Breasted Knowledge: the erotics of breastmilk in the 1970s

Breastfeeding is a body of knowledge habitually relegated to medical texts or public health campaigns; my research, however, is interested in generating another more undisciplined body of breasted knowledge. Understanding breastfeeding to be a lived, corporeal practice as much as a discursive and representational one/many, I read breastfeeding to be historically contingent and made meaningful again and again, over time and place, between mothers, between babies, and between milky exchanges.

In this paper I look to 1970s motherhood manuals to investigate the sexual liberation of maternal breasts as a cultural phenomenon which has since been displaced. The 1970s, like the late 1990s, was a time in which motherhood manuals proliferated, largely due to a market demand by women to know more about their bodies and their maternities. The reading experience, however, is quite distinct. In the 1970s textual archives, breastfeeding is understood to include turn-ons as well as let-downs. While largely the domain of heterosexuality and marriage, breastmilk is discussed as a novelty bonus for sexual practice in terms that are rarely encountered today. It is a discourse supported by medical narratives of hormonal and brain function; thus sexuality emerges as a form of breasted intelligence, but not for long. The difference between these narratives of eroticised breastmilk and today’s circulation of stories of fear and loathing, failure and despair, are vast and suggestive. A different set of ethical relations between sexuality and babies may impinge on such discourses today, however the seventies archives are notable for the pleasure and agency imbued in the maternal subject and her generative and generous body.