

Erotic. Maternal. Cultural. Symbolic. Medical. What are breasts? How are they imagined? And who gets to decide?

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EROTIC. MATERNAL. CULTURAL. SYMBOLIC. MEDICAL. WHAT
ARE BREASTS? HOW ARE THEY IMAGINED? AND WHO GETS
TO DECIDE?

REISA KLEIN, GABRIELLE M. SIEGERS AND DOROTHY WOODMAN

The three of us, each in our own way, have varied and long term relationships with breasts. Growing up, we have experienced years of watching our own bodies change before our very eyes, often mediated through the male gaze. And that changing terrain that we call our body-self continues to shift and alter, as reproduction, aging, and—for one of us—breast cancer leave their marks. Through their presence or absence, breasts are largely visual, even more so through their objectification and fragmentation in media representations and advertisements as well as medical imagery and cosmetic procedures, reconstructions, and prostheses. These visual “imagings” of our ever-changing breasts, along with their inherent fluidity and textures, prompted us to begin ongoing conversations that are occurring across a number of disciplines, including humanities, social sciences, and the arts, but also biology, oncology and medicine.

Breast imaging in medicine has shaped how we understand these material objects as self-evident. At the microscopic level, the medical gaze concentrates on breast tissue as a form of synecdoche. Such medical imaging informs surgeons as to the location of breast tumour tissues to be removed, and radiologists as to where to direct radiotherapy, either to debulk tumours prior to surgery, or to eradicate potential remaining malignant cells after removal of the primary tumour. These procedures suggest that breasts are contingent

upon how they are framed through medical techniques. Biopsies, small pieces of tumour removed with a needle, prior to surgery and/or tumour tissue removed during surgery are sent to the pathology lab, where they are processed, stained, and undergo assessment by a pathologist to determine characteristics of the tumour, such as stage and type, that inform further patient treatment. The whole is contained within the part; the breast's narrative is relayed through its cells.

From a scientific perspective, imaging provides an invaluable tool to monitor breasts over time and detect pathological changes that could lead to a cancer diagnosis. Mammography (low-dose x-ray) is a standard imaging technique used for routine screening, which is somewhat controversial (Bleyer et al.; Coldman et al.; Helvie and Bevers; Nagler et al.). Ultrasound, computerized axial tomography (CT or CAT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), or Positron Emission Tomography (PET) may also be employed to support diagnostic and treatment decisions. If breast cancer is diagnosed at a later stage, bone scans, X-rays, CT, or PET imaging may be used to detect metastases, tumours that may have formed in other areas of the body, such as bones, brain, lungs, and liver. Thus, multiple imaging modalities are used together in the diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up monitoring of breast cancer patients.

While these visual tools are widely employed as per guidelines set out by provincial and national organizations, their use is not without controversy and discussion, as benefits and risks should be considered in each individual case. For example, some research suggests that widespread mammography screening has no impact on breast cancer patient mortality (Bleyer et al.), whereas other research shows that early detection enabled by mammography is saving women's lives (Coldman et al.; Helvie and Bevers). Of course, the potential harm due to radiation exposure must be weighed against the benefits of early detection. False positive and false negative interpretations of imaging bring their own layers of anxiety that are detrimental to health. Yet, by and large, the benefits of these medical imaging techniques are thought to far outweigh any associated risks. As such, even medical imaging does not necessarily provide a value-free or

neutral understanding of the breast, but is co-constituted by social, cultural, economic, and political influences. The process is thus both diagnostic and aesthetic; breasts are thereby reimaged. From local biopsies, we then turn to cross-species experimentation. The latter process is explained, with examples of histological analysis, in the article “Imaging Human Breast Tumours in Different Species: How Human are They?” by Gabrielle M. Siegers et al. in this issue.

Turning from the microscopy of the medical gaze to the macroscopy of cultural analysis, we find discussions about breasts as symbols and sites of asymmetrical power. A representative survey of this field includes historical studies, cultural critique, and intersectional feminist and queer interventions. Marilyn Yalom, in her survey of Western Europe and North America’s history of breasts, has situated the varieties of investments in the representation of breasts and their functions as means for the surveillance and discipline of women’s bodies for large scale political, religious, and sexist purposes (Yalom). Barbara Ehrenreich has engaged with her experiences of breast cancer to investigate and expose the corporate, political, biomedical, and gendered agendas with which breast cancer patients and “survivors” are burdened (“Smile or Die”; “Welcome to Cancerland”). And others, such as Audre Lorde, have provided groundbreaking reflections, often through their own experiences of breast cancer, on the intersectional forces that operate to oppress queer women of color and pressure “survivors” to conform to normative feminine and healthy bodies (Lorde).

