

Ilana Harris-Babou, Golden Thread

January 16 – February 21, 2024

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**Live On,
By Jennifer C. Nash**

In February 2021, Texas faced a statewide emergency. Dangerously cold temperatures caused the power grid to fail, and over a million Texans lost access to both electricity and potable water. Kimberly Seals Allers, a Black breastfeeding advocate, responded to the crisis on Twitter: “My heart breaks for all Texans. I pray that no mama is forced to consider BOILING SNOW to prepare infant formula for their baby. When we say [#breastfeeding](#) is critical emergency preparedness & must be supported & accessible, this is it!!”¹ For Allers, breastfeeding is a crucial way of forging maternal autonomy in an increasingly unpredictable world. A year later, a nation-wide infant formula shortage caused by the shuttering of an Abbott Nutrition factory left parents scrambling to feed their babies. Melissa Bartick responded to the crisis by noting “If we did more to support breastfeeding, we wouldn't be in this mess.”² For Bartick, like for Allers, breastfeeding is a form of readiness. And in a world where emergency increasingly seems to be everywhere, prepared breasts were imagined as a responsible form of risk mitigation.

The most divisive battle in the seemingly endless “mommy wars” continues to be waged around the question *is breast best?* In 2022, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a policy statement recommending two years of breastfeeding—increased from the



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previously recommended one year—citing important health benefits for both feeders and babies, even as they acknowledged the lack of cultural support for breastfeeding. This was a shift from how breastfeeding had been championed in the past: a hallmark of so-called attachment parenting, a practice of self-sufficiency, a feminist rejection of corporatized infant formula (replaced by corporate breastfeeding products), and a signifier of middle-class parenting values. Suddenly, breasts were being put to work to respond to the ongoing social failure to care for children and families, a failure which become abundantly apparent in the ongoing pandemic years.

And women, yet again, were being conscripted into invisible labor – sometimes welcome, sometimes unwelcome – in the name of keeping infants alive.

The idea of good breasts as prepared and on-guard, as conferring health benefits on vulnerable infants, champions breast feeders as good citizens, as performing parenting correctly. The capacity of breastfeeding to mark good and bad mothers is one of the many reasons why interrogating the messy intersections of race and breastfeeding is so important. With increased attention to devastatingly poor Black maternal and infant health outcomes has come a sustained attention to how Black breastfeeding rates are lower than breastfeeding rates for white and Latinx women.³ If breastfeeding is the current hallmark of good mothering, celebrated by a wide range of actors from public health officials to pediatricians, from (some)



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feminists to (some) Black Lives Matter activists, how do Black mothers fare in this moral economy? If breastmilk is hailed as liquid gold- as a nutritional superfood- what does it mean that Black babies are less likely to have access to it? What might it mean to support Black life in the form of supporting Black infant access to colostrum? What if the movement to Black life began with the breast? What are the costs- to both Black women and Black infants- to launch a movement for Black life at the breast?

And so we find ourselves in a moment marked by efforts to encourage and support Black breastfeeding: a proliferation of visual projects to document Black breastfeeding practices by artists (see, for example, Lakisha Cohill, whose photography appears as the cover art for my book *Birthing Black Mothers*), activist-led efforts to “ban the bag” in hospitals and effectively restrict access to free infant formula samples, the growth of Baby Friendly Hospitals, and the work of influencers like Allers to make visible Black women’s breastfeeding practices and to celebrate the annual Black breastfeeding week. This collective effort is significant since breastfeeding remains a practice shrouded in mystery and the American fantasy of privacy. We can think about the ongoing battles over breastfeeding in public and the struggle for access to lactation spaces at work as part of a cultural insistence that the labor of infant-feeding should be shouldered by women, and at home. And, of course, there remains the idea—the fiction-- that breastfeeding should be private because it is natural, an



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exercise of bodily autonomy, even as we know that breastfeeding often requires expert assistance and expensive products, and that it is simply impossible for many. Thanks to our family-unfriendly work policies, the vast majority of American breastfeeding is actually breast-pumping, troubling the narrative that breastfeeding is a practice that promotes infant attachment to parents.

