

Equality at Breakfast: Confronting the Patriarchal Whiteness of “Dairy Pride”

Author : Ruthann Robson

Date : June 11, 2019

Iselin Gambert and Tobias Linné, *Got Mylk?: The Disruptive Possibilities of Plant Milk*, 84 **Brook. L. Rev.** __ (forthcoming 2019), available on [SSRN](#).

It’s time to consider whether the milk on our cereal or granola, or in our coffee or tea, is an agent of inequality. Gambert and Linné in their compelling article, *Got Mylk?: The disruptive possibilities of plant milk*, confront “Dairy Pride” and argue that it operates as a tool of oppression along several axes. They use multiple lenses of equality including capitalism, speciesism, sexism, and racism to analyze milk as reality and symbol.

Perhaps the most obvious equality lens they discuss is the capitalist one of big business and consumers. The so-called “Milk Wars” arise from a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulation that defines milk only as “the lacteal secretion, practically free from colostrum, obtained by the complete milking of one or more healthy cows.” (P. 5.) This excludes all forms of plant milk that have been in use for centuries such as soymilk, coconut milk, and various forms of nut milk, as well as goat and sheep milk. The increasing popularity of plant-based milk has led to FDA warning letters and some lawsuits seeking to stop plant-based milk from using the term “milk.” The proposed DAIRY PRIDE Act (“Defending Against Imitations and Replacements of Yogurt, Milk, and Cheese to Promote Regular Intake of Dairy Everyday” Act), broadens the definition of milk as derived from “hooved mammals,” but would mandate more severe restrictions on the use of the word “milk” in plant-based contexts. (P. 20.) Meanwhile, as Gambert and Linné explain, in Europe litigation over “post-milk” oat beverages such as the Swedish dairy industry suing the “Oatly” company, have perhaps made oat drinks more popular. The comparative United States and European discussions are a marked strength of the article. (P. 40.)

This business and consumer lens on equality in milk definitions and production forms the basis for the other equality lenses that Gambert and Linné deploy. They demonstrate how the “Milk Wars” are inflected with speciesism, sexism, and racism. They show how the regulatory terrain is the site of several overlapping cultural battles around the globe.

Milk, they argue, is “the ultimate feminized tool of exploitation in a patriarchal world.” (P. 49.) Reflecting on the use of the verb “[to] milk” as meaning “to exploit,” they connect legal usages to cultural and scholarly works that consider milk as “symbolically and literally used as a tool of exploitation and regulation of human and nonhuman female bodies alike.” (P. 50.) They connect speciesism and feminism, agreeing with scholars who argue that “the issues underlying the control of both animal and human milk-producers are analogous.” (P. 51.) They make further connections to racism and colonialism, contending that “the colonial practices of multinational First World food and dairy corporations when introducing dairy based infant formula in developing countries have had ‘devastating effects on mothers and children, cows and calves, rural poor and small dairy farmers.’” (P. 51.) And then there is the historical practice of wet-nursing, using human milk, with its class and racial inflections, as well as its modern turns in the selling of “mother’s milk” or even ice-cream made from human milk.

The article also explores milk as identified with whiteness. The authors delve into the genetic disparities with regard to milk’s digestibility in adults, a condition known as “lactase persistence,” and note that

“dairy milk remains today a central fixture of Western culture despite a majority of people of color not being able to digest it.” (Pp. 54-55.) This biology is then refracted with notions of white supremacy (milk as a perfect food for perfect people). Interestingly, the article includes a discussion of milk as a symbol of white power by members of the so-called alt-right.

The proposed solution of Gambert and Linné is an incident of “verbal activism” that would supplant the problematic “milk” with a more liberatory “mylk.” (P. 3.) The term “mylk,” they state, “already has a long history within the vegan community of signifying plant milk.” (P. 71.) Even as the authors recognize a new word will not solve everything — cashew and soy farming practices are not necessarily more labor-friendly than dairy farming practices; plant-based “mylk” might continue to be more expensive than dairy milk if subsidies do not end — they contend “mylk” would be a step towards a world of more equality. Certainly something to think about over breakfast.

Editor’s note: Prof. Robson wrote the above based on a 2018 draft. Since then, Prof. Gambert revised the article and Tobias Linné dropped off as co-author due to conflicts in his schedule that prohibited him from working on the article. The version now online at SSRN, and due to be published in the Brooklyn Law Review, reflects these changes.

Cite as: Ruthann Robson, *Equality at Breakfast: Confronting the Patriarchal Whiteness of “Dairy Pride”*, JOTWELL (June 11, 2019) (reviewing Iselin Gambert and Tobias Linné, *Got Mylk?: The Disruptive Possibilities of Plant Milk*, 84 **Brook. L. Rev.** __ (forthcoming 2019), available on SSRN), <https://equality.jotwell.com/equality-at-breakfast-confronting-the-patriarchal-whiteness-of-dairy-pride/>.