The field of discussion is by no means homogeneous. Diane Herndl revisits Lorde’s arguments and proposes a somewhat different, post-humanist approach for determining whether to reconstruct (or reimagine) the breast (Herndl). Considering cultural forces more generally that influence women’s understandings about their breasts and experiences of breast cancer, Samantha King takes a panoramic view of the pink culture driving philanthropic interests closely tied to corporate interests (King). Queer theory also informs new conceptualizations about breasts. Kim Hall asks us to consider the assumptions underlying claims that a breast is truly female and how queer-breasted experiences offer important counter-imaginings (Hall). Trevor Mac-

Donald provides important reflections and reimagings of breasts/chests by transmen who have given birth and how they make decisions about lactation (MacDonald).

As we met together to conceptualise this project, we wanted to build on these productive and sometimes competing perspectives by bringing new understandings and visual imaginings to the table. We were looking for new ways forward that could not only break through the conventional binaries of gendered, racist, heteronormative, colonial, and neoliberal tropes, but would also experiment with conceptual innovations. In short, in *reimagining breasts*, we want to explore resistant and subversive voices and images where breasts are not just enclosed biological body parts, but where they are complex “assemblages” that are co-constituted by materialities and discourses (on assemblage, see Braidotti; Grosz; Deleuze and Guattari; Puar). These diverse biological, biomedical, socio-cultural, and politico-economic interactions refigure the bounded imagings of the breast, one example being the use of breast tissue for penile reconstruction (Safak), another the use of abdominal tissue in TRAM flap breast reconstruction (“TRAM Flap Reconstruction”). Representations of breasts as landscapes, for example, in Lorde’s cancer journals, Sally Loughridge’s piece in this issue, or the imaging of breasts through their haunting absence in Hollis Sigler’s art, are only a few examples of how breasts are being reimaged (Lorde; Sigler). By engaging with the tissue, leaky, and plastic (Shildrick), our approach considers new implications for the breast as rhizomatic, emphasizing relations and movements, rather than stabilizing tropes of gender, sex, body, and identity. Unlike the legacy of the phallus, where its essentialist signification, logics, and grammars constrain by their necessary creation of the “Other,” the breast’s capaciousness offers multiple absences and presences that mobilize bodies, discourses, and spaces as assemblages and tactics.

In contemporary cultures, across borders and territories, breasts are increasingly “popping up” physically and culturally in new places: as inflatables atop buildings (“Giant Breast”) and bobbing in canals (Stake), as architectural innovations (Versteeg) and mis-renderings in anatomical representations (e.g., images of milk ducts; see Dean), im-

ages circulating on social media (Hocking), and art created with/by “boobs” (Kirkova). We look to popular culture’s emergent “play” with breasts as new bodily displays of protest. Building on these new reimaginings, this special issue initiates a fluid and re-productive space for reimagining and milky writing (Cixous) in which those who read some or all of this journal could traverse and generate new conversations. Like milk-ducts and the expansive unbordered territory of the breast, this journal was envisioned as a rhizome—a proliferating, non-linear assemblage that, in its best form, would extend its life-force beyond even the infinities of the web. We are thrilled to use the electronic journal platform for this—its rhizomatic relationship to other diverse conversations and its accessibility to diverse readers create an ideal environment for this project.

In this edition, you will find paintings, photographs, medical imaging, poetry, personal and analytical essays, and even podcasts. They are all, in the spirit of the rhizome, connected within the perimeters of the journal genre, and free-floating enough to reach beyond it. They invite multi-sensory experiences as vital components of critical thinking and reflection. We welcome you to dip into the journal, in whole or in parts, and to let these contributors take you back into your own bodies, experiences, and selves, and consider how the archive of bodily experiences, dreams, affects, intellects and technologies can restructure the very paradigmatic foundation upon which these are understood and processed over time. This work may extend into the larger contexts in which you labour, reproduce, create, and engage as citizens during this time of crisis, calling us to reimagine our place within and among all that are part of a global community.

Contributors have brought creativity to this discussion in diverse ways. In the abstract for “Seawater/C-cup: Fishy Trans Embodiments and Geographies of Sex Work in Newfoundland,” Daze Jefferies eloquently writes:

I think with my augmented breasts—beyond the medical archive and away from the clinic—as an embodied inquiry into trans geographies of sex work in the island world of

Ktaqamkuk/Newfoundland, Canada. Employing the felt knowledges of my breasts in visuals and poetics, I illustrate fishy entanglements shared between my sex work and breast augmentation that have reframed my social and sexual embodiment. Engaging with my breasts as a contact zone of embodied dis/pleasure, economic promise, and social violence, I suggest that paying creative attention to trans women's breasts might reimagine notions of trans sex-working desire.

