minimum of an unpaid twelve weeks, with Medela breastpumps costing up to \$250, and with workplace policies for breastfeeding and breast-pumping varying widely from business to business and state to state, feminist ecocritics may rightly ask: where are the literary and cultural texts depicting breastfeeding outside of oppressive institutional and cultural contexts? Where are the examples of free mothers of all races, classes, and species able to choose whether, where, and how long to breastfeed their own offspring?

Perhaps those conditions have to yet to exist, and those narratives have yet to be written.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>"Postfeminism" was introduced in 1982 and popularized by prominent antifeminist women such as Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Christina Hoff Sommers. The term implied that feminism had outworn its relevance, and that women now had all the equality they needed. Operation Rescue was an anti-abortion campaign, and the "Mommy Wars" were a media-manufactured competition pitting mothers who worked outside the home against mothers who stayed home with their children (Kinser 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The narrator is never referred to by name, but simply as "Girl," probably part of Le Sueur's aim to emphasize the universality of her experience for poor working class women and girls during the Depression.

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<sup>3</sup> Rogers-Carpenter (2009) compares conclusions of *The Girl* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, arguing that breastmilk references what Le Sueur sees as “the female concept of nourishing,” and moreover it is important who gets fed: in *The Girl*, it is the girl’s own female infant, whereas in *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is a stranger, albeit a starving father (527-528). In a letter to his publisher, Steinbeck (1976) confirms his view on the breastfeeding scene as food rather than sexuality: “I am sorry but I cannot change that ending. ...if there is a symbol, it is a survival symbol not a love symbol, it must be an accident, it must be a stranger, and it must be quick. ...The giving of the breast has no more sentiment than the giving of a piece of bread” (178). While breastmilk certainly is food for a mammal mother’s own offspring, to describe a bereaved new mother’s nursing a male stranger as having “no more sentiment” than milk that was meant for her own child not only instrumentalizes the mother’s body, but dehumanizes (i.e., “animalizes”) her as well, offering rich parallels with the appropriation of nursing milk across other mammal species (who cannot be “asked,” as Ma Joad asks Rosasharn).

<sup>4</sup> Morrison’s story is inspired by the escape of Margaret Garner in 1856, who like Sethe, fled to Cincinnati and was chased by slave-hunters. Garner slit the throat of her mulatto daughter (possibly sired through rape from Garner’s “owner”) and was trying to kill her other two children when she was apprehended. Garner was tried for theft and murder, and was not allowed to speak in court because she was a slave; in Morrison’s novel, Sethe is tried for infanticide. In both historical and fictional accounts, abolitionists use the trial to argue against slavery, with varying outcomes: in the novel, the abolitionists are successful and Sethe is freed, but the historical Margaret Garner was returned to slavery and sent down the river to be sold in Arkansas. Her steamboat collided with another boat, and her last infant was drowned with many others. See Andrews & McKay (1999) and Tally (2009).

<sup>5</sup> My ability to make this distinction between motherhood as institution and experience is indebted to the perceptive intellectual groundwork provided in Adrienne Rich’s foundational feminist text, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976).

<sup>6</sup> Carol Adams (2010) uses the term “animalize” to mean ontologizing another being as subhuman, constructing that being as suitable for serving human ends—appropriating that being’s body, labor energy, sexual and reproductive capacities, etc..

<sup>7</sup> Josef Fritzl lured his daughter into a basement cellar in 1984, repeatedly raped her and kept her confined for 24 years, siring seven children and denying them medical care. Their confinement ended in April 2008, when the daughter’s eldest child became seriously ill, and she persuaded Fritzl to take the girl to a hospital; there, authorities suspected the abuse and alerted the police.

<sup>8</sup> I defined erotophobia as a fear of the erotic that exemplifies what Simon Estok (2009) defines more broadly as “ecophobia,” a fear and abhorrence of nature and all those constructed as nature. See Gaard (2010**b**).

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