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Hope Springs Eternal in the Human Breast

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**Hope Springs Eternal in the Human Breast: An Exploration of
Feminist and Womanist Perspectives of the Breast From the 1960s to the Present**

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

By
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Annandale-On-Hudson, New York
May, 2018

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To My Informants: Thank You. You have forever changed the way I understand my own body. You have been vulnerable, courageous, open, curious, contemplative, passionate, empathic, and funny. I hope that my writing has been able to capture a glimpse of this. Your faith in my ability to represent you/us has meant the world to me.

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To Yuka and Laura: Thank you for your guidance not only with this project, but over the course of my education at Bard College. The lessons I have learned in your classrooms informed this project greatly and will continue to inform my worldview.

To my parents, Sharna and Dan, and to my brother Adam: I could never have done this without your unshakeable belief in me, and constant support. I am profoundly proud and grateful to have you as my family. Hyperbole cannot do you justice, but you already know how much I love you.

To Sadie: Throughout this process our sisterhood has been a source of great strength and inspiration. “Thank you for being a friend.”

Introduction

Late last September, I was hiking with my friend Eloise through Frick Park, an enormous tree filled destination in the middle of my home town of Pittsburgh. It was unusually warm, and as we made our way through the trails, we saw at least a dozen men running, walking, and lying in the grass with their shirts off. They were diverse in age, size, and skin tone. Eloise and I were dehydrated, hot, and tired. We would have liked nothing more than to find a quiet spot in the shade and to relieve ourselves of our shirts and bras, or even to stroll through the park in this equal state of undress; however, we feared arrest, legal ramifications, and social discomfort, if not violence.

This is the kind of experience that got me thinking about what the breast symbolizes here in the United States, and how this differs from the way my peers and I understand our own bodies. I began to wonder if our cultural notions of the female breast actually demonstrate and/or reify the inequalities facing women. In the United States, women face more obvious and greater challenges such as wage inequality, access to safe abortions and birth control, rape and sexual assault. It could be argued that these are more important topics to spend time researching, but I always find myself circling back to the question, what is so disturbing about women walking or lying topless in the sunshine? Why are women being restrained, arrested, and attacked for it if breasts don't represent some greater social/political tension?

This curiosity drove me towards the theme of my senior project. My research for chapter one was primarily focused on Marilyn Yalom's book *A History of the Breast*. I chose to explore a feminist perspective on the breast from the 1960s until today. In writing about and contrasting texts from an earlier period in feminist history, I learned a great deal about how feminism has

evolved and changed since the 1970s and how much of it has replicated itself. My first chapter explores breast related protests from the 1960s-1980s as well as comparing feminist literature in the pivotal self-help text *Our Bodies Ourselves*, which was originally published in 1979 with current feminist breast related literature, specifically a coffee table book about breasts entitled *Bare Reality* by Laura Dodsworth published in 2015.

Chapter two explores the feminist groups Free the Nipple and Femen. These groups both use toplessness as a means to an end, but their end goals are different, as are their strategies for reaching them. In writing this chapter, I clarified a great deal for myself about these two somewhat mysterious and complicated organizations. I looked beneath their attention-grabbing social media profiles and protest pictures in order to understand the inner workings of the groups. I attempted to point out the ways in which the groups are both similar and different. I also wrote about the inconsistencies and shortcomings of the groups that I discovered in my research. For this chapter, I explored a fictional film created by the founder of Free the Nipple, and a documentary about Femen created by film maker Kitty Green. I also explored the websites and Instagram accounts of both groups, as well as reading a number of academic articles about Femen. This chapter incorporated online fieldwork/research that wound up being highly informative.

After having taken myself (and hopefully my reader) through a historical account of feminist relationships to the breast and providing an overview of current prominent social movements related to the topic, chapter three centers on some of the women in my life, my peers my and friends. I interviewed eight Bard students who self-identified as cis-gendered feminist and womanist women¹ individually, and three more in a focus group setting which provided me

¹ In an article for www.thoughtco.com (February 18, 2018) activist Linda Napikoski defines womanism,

with a total of eleven interlocutors. I chose to interview this particular group so that my small study could remain relevant, as opposed to expanding it to include a wider array of people. I asked all of my individual interlocutors the same set of questions (see appendix) hoping to get closer to an understanding of what breasts mean to the young women I interviewed. In my focus group I chose simply to speak about my project for a minute or two and then open up the dialogue to my interlocutors for their comments and thoughts. I attempted to steer the conversation towards the relevant themes of feminism, topless activism, and female community.

