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In memory: women's experiences of breasts

Introduction

»Nothing about the breast is self-evident. Nothing is self-evident [...] the breast is particularly problematic deeply sexualized, deeply racialized, deeply contested« (Katz-Rothman 2000: 1234)

Breasts are central to women's feelings about their bodies. We all have a relationship with our breasts and so does everyone else: our partners, children, often friends, colleagues, casual acquaintances, even complete strangers. Institutions such as medicine and the media are deeply interested in our breasts. In billboard advertising, women's breasts have become part of many urban landscapes. They are public property more than any other part of human bodies. Breasts – women themselves – are constructed by these discourses in particular ways, these meanings coexisting uneasily alongside the lived somatic ›truth‹ of each individual woman's experience of her own flesh. The origins of discourses which construct breasts (and women) in particular ways are deeply embedded in knowledge systems that have become naturalized and thus ›invisible‹.

Despite the contested and problematic location of the female breast in society as well as on our own bodies, academic materials in the social sciences theorizing breasts within a feminist perspective are relatively scarce¹. While the notion of the ›inscribed‹ body has some presence in poststructural theorizing, academics still tend to avoid the messiness of the lived corporeal body. Moreover, although breasts feature in figurative speech, such as in German, ›Busenfreundin²‹, or in English, ›bosom buddies‹, there is a conspiracy of silence around literal breasts.

To work scientifically on breasts with/in a group of women, thus, seemed to us to be ideal not only to break these silences but also to foreground in a study of ›the female body‹ in society. Although we are resistant to the practice of fragmenting the female body into unrelated highly sexualized ›pieces of meat‹, it seemed more effective for our research to trace the broad question of how the female body becomes culturally inscribed in relation to a particular site on our bodies.

Furthermore we were concerned with exploring how the lived experience and ›somatic‹ embodied knowledge of women about their own bodies sit alongside such cultural inscription and the extent to which they are influenced by it. In order to answer these questions we chose ›collective memory work‹ as our methodological approach. Frigga Haug and her colleagues, originators of this method, had found it particularly productive for exploring how ›individual parts of the body are linked with sexuality, the way gender is expressed through the body, the routines that have drilled us in a particular relationship with our bodies, and the ways in which all of this is knotted into social structures and social relations‹ (Haug et al, 1987: 34). Additionally, in that many stories of female bodies in the world are told as stories about ›power‹ and powerlessness, we saw our focus on women's breasts as consistent with Foucault's claims that power ›reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives‹ (1980: 39). We aim to bridge the gap between the socially/ culturally inscribed women's body upon which social law, morality and values are inscribed and the lived experience of ourselves as women in these particular ›bodies in their concrete specificity‹ (Grosz, 1994: vii).

Since the work of theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 1995) and Alison Bartlett (2000a, b) on corporeal feminism, it seems imperative to include the material body as well as the discursive body in feminist work. Nevertheless, because female breasts are so thoroughly colonized by culture, and because our societies are so saturated by information and images of breasts, we were also a little apprehensive about our abilities to unravel the dense tangle of discourses which impact upon our understanding of breasts in general and of our own breasts, our own flesh.

Methodology

»I don't know, why my memory has stored this. Why not another perspective, a more reasonable exchange of words? The cat memory [...] Independent, incorruptible, disobedient.« (Johnson, 1994: 7)

Collective memory work is a methodology explicitly designed to focus on the sexualization of the female body. According to Haug it involves:

(C)hoosing a theme connected with the body ... and calling on members of the group to write down their memories of past events that focus on this physical area, ... the stories are circulated amongst the group, discussed, reassessed and rewritten. The group searches for absences in the text, for its internal contradictions, for clichéd formulations covering knots of emotion or painful detail. Rewritten in the light of collective critique, the final version becomes a finely textured account of the process of production of the sexualized female body. (Haug et al, 1987: 13)

As the subjective memories of the researchers themselves constitute the data for analysis the traditional subject/object binaries of social science are disrupted and the passive ›object‹ of research and the scientific all-knowing ›subject‹ of positivist traditions are merged. Writing personal memories as research data transgresses those academic practices which value objectivity, debar the personal and are silent about the place of the researcher. Memory-work methodology involves the researchers in »wriggling free of the constraints of purely private and individual experiences« (Haug et al, 1987: 38), and placing these experiences at the center of the research process.