Ilana Harris-Babou's evocative "Liquid Gold" tackles the mysteries of breastmilk with its dazzling and productively disorienting presentation of frothy, bubbly, ethereal milk. What does it mean, her work asks, when a liquid becomes hailed as "gold," when it can be both liquid and solid? What does it mean for something pale to be championed as golden? What does it mean that a liquid is imagined to be salvific? And how do we understand the hailing of "liquid gold" – particularly colostrum – as "Black gold," as a guard against not just the precarity of early life but the precarity of Black life more generally. Harris-Babou invites her viewers to sit with the amorphousness of milk, with the fact that it is valued (we can think about Medolac's problematic efforts to profit from Black women's breastmilk⁴) and devalued, that it is seen as both foundational to life and kept hidden from view.

Harris-Babou's "Let Down Reflex" goes further, offering a tender and nuanced visual intervention into contentious debates about infant-feeding which are *felt* in maternal life in profound ways. While her work takes seriously the political aspects of infant-feeding, it centers



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the experiential: how does breastfeeding feel? What does it mean to make decisions about infant-feeding in a world where maternal decision-making is surveilled and scrutinized? What does it mean when a form of infant-feeding that is supposed to be natural hurts? How do Black women make choices about infant-feeding when every possible option seems already saturated with political meaning? The soundtrack of “Let Down Reflex” consists of a chorus of voices that reminds us that breastfeeding can be painful and a source of empowerment, an intimate act and an alienating one, a profound connection with a past and a deeply lonely practice. We also see images of how infant formula is treated in the US, often kept in locked cases in pharmacies and grocery stores. What does it mean when formula is so expensive that it is out-of-reach for so many? What does it mean to live in a country where so many parents can’t afford to feed their children? Harris-Babou is, of course, mindful of the fact that there are complicated racial histories surrounding infant-feeding, from histories of wet nursing to the complicated racial history of infant formula marketing (which Andrea Freeman details in her recent work *Skimmed*). Harris-Babou takes this on capturing how breastfeeding can feel like an act of self-possession and autonomy for some, and like pain for others (and sometimes like both). This is an effort to think about what it means when one’s body becomes a receptacle of liquid gold.



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What I find so significant about this work is that Harris-Babou returns us to the vibrant and urgent space of the ordinary, the daily and repetitive practice of keeping a child alive in the early days and months of their life. As Elizabeth Alexander notes in her stunning diagnosis of the Trayvon Generation, "Let's be clear about what motherhood is. A being comes onto this earth, and you are charged with keeping it alive. It dies if you do not tend it. It is as simple as that."⁵ Harris-Babou, like Alexander, asks her viewers to think about the lifework of infant-feeding, the host of state and corporate efforts to make lifework harder (or even impossible) and the ongoing, every day, routinized acts of living on.

¹ See @iamKSealsAllers (February 19, 2021): <https://twitter.com/iamKSealsAllers/status/1362764345185345536>

² Melissa Bartick qtd. in Scott Horsley, "The baby formula shortage is prompting calls to increase support for breastfeeding," *National Public Radio* May 30, 2022 <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/30/1101882916/baby-formula-shortage-breastfeeding>

³ See, for example, Chelsea O. McKinney et al, "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Breastfeeding," *Pediatrics* 138.2 (Aug 2016) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4960721/>

⁴ See "An Open Letter to Medolac Laboratories from Detroit Mothers," *Black Mothers Breast Feeding Association* (2015) <https://Blackmothersbreastfeeding.org/2015/01/open-letter-to-medolac-laboratories-from-detroit-mothers/>

⁵ Elizabeth Alexander, "The Trayvon Generation," *New Yorker Magazine* June 15, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation>



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Ilana Harris-Babou's work is interdisciplinary, spanning sculpture, installation, and video. Her work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions throughout the US and Europe, including current exhibitions *Needy Machines* at Candice Madey, New York, and *Under My Feet* at Storefront for Art and Architecture. In May 2023, Harris Babou's work *Liquid Gold* took over the screens of Times Square for the Midnight Moment program. She has presented solo exhibitions of her work internationally. Institutions include: The Highline, NY (2022), Artspace, New Haven, CT (2022); Kunsthau Hamburg, Germany (2021); ICA Chattanooga, TN (2021); and The Museum of Arts and Design, NY (2017). Her work has been included in the Istanbul Design Biennial (2020) and The Whitney Biennial (2019). Group exhibitions include The Wellcome Collection in London; California College of the Arts Wattis Institute, San Francisco; The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield among others. Harris-Babou lives and works in Brooklyn and Middletown, CT, and holds an MFA from Columbia University and a BA from Yale University.