Within my interviews I had a kind of ‘insider perspective’ because, like my interlocutors I am a student at Bard College, and I am a cis-gendered woman who self identifies as a feminist. These qualities and my age (twenty one,) race (white,) ethnic/cultural background (Jewish,) class (middleclass,) religious affiliation (atheist,) all affected my positionality in this project. I feel that because I am a cis-gendered, feminist woman I was granted greater access and openness with my similarly identified interlocutors. Moreover, I am sure that these factors implicitly played into the topic I chose to study, the way I chose to research it, and what I ultimately wrote about it.

My project has also been informed by my study of anthropology and gender and sexuality. Professor Yuka Suzuki inspired me to major in anthropology when I began to explore

A black feminist or feminist of color, according to Alice Walker, who first publicly used the term; someone who is committed to the wholeness and well-being of all of humanity, male and female. Womanism identifies and critically analyzes sexism, anti-black racism, and their intersection. Womanism recognizes the beauty and strength of embodied black womanhood, and seeks connections and solidarity with black men. Womanism identifies and criticizes sexism in the African American community and racism in the feminist community.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary (February 28, 2018) defines feminism,

- 1: the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes
- 2: organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests

<https://www.thoughtco.com/womanist-feminism-definition-3528993>

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>

race and culture in her course “Post-Apartheid Imaginaries.” During my freshman year, I continued to explore themes of race and culture with Donna Ford Grover in her course “Women Writing the Caribbean,” which also served to push me forward into my concentration in gender and sexuality studies.

For the entirety of the project I attempted to maintain an anthropological understanding of my findings. This meant that the way I analyzed online sources, films, books, and articles, kept in mind larger anthropological theorists such as Ruth Behar in *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border With Esperanza's Story* (1993) a text in which Behar thoughtfully portrays the life of her interlocutor and attempts to understand her and represent her to the best of her ability. This book influenced the style in which I conducted my interviews, and the way I chose to write them up. Emily Martin in *Woman in The Body* (1987) writes about medical science as it applies to female reproduction, and the ways in which sexist medical and social norms are naturalized through the misuse of language. She explores the notion that while a social norm may be widely accepted as natural, it is not necessarily right or natural. This is a concept that I employ throughout my project.

Athena Athanasiou in *Agonistic Mourning* (2017), and “Sherry Ortner in “Is Female to Male as Male is to Culture” (1972) both write about reclaiming traditionally female traits and roles and bestowing greater social/cultural appreciation upon them as a way to equalize society. Professor Michele Dominy in “Lesbian-Feminist Gender Conceptions: Separatism in Christchurch New Zealand” (1986) Also writes about feminists who rather than rejecting biology altogether, attempt to re-appropriate and elevate female biology, and to understand it as being superior rather than inferior to male biology. These last three authors writings had great implications for and connections with the interviews I conducted in my final chapter.

I also specifically incorporated the knowledge I gained from my course with Professor John Ryle “The Interview,” in which I honed my interviewing skills, which was greatly beneficial to my work in chapter three. In my course with Professor Jonah Rubin “Doing Ethnography,” I learned a great deal about various anthropological methodologies and began a prototype of my senior project. In my “Contemporary Critical Theory” class with Professor Laura Kunreuther, I read numerous anthropological texts, and presented on feminist scholars Donna Harraway, and Athena Athanasiou which taught me a great deal about women and feminism within anthropology. Professor Kunreuther also taught my “Introduction to Anthropology” course in which I did my very first ethnography, setting me up with the fundamental tools I needed to pursue this project.

In addition, I have attempted to bring my knowledge of gender and sexuality to bear on this project. I have been inspired by feminist and womanist authors such as Kimberly Crenshaw in “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew” (1993), an article exploring the concept of intersectionality, which I held in my consciousness as I conducted my interviews. Peggy Orenstein in *Girls and Sex* (2016), a text which explores how high school and college aged women are conducting themselves in the context of sexual relationships, and how they are being affected by sexism. Orenstein’s interview style and subject matter was highly inspirational in the context of my project. Hanne Blank in *Virgin the Untouched History* (1996) explores myths and misconceptions regarding female sexuality and virginity. Her rewriting of history from the female perspective, helped me to conceptualize this project. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Dear Ijeawele or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) writes encouraging words for all women. Her book fortified my spirits throughout the writing process.

Lastly, I was encouraged by Helene Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), whom I read in my “Feminist Philosophy” course with Professor Daniel Berthold. In her article, *The Laugh of the Medusa* Cixous says, “Your body is yours, take it” (1976, 246). This message is one that has influenced my entire project. It gives me the courage to write about and discuss the female body because I am reminded that it is mine, and mine to speak about.