Originally, collective memory research as conducted by Haug and others involves relatively homogenous groups of women who work for extended periods of time on their projects. As our research was located within the international context of ›if³‹, we adapted the method to local circumstances. As our group was geo-culturally heterogeneous⁴ we set out to consider questions of diversity and similarity in female lives,⁵ yet it was the complementariness of our memories that led us towards a collective understanding of how we live as women with breasts at this point of ›herstory‹. Despite the limited amount of time given, we aimed to adhere to principles of feminist research which engender an egalitarian relationship among research participants and a commitment to non-exploitation of individuals and their memories. The atmosphere of trust among us, and

the concreteness of embodied memories, were reflected in many moments when women shadowed the movements in their remembered stories with the actions of their bodies of the present. One woman would therefore grab her breast in the same way as she remembered her doctor had done, another demonstrated with her hands how she discovered a lump, a third one what it felt like to wear a bra.

Although in the workshops⁶ we talked about cultural constructivism, notions such as normativity and normality, and theories which seemed apt, the final stage of analysis as well as the theoretical framing remained the responsibility of the two researchers⁷ We were not interested in collecting an ›anthology‹ of distinct individual stories, but rather we wanted to trace the ripples and ruptures between our stories of living as women. We have all learned, through our various lived experiences, that we must negotiate our lives in this world with the consciousness that having breasts ›matters‹, that it is culturally and socially significant in particularly gendered ways. For example, in aiming for a ›collective‹ sense of how it was to be adolescent girls who were ›getting breasts‹, we wanted to move towards that stage where »(t)hrough the processes of talking and listening, of writing and rewriting, the edges that mark off the texts of ourselves, one from the other, are blurred« (Davies et al, 2001: 169).

Mamma-Genesis: Getting Breasts

»Female breasts are never innocent, their socialization takes place at the very moment they appear – a moment that also signals the entry into adulthood. Thus sexualization and adulthood occur simultaneously.« (Haug et al, 1987: 39)

The first collective memory workshop we convened generated memories of body changes at puberty in response to the prompt ›Getting Breasts‹. Getting breasts meant being marked – inscribed in our flesh – as different from the ›other‹, from boys. Many of these memories reflected an often perplexed awareness on the part of the adolescent girl of the sexualization of her body that was occurring, and was out of her control. As this sexualization was connected with objectification and commodification of breasts as well as breasts as

symbolic images in Western culture several women found it difficult to begin talking about breasts:

I have so many distinct memories and feelings regarding my breasts when they were growing because, besides my menstrual period, breasts were synonymous with being a ›real‹ woman in the United States.

Some of the memories described how the development of breasts was directly responsible for the curtailment of physical activities that were previously enjoyed. While boys seemed to have the right to continue being boys, girls who were ›tomboys‹ had to find a new identity when their bodies became womanly. The girl in the following memory constructs a relationship of binary opposition between her pre- and post-breasted selves:

As a child, I was very much a tomboy. I ran around outside a lot, and I loved being very straight-forward, strong, not fuzzy, ›solid‹ and wild. When I got breasts, I learnt very quickly that becoming a woman would radically challenge these preferences.

Once the girl started to become a woman, she is situated in the memory as somehow opposite to »straight-forward, strong, not fuzzy, ›solid‹ and wild«. The writer of this memory implies that as a ›becoming-woman‹ she sees herself as *indirect* rather than straight-forward, *weak* rather than strong, ›fuzzy‹, *fluid* (or *amorphous*) rather than solid, *tame* rather than wild. Her description of what she can no longer be, and the implications of the opposite ways of being that are forced on her, resonate with what Grosz calls the ›formlessness‹ of women's corporeality, where although »women, insofar as they are human, have the same degree of solidity [...] as men, yet insofar as they are women, they are represented and live themselves as seepage, liquidity« (Grosz, 1994: 203). Iris Young talks of a process of ›desubstantialization‹ wherein, for women themselves, »the breasted body becomes blurry, mushy, indefinite, multiple and without clear identity« (Young, 1990: 192). While echoes of these ideas of Young and Grosz can be found in some memories, in the social world in which the girls suddenly have to (re)negotiate the conditions of their lives due to their changed corporeality, their breasts are undeniably present. Undergoing a metamorphosis that is sometimes seem to be almost monstrous, breasts appear to be out of control, and do not hold to their correct place. They ›jump out‹ unexpect-

edly, provoking deep shame that is from then on inevitably related to a physical coming to womanhood.