These words exemplify this edition's larger project: to engage diverse experiences and relationships, images and language, so as to disassemble the constraints of representation and reflection (in all their forms) in the neoliberal and Cartesian hegemonies that continue to hold us hostage to outmoded, harmful, and moribund praxis.

Anique Ellis and Josephine Baker's collaborative poetic prose "Reclaiming Breast" startles us from the outset. We wonder: why the singular? We take out our red pen to correct. In so doing, we become the auditor addressed by the poem—we are implicated in the politics it names and resists. This disruption of grammatical expectations strikes at the heart of the hegemonic modes of representation and thinking about women's bodies. It disables the ideological signifier. Breast must always be pluralized—to say otherwise is to deviate from accepted practices. The poem continues to veer between plural and singular, inviting the grammatical disruptions that punctuate the poem throughout. The struggle to speak is to resist the ideological grammars that coerce representation of words and ideas, of breast itself, and in so doing, to disrupt oppressive cultural and social grammars that discipline the body: "My breast does not define me, so don't define my value, femininity, or worth with my breast."

In "Going Flat: Breast Cancer, Mastectomy and the Politics of Choice," Abigail Bakan examines her own personal journey of "going flat" as an alternative to breast reconstruction. She challenges the paternalistic biomedical push for breast conservation where breast cancer is (re)affirmed as a loss, a lack and an absence. Through a new collectivity of women choosing to "go flat" Bakan advocates for a politics of choice and a reimagining of surgical options follow-

ing surgical treatments for breast cancer that foregrounds women's rights and bodily autonomy.

In "Revealing Narratives in Before and After Photographs of Cosmetic Breast Surgeries," Rachel Hurst breathes life into otherwise "unremarkable" images of pre- and post-surgical cases, deriving unexpected layers of meaning from the photographs by binding them to real-life stories of women who have undergone plastic surgeries. In short, Hurst reimages these images and reconnects the de-individualized torsos to women who have been in their place, filling in some of the gaps by shedding light on what is—by design—hidden from the intended narrative embodied by such photographs.

Vanessa Greaves's stunning torso sculpture "Broken" challenges us to contemplate the implications surrounding a missing breast. Defiant in its beauty and solidity, this piece encourages us to focus on and appreciate what is present as opposed to what is absent, yet acknowledges the inner struggle women face when coming to terms with their altered self after mastectomy.

Sally Loughridge's artwork and reflections in "Rad Art: A Journey Through Radiation Treatment" offer remarkable paintings of breasts as landscapes accompanied by brief reflective statements as she contemplates her experiences of breast cancer through image and text. She writes in her opening reflection: "I had always thought of my breasts as a matched pair. But since I received a diagnosis of breast cancer, they have become distinctly individual. I am anxious about starting radiation, and I feel protective of my right breast—in a familiar, motherly way." Playing with old tropes in new ways, Loughridge expresses the incommensurability of her experiences, opening up vistas for expansive reimaginings.

In "Running for the Future," Rachael Pack considers images used for the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation's 2013 Run for the Future fundraising campaign, revealing unexpected messaging projected from images of children taking steps to create a better future without breast cancer. Pack is compelling and articulate, arguing that the "queering of time" employed by the fundraising campaign conveys a sense of duty on Canadians to take steps to protect heterosexual nu-

clear families of the future. Pack's surprising analysis will certainly stimulate interesting discussions with respect to ethics, communication, feminism, politics, and intersectionality.

In "Imaging Human Breast Tumours in Different Species: How Human are They?," Siegers et al. consider in a *gedankenexperiment* the philosophical question of whether implanted human breast tissue can still be considered human once it is growing within another species, and show striking images of such hybrid entities. While enlightening readers about aspects of scientific research, this piece discussing implantation of human tissue into other living species raises questions about borders and categories in numerous ways, most importantly for this issue, concerning where breasts begin and end, or if they do at all.

Dorothy Woodman and Aloys Fleischmann's haunting "Still Life" also asks the audience to consider where the body begins and ends. Their unique collaboration results in art that incorporates multiple perspectives simultaneously. The public/private movement and display of the prosthesis invites opportunities for his, as well as her, experience, challenging ideas of fixed subjects and objects. As the prosthesis both stands in for a body part and is incorporated into a painterly photograph and still life, the binaries are blurred in ways that create new arrangements and discourses that set the stage for a new breast politics.

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