Chapter 1 – A *Feminist History of the Breast*

Marilyn Yalom is a renowned historian and a professor at Stanford University in the Women and Gender Studies department. She has written the only comprehensive historical text entitled *A History of the Breast*, tracing human relationships to the breast from the Paleolithic era until 1997 when the book was published. When considering what texts to turn to for this chapter, I decided to utilize her book *A History of the Breast* as my main source and anchor. In addition to being a well respected scholar, Yalom shares my enthusiasm for uncovering lesser known historical perspectives, namely, female, and feminist perspectives relating to the breast.

Although Yalom provides a thorough and balanced history of important historical moments concerning the breast that span centuries, for the purpose of this project I have decided to focus on a “feminist history of the breast” specifically attending to the 1960s-1970s through today. Feminism began with the suffragettes in the 1920’s. It targeted women’s rights in the workplace and succeeded in getting women the right to vote. However, second wave feminism is even more relevant to my project because the 1960s and 1970s brought up issues of the physical body, and began the very first braless and topless protests, and movements. This will be important in framing my next chapter that details two prominent current feminist movements surrounding the breast.

Yalom understands the breast as being a central player in the women’s movement of the 1960’s. Political breast related movements are not exactly a new phenomenon. Their precursors were forged in the early political battles of second wave feminism. Yalom says,

...The discarding of bras was turned against women by numerous detractors who saw in it an affront to public decency, good taste, and a man-made vision of physical beauty that

required its breasts to be round, large, firm, and clearly delineated. Whereas the packaging of breasts as sexual objects had been the norm in the forties and fifties, the unbound bosom of the late sixties represented a form of lawlessness, a deregulation of breasts, which were now permitted to flop about without constraint, and were a harbinger of greater license yet to come (1997, 243).

The feminists of the 1960s were responding to the sexism of the 1940s and 1950s by manifesting their beliefs in a physical way. Yalom uses the term ‘packaging’ thus suggesting that breasts were something not only to be controlled, but also to be advertised, and ultimately bought and sold. A desire to discard the patriarchal political values of the time was tied into a desire to do away with capitalism. In the above quote Yalom says that “the lawlessness” and “deregulation of breasts” are “a harbinger of greater license yet to come.” She understands the ‘freeing’ of breasts as being both the catalyst and the symbol of women’s future empowerment.

Earlier in her writing, Yalom details the many instances in which breasts have played major (if varied) roles in society, both historically and cross culturally. She understands them as being highly significant, even if she does not manage to pin down exactly what they signify. She understands breasts as being a powerful tool for protest simply because of the social and psychological value that they hold. She writes,

Given the symbolic importance of the breast, it is not surprising that the women’s liberation movement began with a form of protest subsequently called “bra-burning.” Led by the poet Robin Morgan, members of the Women’s Liberation Party picketed the 1968 Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City and urged women to throw away their bras, girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, and other ‘mindless boob girlie’ symbols that they considered demeaning (1997, 242).

Although bras were the most eye catching and scandalous item the feminists of the 1960's wanted to do away with, a whole slew of other items were being discarded along with them. Bralessness was intended to initiate and go hand in hand with the disposal of all manner of patriarchal norms. Women were beginning to embody their beliefs and their empowerment. By protesting the Miss America pageant, they were taking on what they deemed to be problematic beauty standards and juxtaposing them with a different set of physical ideals, namely, 'liberated' breasts, and a body and face void of constrictions or enhancements.

While 'bra burning' became an iconic phrase in connection with the feminists of the 1960's and 1970's the term was actually created by a false report. Yalom explains that at first bras were simply thrown into trash cans. A reporter, seeing a connection with other political acts of his time "such as burning draft cards or flags" (1997, 242) became carried away and reimagined the scene with more vivid imagery. Later on, in different protests, bras were burned, but the chronology of the events has often led to much debate about whether the term 'bra burning' is simply an exaggerated myth.

Either way, the discarding of bras was just the tip of the iceberg for some feminists of the time. In fact, toplessness as a form of organized and individual protest was becoming more and more popular. Yalom tells us that in the 1970s and 1980s, it was not uncommon for feminists to spend time topless outdoors, or to intentionally flash people as a way to "thumb one's nose at society"(1997, 243).