But when they started to grow up, I was trying to cover them better, but it became not so easy, sometimes they were just jumping out, when we played some game. It was shameful, people around started to laugh when this happened.

The sudden visibility of femininity and the ›dangers‹ associated with showing what had been hidden before, runs like a red thread through most of the memories. Sometimes we learned even way before puberty that breasts, these ›blurry, mushy‹ objects emerging from our bodies, needed to be contained, defined, and clarified for (our) modesty.

The most important thing I knew about breasts is that they should be covered. To be a grown up woman means to cover your breast so I wanted to have a swimming suit (not just bikini pads) when I did not have any breasts (about eight or nine).

Recognition of the societal imperative to cover our breasts was immediately followed by memories about *the* item of clothing that was from then on associated with being a woman: the bra. Young describes how ›(t)he bra normalizes the breasts, lifting and curving the breasts to approximate the one and only breast ideal‹ (Young, 1990: 95f). Memories of purchasing first brassieres involved both our own desires for safe containment, for the maturity and certainty (that we were en route into developing proper women's bodies) as well as the desire of our relatives and the professionals involved in selling a bra to a ›barely breasted girl‹. With these first bras promising a contained safe corporeality they also sold us a promise of ›womanhood‹, of the right sort of womanhood.

I distinctly remember the day when my mother ›decided‹ that it was time for me to wear a bra. I had never said anything to my mother previously, even though I very much wanted to wear a bra, like all the other girls. One late-spring evening, while playing in the yard with my younger sister, my mother saw my exposed and growing breasts while I was doing cartwheels. At one point, she asked me to come to the patio, where she was sitting with my father, and she looked at my breasts through my shirt. She then announced to my father, sister and I that we needed to go ›bra shopping‹ because I was growing. At the same moment, she also decided while giving me a hug that I needed to begin to wear deodorant. Even though it felt like an exciting moment, I was also horrified that she would choose to say all of this in front of my FATHER, the only male in

our family. Even though he was a part of the family, my father was also a part of our culture that made me feel ashamed about my growing body and being a woman in society.

Bound up with the purchase of the first bra are glimpses of other norms concerning women's bodies and the moral comportment of those bodies. A woman('s body) should be kept clean, sweetsmelling and neat. The flesh of the breasts should be invisible, bound and concealed within the bra, hidden from the gaze of men, even from fathers. Yet simultaneously, the breasts are also made more visible by the bra. Thus, through wearing bras, women attempt to satisfy society's simultaneous and ›schizophrenic‹ demands for both closure/containment and exposure/ emphasis. Emphasised by the scaffolding of the bra, the breasts become even more the ›object‹ of the gaze and the attention of peers of both sexes.

When she was 14, her aunt decided that she needed to begin to wear a brassiere. So her aunt took her into the underwear department of a larger city store to be ›fitted‹ by a professional ›fitter‹ – a large woman with an ample bosom over which draped a take measure. The fitter measured her chest underneath her breasts and then across the breasts. The fitter returned with several brassieres hanging from her arm. She was ordered to place her arms through the bra stoops and bend over while the fitter hooked the plastic across her back. She was told to stand erect while the fitter adjusted the shoulder straps and ran her finger across the front of the bra, underneath the cups to test for ›soon for expansion‹. She left the store with two white cotton ›teen‹ bras Berlei size 32 A (because the fitter said she had a broad back), ›one to wear and one in the wash‹. Her breasts barely filled the bra but she would not be embarrassed when the girls at school ›twanged‹ the bra elastic (boys did too), or when she had to get changed into her sports uniform.

Psychologist Jane Ussher describes the contradictions inherent in the purchase of the first bra in terms of the influence on the *individual* psychological humanist subject, the adolescent girl. Bra-purchasing, she claims, is as a rite of passage and is indicative of the problematic relationship between a girl (the ›becoming‹ woman) and her mother (the ›already‹ woman). While some mothers take their daughters to get bras while their breasts are still quite undeveloped, others postpone the purchase, yet, Ussher stresses, ›either attitude on the part of the mother may have serious effects on the development of her daughter's self-image‹ (Ussher, 1989: 24).

