

# Book Review: *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding: Cultural Contexts and Confrontations*, edited by Tanya Cassidy and Abdullahi El Tom

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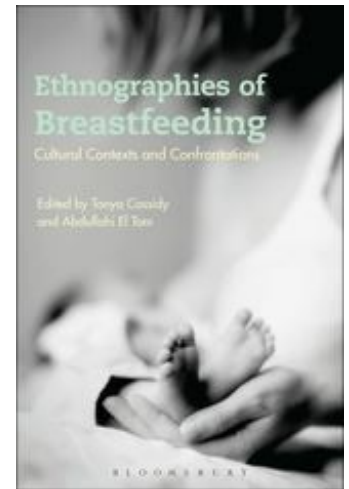
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*Ethnographies of Breastfeeding* is an ideal text for specialists who wish to explore the cultural fringes of the world of breastfeeding, writes Isabel López Ruiz. The interviews with breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding women, surrogate mothers, and medical professionals will be useful for researchers and students.

**Ethnographies of Breastfeeding: Cultural Contexts and Confrontations.** Edited by Tanya Cassidy and Abdullahi El Tom. Bloomsbury, 2014.

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Like many other women-specific issues, breastfeeding has come under a lot of public scrutiny. What should be a personal, freely chosen exchange between mother and child has been placed under the spotlight and repeatedly dissected by medical professionals, public health institutions, and figures of authority. In *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding: Cultural Contexts and Confrontations*, edited by Tanya Cassidy and Abdullahi El Tom, the focus is placed on the needs and choices of the millions of mothers across the world who have been routinely ignored throughout history in favour of the demands of multinationals.



The decision of whether or not to breastfeed is still a controversial topic. Just last year, supporters and detractors of public breastfeeding clashed on social media after hearing about Lou Burns, a woman who was [asked to cover up at Claridge's](#) because her breastfeeding was deemed 'offensive'. The hostility expressed towards Ms Burns is proof that more has to be written about breastfeeding in order to cast aside such humiliating connotations with which it is associated.

Unfortunately, *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding* has the potential to alienate a wider audience which is perhaps the group that most needs an accessible and woman-friendly volume on this topic. In failing to capitalise on current debates on the issue, and focusing largely on anthropological and scientific findings, this volume misses a fantastic opportunity to explore an ever-present and fascinating topic.

The foreword sets off the collection to a disconcerting start, with Penny Van Esterik, esteemed Professor of Anthropology, stating that she prefers the term 'human milk' to 'breastmilk', a preference not upheld in the following chapters. This is just one of the many terminological inconsistencies that feature throughout this text, which undoubtedly complicate the reading experience. Whilst it is understandable to have a wide range of writing styles, given the number of chapters and the diverse provenance of their respective authors, its heterogeneity is more confusing than comprehensive. Nevertheless, this volume includes some hidden gems which are sure to lead readers to question established cultural assumptions about breastfeeding.

In approaching breastfeeding from a cultural point of view, without relying heavily on scientific findings, Charlotte Faircloth's chapter "Between *le Corps 'Maternel' et le Corps 'Érotique'*": Exploring Women's Experiences of Breastfeeding and Expressing in the UK and France" provides an accessible starting point for any non-specialist reader. Faircloth's inclusion of feminist figures such as Simone de Beauvoir, who viewed breastfeeding as 'some sort of enslavement' (p.75), alongside how other status-related issues have impacted modern breastfeeding trends in the UK and France is fascinating and serves to anchor empirical findings in mainstream discussions about

gender, class, and nationality. This piece bridges the gap between ethnographical evidence and accessible cultural theories; it is in this way *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding* shines at its brightest. Although not without its overwhelming number of in-text citations and contradictory points of view, Faircloth's chapter is perhaps the most thrilling and inviting contribution.



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In a similar vein, we find Vanessa Maher's "Women and Children First? Gender, Power, and Resources, and their Implications for Infant Feeding", the volume's final chapter. Despite Maher's argument being grounded on empirical evidence, the numerical data does not feel intrusive or intimidating to a non-specialist. The global scope of this section, focusing on breastfeeding practices in the US, Zambia, and Brazil, automatically makes it new and insightful. In comparing the differing experiences of women across the world, the author hints at the concept of intersectionality (how issues of class, race, and sexuality, amongst others, intersect to create systems of oppression, domination or discrimination), which gives her discussion a current twist. However, this chapter could have benefited from the inclusion of direct quotes from the women it mentions, as featured in chapter 10, "Breastfeeding and Bonding: Issues and Dilemmas in Surrogacy", another highlight from this collection.

In chapter 4, "Historical Ethnography and the Meanings of Human Milk in Ireland", editor Tanya Cassidy explores issues surrounding breastfeeding, wet nurses, surrogacy, and milk banking in the Republic of Ireland. What promises to be a deeply interesting chapter for women's issues, considering Ireland is infamously known for its restrictive abortion legislation, is unfortunately drained by the abundance of external references and the focus on her ethnographical analysis. The highlights of this chapter come in the shape of sporadic facts: Few readers will be aware of the fact that Ireland 'has one of the lowest rates of breastfeeding in Europe' (p.46), it is 'the world's largest producer of infant nutrition products' (p.46), and it shares a unique [human milk bank](#) with Northern Ireland (p.47).

Whilst these chapters certainly do what they say on their anthropological, research-oriented tins and will no doubt be of use for academics in the fields of anthropology, sociology, medical sciences, and human nutrition, the majority of *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding* is not designed for a non-specialist audience. Thus, it may disappoint those who, like me, are searching for a more accessible and cohesive volume on issues surrounding breastfeeding.

It is undeniable that each contributor is clearly an expert in their field and that their findings ultimately create an illuminating transnational web of motherly experience, but this text can often be hard to navigate given the number of statistics and references that feature in most pages. However, the interviews with breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding women, surrogate mothers, and medical professionals act as a welcome human counterbalance.

To conclude, *Ethnographies of Breastfeeding* is an ideal text for specialists who wish to explore the cultural fringes of

the world of breastfeeding. Non-specialist readers will feel more at ease with the aforementioned chapters which rely less on numbers, and make more use of mainstream cultural trends. Those wishing to read more on Feminist critiques of breastfeeding and maternity in general may find in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* the ideal intellectual springboard.

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