Yalom understands the practice of removing ones blouse or top as a way to protest society at large. Because Yalom believes the breast to be symbolically potent she understands this as being a fairly effective mode of dissent. In fact, its effects were widely spread enough to

warrant a pamphlet from the 1970s on Army, Military, and Police protocol in response to toplessness (cited by Yalom) entitled “Keeping Your Cool in a Civil Disturbance”

Situation: You are in formation faced by a group of females about your age. They yell: “If you are on our side, smile” and then raise their blouses to expose their breasts. How do you handle this?

Solution: Concentrate on what you’re there for. After all, you’ve seen breasts before. The girls are just teasing and want you to make a mistake so they can ridicule you. Stay sharp and alert! (1997, 244).

Although we can’t be sure whether or not the ‘situation’ was typical for its time, we can assume that it approximated experiences that at least a few policeman had experienced in the past, otherwise why would they include it in training protocols? If we analyze it at face value we can see that the women are using their bodies to confuse, bemuse, and possibly embarrass the police officers.

I would argue that, the women are exposing themselves with a conscious intention to take advantage of the typically ascribed uncontrollable sexual desires of men, in order to publicly ridicule both the men themselves and the ways in which they have been socialized. In this instance, the men become the laughing stock and the women have control, which is different from the kind of toplessness depicted in pornography or men’s magazines of that era in which men are in control and women are on display.

The “solution” is to “concentrate on what you’re there for” and “stay sharp and alert!” One might ask, what are the police there for? What is the danger for which they must “stay sharp and alert?” Why are bare breasts dangerous? The most amusing component of the “solution” is “After all, you’ve seen breasts before.” Firstly, it is possible (although unlikely) that this is an

erroneous assumption. But what this phrase really emphasizes is just how infantile we assume men are, and just how out of control. Perhaps though, these men had not seen breasts in this setting or in this light. Perhaps when women use their breasts for their own purposes, or in a political manner breasts become foreign and intimidating.

Lastly the trainees are told “the girls are just teasing, and want you to make a mistake so they can ridicule you.” This is an interesting thought and requires some analysis. First of all, using the term girls instead of women is demeaning and patronizing. Understanding the protestors as inferior or infantile helps to diminish the logic and value behind their protest. “The girls are just teasing” taps into an age old trope of women being perceived as seductresses simply for existing. In this instance it is possible that the female protestors are subverting this trope and using it for their own gain, however it is unlikely that “teasing” is the main reason for the protest. We could imagine them protesting for abortion rights, or against sexual violence, perhaps they are protesting the Vietnam war. Or maybe, they are simply protesting the fact that they cannot be topless in public without being perceived as a “tease” or without being perceived as “asking for it.”

So, are the women teasing the men? Maybe. Is the point of their protest simply to get the officers to “make a mistake so they can ridicule you?” Possibly, but in all likelihood most young women wouldn’t risk being imprisoned simply because they want to laugh at a police officer. It is far more likely that something greater is at stake.

This leads us into the topless protests of the 1980s. Yalom writes,

Topless demonstrations became a means of calling attention to a wide range of women’s issues, including pornography, sexism, health care, and safe sex. In 1984 for example,

sixty bare-breasted women and men paraded through the streets of Santa Cruz, California (1997, 244).

Yalom underscores the fact that although some topless protests are simply used to protest laws and social conventions that prohibit women from being topless, other forms of demonstration make use of the taboo and eye-catching nature of bare breasted women, to bring attention to larger and more abstract political issues. This is one of the main differences I will explore in chapter two with the comparison of current topless feminist groups, Femen, and Free the Nipple.

Another protest of that era led by feminist activist Anne Simonton, was targeting the abuse of women in pornography and advertising, while also protesting laws and taboos against bare breasts. This is a particularly interesting foreshadowing of the split that has occurred within current breast related groups. For example, Femen uses the shock factor of bare breasts to bring awareness to other political issues, while Free the Nipple protests simply for the right to be topless. In her protest Simonton, has managed to incorporate both concepts. Yalom's quotes Simonton as saying,

If women's breasts weren't hidden in shame or seen as obscene and wicked, how could Madison Avenue, pornographers, movies and television continue to profit off their exposure? We are saying 'no' to the assumption that our bodies belong to advertisers, beauty contests, pornographers, topless bars, peep shows, ad nauseam. We reclaim our inherent right to govern our bodies. (1997, 244)

Here, we see feminist activist Ann Simonton verbalize many of the sentiments of the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. She compellingly combines and admonishes the categories of sexism and consumerism, pointing out the many ways in which they reinforce each other. Simonton has

first-hand experience of the industries she so passionately admonishes, because before becoming an activist she worked as a model in the fashion industry.