Arguing from an individual-psychological perspective Ussher's claims for a linear causality between mothers' attitudes and daugh-

ters' emerging self-image sound quite convincing initially. However, this position disregards social contexts: neither the girl nor her mother exist in a ›bubble‹ apart from society and culture. In the memories which emerged around the significance of ›the bra‹ in the workshop, it became evident that all these ›individual‹ girls and all these ›individual‹ mothers/ aunts/ fitters acted within the social. Our breast-stories are snapshots from the complex discursive field of the social where we are subject to »processes which are in a constant state of flux, and which are not necessarily observable« (Davies, 2000).

Traces of these processes can be identified within the memory stories of our embodiment as women and girls, for example, in the links between modesty and women's bodies; or between sexuality and female breasts. By the time they reach puberty most girls are already very familiar with ›the gaze‹ that defines breasts as sexual sites of women's bodies. At puberty, as our own breasts become objects of this gaze, we feel both ambiguity and fear especially because breasts do not emerge overnight as perfect exemplars of adult women's breasts. Rather they come, sometimes painfully, over a period of time. This period of emergence of breasts was experienced by us as a ›liminal‹ phase, a phase of becoming — no-more child, not-yet woman, in between the two. Memories which detail the bizarre manifestations of hormones on our bodies indicate how difficult this time could be for girls.

Her own breasts had begun to develop very strangely. The nipple and surrounding pink area became very swollen and spongy/soft in texture but the rest of her chest area stayed quite flat. She was terrified that people would be able to see these abnormally swollen nipples and would know that something weird had happened to her body. She wore cotton singlets under her clothes and was relieved when her mother suggested it might be time to go shopping for a bra.

Then, I was unaware that I was developing as I started experiencing pains on my nipples. My first reaction was to classify the pains as [...] arising from insect bites. I kept the experience to myself, having been socialized to see that part of the body as exclusively very private. As the pains subsided and the curves of my two breasts emerged, I felt ashamed of myself and initially wanted them to disappear as to avoid further embarrassment of having something protruding out of my body.

All of the women who recorded their memories recalled worrying about the ›normality‹ of this/their development. But, what was a ›normal‹ breast? What was a ›normal‹ shape? And particularly, what was a ›normal‹ size? And how can we tell what is ›normal‹? In her lyrical celebration of the female body, *Woman: An intimate geography*, Natalie Angier describes »breasts as varied as faces: breasts shaped like tubes, breasts shaped like tears, breasts that flop down, breasts that point up, breasts that are dominated by thick, dark nipples and areolae, breasts with nipples so small and pale they look airbrushed« (Angier, 1999: 128). Yet the girls in our stories seemed to have no access to the multiple stories about what is ›normal‹ for breasts. Normality for these girls is constructed through arbitrary comparisons to other girls and women, and to images derived from popular culture:

At least I had succeeded not to end up ›flat as a board‹. Although getting breasts has been a very disturbing experience in many respects my friends and me never would have questioned or challenged the pressure it put on us. It was absolutely clear to us that having breasts was a victory, not having any made you inferior, sagged breasts were ugly, etc.

She had seen an article in a women's magazine with a drawing that illustrated the test women could use to find out if their breasts had begun to sag. You held a pencil underneath the breast and if it stayed there by itself, you had a problem with ›sag‹. The girl wanted the pencil to stay there, because then she would have breasts large enough to be proud of, though at the same time she did not want to have breasts that would sag. It seemed impossible.

Breasts – clothed and unclothed – must conform to an ideal of weight, shape, silhouette as our social surroundings seem to suggest. Not only ›too small‹ but also ›too large‹ is a problem. ›Just right‹ is not only difficult to recognize but it probably does not exist, and if it does appear to, it's only for a short time as with any ideal this is subject to historical change as well as to individual aging. Ussher stresses that the psychological impact of worry about ›normality‹ leads to anxiety, insecurity and fear (Ussher, 1989: 22f). Yet far from being individual psychological ›pathologies‹, these negative emotions are endemic to adolescent girls in the societies in which we live. The memory stories about ›getting breasts‹ confirm the characterization of adolescence described by Ussher and the continuing insecurity women feel about the aesthetics of their own breasts, the

same insecurity which makes breast surgery a central pillar of the cosmetic surgery industry (Yalom, 1997: 7).

The process of getting breasts, these signifiers of the shift in status from child to adult, from a largely ›asexual‹ body to a sexualized body, from child to woman, occurs within the hierarchical relationships which structure the lives of adolescents: parents, siblings and peers.

I was surrounded by women in my family and was distinctly aware of my mother's womanness, as she was very open about her body. I wanted to be like my mother – look like her, act like her, etc. Yet, I did not begin to develop breasts when ›other‹ girls in my school did. Hence, I distinctly remember not feeling ›like a girl-woman‹ very early on.

Adolescent girls' relationships with their mothers (and other women) entail, as this memory shows, »a growing sense of shared femaleness that includes their similar bodies« (Yalom, 1997: 151). The transition from childhood to adulthood is nevertheless often experienced by the individual as traumatic as it is linked to bodily metamorphoses that are experienced as erratic and to often frightening changes in the social and cultural landscape for girls. Getting breasts might thus incorporate a metaphorical sense of loss. One of the women for example contributed a memory where a girl is ›read‹ as provocative by her own mother, as a potential rival.

I'm six years old,
suddenly I have to cover my innocence,
I have to cover my breast.
›Shame on you!‹
I feel embarrassed, ashamed:
I show ›me‹,
a part of my body
people don't want to see in public.
My mother doesn't want me
My mother doesn't want me to become
a woman, a sexual body.
I should
Not be seen as whole, powerful, as pretty,
as sexually attractive.
Sexually attractive
at six years?
For whom?!

This broken/ breaking chain of shared femaleness and the resulting ambivalent feelings towards femaleness is also referred to by another

contributor who offered a memory describing how for her getting breasts was shot through with grief for the simultaneous and shocking loss of her mother.

I was eleven years old when suddenly my mom died. Eleven is for most of us the age of becoming more of a woman ourselves. I spent much effort resisting the fact of starting to bleed, of getting breasts and I would ignore any interest in sexual matters, in boys, in curious or even supportive talks. I became rather inaccessible however I also felt at the same time highly ambiguous about all that. It's been like two sides of a medal, one shining during daytime only, the other one just at night. When I saw a mother suckling her baby child, this would easily provoke strong feelings of aggression within me. This would completely turn at night time. My fantasies would turn me into this small beloved child, enjoying a woman's breasts, I could find some rest or even become this woman myself.

The focus of another memory rests on the hierarchical status and competitive relationship of siblings. The girl of the story feels she has a moral right to maintain her superiority over her younger sister although her breasts that ›unfortunately‹ do not develop at a rate parallel to their age differences almost betray her.

Her sister had visible breasts before she did, even though she was nearly two years younger [...] She had the first place in the family so she should have developed breasts first. It was her right. Nothing about her breasts seemed to be happening normally.

Breasts, as this memory shows, can become the fleshy arena in which complex relations and hierarchies are played out. Whilst most of us experienced our bare breasts privately in early puberty, one memory details the elaborate ritual developed by a group of schoolgirls that publicly defined and monitored ›normality‹ and also served to establish hierarchies between them based on the size and rate of growth of their breasts. In this game, ›one of them is always the winner‹, another is also always ›the loser‹ and it's important for the girl in the memory to locate herself advantageously in the hierarchy.

She's probably between 13 and 14 and does what they all do. Usually they do it while changing for sports classes, everyone of them hurrying up in order not to expose too much and too long some of the bodily parts that somehow seem to be different every week: subtle, or better hidden glances at each others breasts, quick moving eyes, staring and then quickly moving away. The worst label one can attach to any of the seen breasts and the worst that can be attached to one's own breasts is ›BMW⁸‹, so her eyes as well as the others are in fact not only glancing but actually taking measures. ›Hers bigger than mine? Smaller than

mine? although nothing is ever spoken. When they speak it is only among a smaller group of them, all friends. They meet during the main break at one of the back doors of the school close to the chemistry lab – it is a darker place and always a little damp. There they stand and then one of them starts with ›the working procedure‹ in which one after the other pulls up her shirt exposing her breast to the others. Now comments start, comparisons verbally made, conflicts publicly arise about size and about which one is the biggest? There are also conflicts about how to measure and compare different sizes, what is bigger: a sagging one, round and soft or the one which is popping out like an unripe green apple? Her friend told her that she started measuring them objectively using a tape-measure but still conflicts arise whether one should start measuring from the nipple down to the ribs or vice versa. Somehow, one of them is always the winner – she can already tell when they start pulling up their shirt cause the winner would always be one who has to pull up a bra as well. It is never her – she ›started late‹ as they say, it is important though, that there are always some who are even more BMW which she is vividly pointing out whenever someone tries to put her at the end.