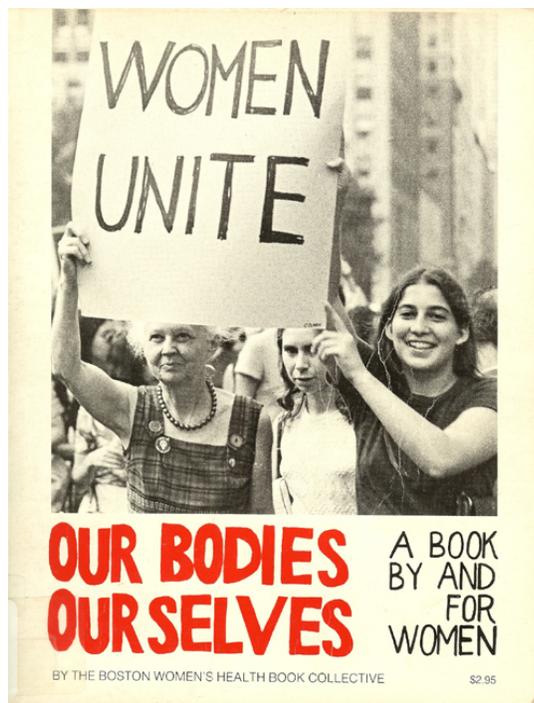
In the above quote Simonton says, “if women’s breasts weren’t hidden in shame, or seen as obscene and wicked, how could Madison Avenue, pornographers, movies and television continue to profit off their exposure?” Simonton believes that in order to put a stop to capitalist enterprises that further perpetuate the subjugation of women we must de-stigmatize the female breast. She is protesting the industries, but she is also protesting the fact that women’s bodies are perceived as inherently “obscene.” Perhaps Simonton is modelling the type of behavior she feels will help to put a stop to the issues she is addressing. Perhaps she believes that the more women who choose to expose their breasts, the less they will be perceived in a way that will create profit for businesses she clearly disapproves of.

Although Yalom details breast related topics all the way through the 1990s I would like to bring us back to focusing in on a vital feminist text from the 1970s entitled *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Yalom understands it as epitomizing and catalyzing a feminist reclamation of the body. This surely inspired women like Simonton, and quite possibly served as a precursor to movements like Free the Nipple and Femen.

She writes, “The revolutionary book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1979) became the battle cry for a whole new generation of women, who asserted that the destiny traditionally attributed to women was not God-given, but only man made” (1997, 242). Meaning that, the rights accorded to women were not pre-destined, but in fact malleable and changeable.

The well-known text *Our Bodies, Ourselves* began as a pamphlet called *Women and Their Bodies* (1970). It was created by twelve women who met at a conference in Boston in 1969 with the same title as the pamphlet. During the conference, they bonded over plain and open

discussions about feminism, sexuality, the female body, and the medical system and its flaws. They decided to continue the conversation long after the conference had ended and wound up creating the widely circulated *Women and Their Bodies*. The pamphlet caught on like wildfire and was ultimately adapted into a book. The book has continued to be updated on a regular basis (its most recent edition was published in 2011,) with relevant information and has since been printed in many languages, affecting women all around the world.



The original cover of the book contains an image of a women's protest with two women, one young, the other older holding a sign with the slogan "Women Unite" emblazoned on it. Behind them stands a crowd of fellow protestors, and one somber slightly shadowed woman stands between the women holding the sign. The younger sign holder has a joyful, optimistic expression on her face which points to her enthusiasm and hope for the future. The older woman

is slightly more sedate but appears steadfast and strong. If I were to hazard a guess about the intentions of this photograph I would say that the woman behind the sign holders represents the all too serious challenges and struggles of the past while the two women in the front represent a promising union across generations that may carry the protestors into a brighter future.

In any case, the slogan “Women Unite” is fairly self-explanatory. This book is meant to inspire women to find fellowship and connection with other women, and it is meant to incite uprising and protest against a flawed and sexist social and medical system.

When it came time to write the first edition of the book the women collectively penned an introduction. They wrote,

As we developed the course we realized more and more that we really were capable of collecting, understanding, and evaluating medical information. Together we evaluated our reading of books and journals, our talks with doctors and friends who were medical students. We found we could discuss, question, and argue with each other in a new spirit of cooperation rather than competition. We were equally struck by how important it was for us to be able to open up with one another and share our feelings about our bodies. The process of talking was as crucial as the facts themselves. Over time the facts and feelings melted together in ways that touched us very deeply, and that is reflected in the changing titles of the course and then the book, from “Women and Their Bodies” to “Women and Our Bodies” to, finally, “Our Bodies, Ourselves” (1979, 3).