Our stories about getting breasts reflect the tension in collective memory work between individual memories and collective recognition of the discursive frameworks – relating to gender, family, school, public/private and to sexuality – within which our stories make sense. In the public domain particularly, breasts are constructed as ›objects of the gaze‹, usually seen as a ›male‹ gaze but one which women themselves have also internalized. As we adopt this gaze which sees them somehow as separate and apart from ourselves, measurable against other similarly decontextualized breasts or against some vague or unattainable norm, our own breasts become ›self-objectified‹. In her historical review of breasts, Marion Yalom typifies contemporary Western women as ›tyrannized by arbitrary notions of beauty which [...] have taken the form of skinny bodies with conspicuous breasts‹ (Yalom, 1997: 7). Multi-billion dollar industries – promoting cosmetic surgery, weight loss and exercise programs, lingerie – are premised on this ›tyranny‹ which is itself reliant on our skills of self-objectification. As compliant consumers and as regulators of our own and other women's bodies, we are active agents in perpetuating this ›tyranny‹.

One of our projects as feminists is certainly extricating ourselves, as much as we can, from this ruthless and self-defeating relation to our bodies. Developing alternative discourses within which women's bodies in their varieties are constructed as ›normal‹ or as ›desirable‹ (as it is done already in women's self help groups or books⁹) is an

effective strategy. However, these texts were not available to us as adolescents. Telling and theorizing lived experience through memory work is another strand of this strategy.

Consistent with dominant discourses of sexualization of women's bodies, we carefully trained ourselves to turn an objectifying gaze upon our almost-women's bodies. Simultaneously, this gaze was (more) often turned on us and our breasts by other people in much more dangerous contexts. Perpetrators of this invasion of our bodies – that now could be touched, stared at and commented on openly – included nameless men and the boys who were usually our peers at schools. We also remembered phrases used by ›caring‹ people, such as teachers, referring to our new breasts as ›mountains moving‹ or doctors justifying the need to wear a bra as ›young trees have to be shaped early‹:

When my breasts became bigger I also felt that some men were looking at me. Sometimes there were men who were trying to touch my breasts in the dark entrance to our house or in the park. Thus, I was not feeling comfortable having breasts, I felt that it connected to danger. I had the feeling that many men wanted to touch me and I tried to be as far as possible from them. Boys from my class were finding it funny and interesting that girls started to have breasts and were trying to look at us whenever it was possible (in the room for changing clothes for sports for example). Also they were trying to touch our backs to show that they know we were wearing bras. One day I saw a boy who was trying to touch the back of my girlfriend and I pushed him on the floor really severely. He did not expect it, was surprised, but I was so angry that I could push him like this many times.

I remember that boys in my grade would rub their fingers down girls' backs, feeling for a bra-strap, with the hopes of finding one to pull it. If they did not find a bra-strap, the girl became the object of even more teasing. I was horrified the first time I saw this happen, and I remember trying my hardest to keep my bra-less and undeveloped body hidden and away from them. I was somehow able to escape them, and they were not able to feel my back until I had started to wear a bra.

Getting breasts for all of us meant danger, exposure, vulnerability. Some women were told by their mothers that this danger was everywhere and that it was a woman's responsibility to take care and to control male urges and drives by ensuring that their breasts were sufficiently covered. Thus, *we* suddenly had a responsibility to comply with our own domestication and commodification within ›traditional‹ patriarchal systems. In this context one participant wrote her

memory of growing up in a rural village as a poem. The analogy made by the village men between her adolescent female body and domestic animals provoked much distress and discussion within the group:

I am now old enough to follow the re-mark of the menin – no longer –
›my‹ village: »She is now old enough to go to the fields« Like a cow. She
– getting breasts, a flower blooming in her whole, unique beauty – now
she is old enough to go to the fields!

Yes, I can feed a baby now – or not.