The women unlocked something in themselves that they hadn’t known existed, the potential to truly understand and process complex scientific and medical information. This was the first step in their project, having faith in their own abilities and intelligence. More importantly though, they learned that they could “discuss, question, and argue with each other in a new spirit of

cooperation rather than competition.” This meant that instead of vying for the most prestigious role within the project the women managed to celebrate each other’s additions, feedback, and knowledge in a way that created a sense of community and connection. This was a powerful occurrence, it demonstrated that women could work towards a common goal without becoming petty, or competitive.

Moreover, they say that “the process of talking was as crucial as the facts themselves.” The women found that the emotional rewards of learning about what they had in common regarding their bodies was just as vital as learning about the biological facts they were discovering. This played into their changing of the title from a less embodied *Women and Their Bodies*, to *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The first title suggests a slightly removed authorship while the second both includes the authors in the collective “our” and literally conflates the notion of “self” with the physical body.

The authors go on to say,

Once we had learned what the “experts” had to tell us, we found that we still had a lot to teach and to learn from one another. For instance, many of us had “learned” about the menstrual cycle in science or biology classes — we had perhaps even memorized the names of the menstrual hormones and what they did. But most of us did not remember much of what we had learned. This time when we read in a text that the onset of menstruation is a normal and universal occurrence in young girls from ages ten to eighteen, we started to talk about our first menstrual periods. We found that, for many of us, beginning to menstruate had not felt normal at all, but scary, embarrassing, mysterious. We realized that what we had been told about menstruation and what we had

not been told — even the tone of voice it had been told in — all had an effect on our feelings about being female (1997, 4).

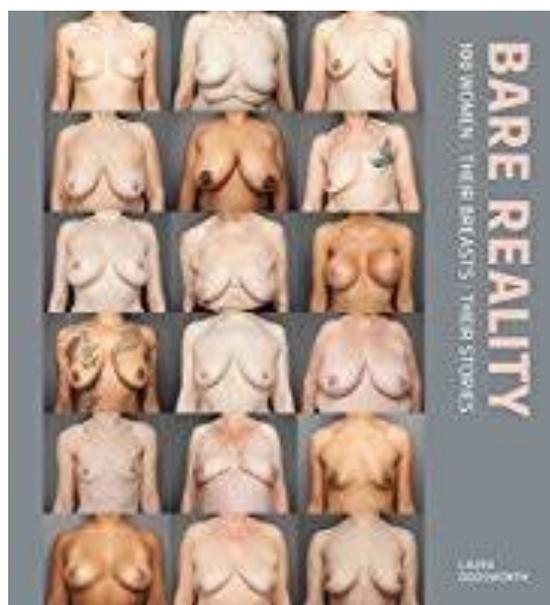
The authors felt that the process of intimate sharing and collective growth in and of itself was highly valuable. It wasn't simply the information they gathered together, it was the act of disseminating that information that truly moved them. The medical information was salient and useful, but it was the act of uncovering something hidden, and private that felt cathartic and healing. The women quickly learned that even though they had been given plenty of dry facts about female anatomy in grade school, they weren't able to process those facts fully because they didn't resonate or align with their lived experiences. Although menstruation is a normal and universal physical occurrence for many women, the majority of women in their group felt anxious and alienated when they first began to menstruate.

This is in large part because of the *way* they were told about menstruation. They feel that tone of voice, timing, and all the things left unsaid profoundly affected not only how they felt about the process of menstruation, but also fundamentally affected how they felt about being female. The authors decided to publicize experiences and information that they had been taught all their lives was private, and even shameful. In doing so they managed to eradicate the shame and fear that comes along with ignorance and isolation.

In the original pamphlet *Women and Their Bodies* breasts are addressed only briefly in a section about the practicalities of breast feeding. However, an image of two women farming topless is put, seemingly haphazardly into a section about female sexuality. Two women actively cultivate the land, they seem to be unaware that they are being photographed and are unselfconsciously topless. To me, this symbolizes the authors intention to encourage women to

cultivate their own desires as actively as these women work the land, and to make use of their bodies without feeling that they need to present themselves as objects for others. Their bare breasts represent the ‘untamed’ and unapologetic behavior that the authors want to foster in themselves and in their readers. Their bodies are utilitarian, in that they are functional, and clearly powerful, they are made to be useful to the women they belong to, not to the observer. Although the feminist movement that was spawned alongside this ground-breaking book was not directly breast related, it connects beautifully to political breast groups, and it is clear that the iconography of bare breasts felt relevant, and poignant even then.