Female breasts, as shown through our memories, are a zone of the body which provides opportunities to trace the »existential afflictions and obstacles facing girls in their attempts to become ›grown-up‹ women« (Haug et al, 1987: 24). This discursive tracing exposes old scars acquired through the process of cultural inscription which defined our breasts and ourselves as sexualized objects.

Conclusion

›She pointed towards my breasts and asked what these were. Yes, child!
These are mysteries.«(Modersohn-Becker, 1902)

The breast memories we told each other exemplified the complex and ambivalent relationships women have with their own breasts and with the breasts of other women in cultures where breasts are fetishized. Collective memory, a method that specifically tries to empower women to raise their voices and to make their subjective experiences heard, enabled us to begin to break the silences surrounding breasts despite their abundant public images in urban landscapes. As the starting point for numerous vehement discussions about gender and power, based on the memories we shared with each other, our breasts thus (re)presented indeed a »microcosm of the wider world« (Maher, 2000).

The willingness with which women opened themselves up to us, talking in detail about their experiences of shame and embarrassment as well as about pleasure and amazement in the process of becoming (breasted) women showed us the importance of opening a forum (although limited in time and place) for these topics. Clearly, ›getting breasts‹ signified the starting of a lifelong process of being

perceived and constructed as female, the ›other‹, as dangerous but also to perceive ourselves like this. To ›be breasted‹ meant to be exposed to attacks or to be obstructed. In a latter workshop, ›dangerous breasts‹ were moreover experienced as breasts that could aggressively turn against us in the form of cancer, that made us vulnerable to disease and to death by their very existence, simply because we are female. Not having breasts through the possibility of losing them again through cancer surgery, however, endangered our femaleness as well.

Surprisingly enough, not one of the women talked about the beauty of her breast or about compliments she had received about them. The consequences of the current socio-culturally produced meanings, risks, and dangers rather result in feelings of uncertainty and anxiety in women. Using breasts as a metaphor for how we live as women in the world – as adolescents, ›getting breasts‹, and as adult women, terrified of ›losing‹ our breasts – we are simultaneously, schizophrenically, embodied and disembodied. Strategies for ›re-embodiment‹ ourselves as women include telling our own stories and listening to those of our ›sisters‹, increasing our knowledge about the culturally constructed rather than the natural constraints and developing skills to help us deconstruct the discourses about women's breasts. We hope that this project¹⁰ is read as part of this process of resistance and that there will come a day when our breasts – and ourselves – experience new horizons.

As I lean over to write
one breast warm as a breast from the sun
hangs over as if to read what I am writing
these breasts always want to know everything
[...]
in the morning my breast is refreshed
and wants to know something new.
(Llewellyn, 1992: 34)

Notes

- 1 Apart from Yalom's *A History of the Breast* (1997), breasts have been subsumed within discussions about motherhood/ lactation (Carter, 1995), body image (Bordo, 1993), cosmetic surgery (Davis, 1997), cultural anthropology (Counihan, 1999; Ensel, 1998), philosophy (Grosz, 1994) and psychology (Ussher, 1989)
- 2 Meaning 'beast friend' in German, used in the female form only
- 3 Internationale Frauenuniversitaet, Hanover, Germany, July-October 2000.
- 4 The memories recalled in the oral and written memories from the formal workshops and the tutorial group included stories from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Nigeria, USA and Russia. Further, in a gathering of German midwifery colleagues and friends, which coincided with our research project, one of the authors collected several more memory texts relating to breasts.
- 5 Geography was just one of the multiple frames within which the memories were told (others could have been class, age, ethnicity, profession, religion).
- 6 Our research project at ifu consisted of 3 consecutive workshops with the topics *Getting Breasts*, *Dangerous Breasts* and *Nurturing Breasts*. This paper draws upon the first of the workshops.
- 7 As a principle of non-hierarchical feminist research, we agreed on a strategy of collective ownership of the texts – that within each group, all participants would receive a copy of all the texts that had been produced within that workshop and all the email addresses of participants. If a participant wished to use a text written by another participant in her own different research context, she could then negotiate the conditions of that use with the writer.
- 8 An acronym for 'Brett mit Warze', 'flat as a board', but also a pun in German referring to the famous German automotive company, BMW.
- 9 Such books include Angier (1999), Boston Women's Health Collective (1985) and Northrup (1998).
- 10 Thank you to all the women who, with such generosity and openness of spirit, participated in the collective memory workshops.

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