The notion that one should ‘bare’ the ‘un-bearable’ in order to take away its power directly correlates to a book that was published in 2015 entitled *Bare Reality*. The book, created by photographer Laura Dodsworth, features one hundred images of women’s bare breasts and torsos along with a short interview conducted by Dodsworth about how they feel about their own breasts. Dodsworth chose to create anonymity for the women by leaving their heads and faces out of the images.



The cover features eighteen women who clearly come from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, age groups, and all have drastically different body types. Some of the women are tattooed, one of the women has had breast implants, one has had a mastectomy, and each woman's breasts vary in terms of size, shape and color.

This is clearly a very intentional choice, in her introduction Dodsworth writes, "Women aged from 19 to 101 have taken part in *Bare Reality*, women with healthy breasts, cancer survivors, different ethnicities, women from all walks of life, all shapes and sizes, heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, and trans women" (2015, 10). She finds it important to put forward an incredibly diverse group of women and their experiences.

Dodsworth goes on to say,

What will you gain from this book? If you are a man, you might not have seen as many 'real' breasts, or heard women be so frank. As a woman you might be interested in seeing what other women's breasts look like and take heart: no-one is perfectly symmetrical, many women perceive themselves to be too large, too small, too saggy. If you are younger and still developing, you might be curious to see 'real' breasts, learn about other women's experiences, and gain an insight into your own potential future(2015, 10).

Dodsworth, it seems, has created the book for educational purposes. She uses the word "real" in quotations indicating that the breasts we typically see are in some way "un-real." The breasts we see in the media are rarely bare, un-altered surgically, and untouched with Photoshop. I understand Dodsworth as claiming that the breasts in her book are more "real" because they are less contrived and altered. She seems to want her book to have a positive influence on women's

perceptions of their own bodies, and hopes that they will “take heart” in seeing and reading about “real” breasts.

I own this book and have had many opportunities to witness people reading it for the first time. Interestingly, women are the only ones I have seen pick it up. A number of women have searched for their ‘twins’ looking for breasts that resemble their own. I find this action demonstrates the use value of this book, although no one is going to find an exact replica of their breasts, they may find breasts that look familiar. Given that we don’t see a large variety of naked breasts on a daily basis, many of my friends have expressed gratitude towards the author for making them feel ‘normal’ or ‘less alone.’ In many ways I feel the book accomplishes the authors goals. It is educational, and supportive of body positivity. It also normalizes female toplessness and as we will soon see is a part of the Free the Nipple movement.

Ch. 2 – “The Nipple is the Trojan Horse”²

In this chapter I would like to examine the two most prominent and far reaching topless feminist groups, Free the Nipple and Femen. Free the Nipple has been covered by multiple news sources, including *The New York Times*³ in an article by journalist, Deborah Acosta. Femen, in addition to being regularly referenced in the media, such as in an article for *The Washington Post*⁴ by journalist Sonia Rao, is a group that has been the focus of several academic papers, and two documentaries. I examine what the groups have in common, and what sets them apart. Moreover, I delve into what constitutes the making of a movement and how these two groups differ in their self-definition. Lastly, I parse the goals and motives, of each group and consider their success in accomplishing these goals.

Femen

I write about Femen first because I will demonstrate, later in the chapter, that Free the Nipple is in fact an offshoot of this group. My analysis of Femen is primarily derived from the documentary *Ukraine is Not a Brothel*,⁵ directed by Kitty Green and based on the group, an exploration of Femen’s official website, and an article written by feminist scholar Theresa O’Keefe (2014.) Although O’Keefe makes numerous salient points, many of which are convincing, the conclusions we come to about the group differ. O’Keefe argues that the group

² A quote from Free the Nipple Founder Lina Esco in an interview from YouTube channel StyleLikeU <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvGFbK8xBrg> (2017)

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/25/fashion/free-the-nipple-video.html>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/04/09/former-cosby-show-actress-protests-topless-at-bill-cosbys-sexual-assault-retrial/?utm_term=.a6b27f9ff36a

⁵ Cited as UNB (2013)

ultimately does more harm than good for women, and feminism. I argue that a slightly more nuanced response to the group is warranted, and that the group does more good than harm.

Femen is a self-proclaimed feminist, activist, group originating in the Ukraine. Femen was supposedly created by an economist named Anna Hutsol, (although this is up for debate, as we will see later in the chapter.) The group originally consisted of three key members, Oksana Shachko, Inna Shevchenko, and Sasha Shevchenko (O'Keefe 2014, 9). They conducted their first topless protest on the streets of Kiev in 2009 (O'Keefe 2014, 9).

Femen is deeply flawed in many ways, they have been accused of Islamophobia, superficiality, and discrimination based on members size and shape. If the group's tactics were adjusted it is likely that they would become far more effective in their efforts. That being said, the group continuously manages to infiltrate, disrupt, and disturb conservative groups, and politicians. They have become a serious concern to their adversaries, so much so that the Ukrainian group moved its headquarters to France because of physical threats from the Ukrainian government and local people (UNB 2013). O'Keefe argues that the kind of immodesty (toplessness) demonstrated by the group only serves to further please men, and reify social norms. If this is true, why are they feared rather than celebrated? If Femen, with all its faults, and shortcomings is not effective, and important, why would they need to put their own lives at risk in order to accomplish their goals?

Ukraine is Not a Brothel directed by Kitty Green was created in 2013. It followed the group and highlighted their many trials and tribulations, victories, and endless inconsistencies. The documentary was made after the group began reaching international audiences with their attention-grabbing stunts. These stunts, which are posted about on their website, include crashing and protesting topless at anti-abortion marches, or most recently, protesting the president of

Ukraine, at the large, and exclusive Viennese Ball. They often target high profile politicians and events whom they deem repressive, sexist, or homophobic and protest them while being topless, frequently painting a controversial, or obscene slogan on the backs and chests of group members.

According to the documentary *Ukraine is Not a Brothel*, the women are all too accustomed to physical dangers. In 2012 members of the group were kidnapped by a group of men with guns, (the men were never caught, but the group suspects that they were hired by the government of Ukraine.) They were led into a snowy forest, forced to undress, and were then left to fend for themselves. This was an extreme case, but Femen protestors have often been photographed being grabbed, and dragged, from their protests. They also claim that police often hit and grope them. In *Ukraine is Not a Brothel*, prominent group member Oksana Shachko says, “They are very rough with us. They pushed me up against the wall, one of them felt me up, he said ‘give me a feel.’ There was no way to protect myself.” Members of Femen frequently endanger their own safety, and are all too used to being arrested. Their passion, and bravery, are without a doubt, admirable, but the group is also full of notable contradictions and flaws. How do these contradictions affect the usefulness of Femen’s protests?

Femen was supposedly founded by Anna Hutsol, a Ukrainian feminist activist who has never actually participated in any of her topless protests. However, as the documentary *Ukraine is Not a Brothel* demonstrates, the origins of the group are still shrouded in mystery. In fact, the film implies that the actual founder is a man by the name of Victor Svyatski. Upon researching Svyatski I found very little information about him. He seems to have few distinguishing characteristics, and like the other members of Femen, came to radical protest somewhat randomly. In the documentary, he claims that he is the “patriarch” of this feminist movement, and that the whole thing emerged from a sexist fantasy he had of leading a group of beautiful

topless women. He then claims to have co-opted the feminist group that Hutsol had created and introduced the topless component. He says that he used Hutsol as a kind of front woman in order to fulfill his wishes. In an article entitled “We’re Not Run By Men” written by Milene Larson, in 2013 for Vice News, Inna Shevchenko, the current leader of Femen disputes this saying, “It was a woman who came up with the idea of being topless.”

None of the women in the film, confirm or deny that he had a prominent role in creating the group, but all of them expressed a strong desire to sever all ties with Svyatski, who seems to have a volatile personality. Moreover, Shevchenko expresses, in the film and in interviews since the film was made, that despite its complex origins, the only people in charge of and participating in Femen now are powerful women. In Larson’s article Shevchenko says,

In the end, Victor was destroyed—he was kicked out of the movement more than a year ago. The future of Femen—and what I have built together with the activists all over the world who have joined us during this last year—is all based on our own ideas and wishes to fight patriarchy and oppression. (2013, 1)

Shevchenko seems to be suggesting that however prominent Victor was in the past his legacy is no longer relevant. She is taking ownership of Femen, including both its victories and pitfalls.

While I find the origins of the group fascinating, and concerning, because of the suspicions around its founder, I am confident that the group, as it exists now, is led by women as Shevchenko says. Because of this, I am choosing to analyze it as it is now, and to both critique and commend the group with the understanding that while it may still be influenced by patriarchal, and problematic norms, it is run by self-proclaimed feminist women.

Another issue Femen struggles with is Islamophobia. In her article “Microrebellious Bodies” (2014) Zakia Salime, a professor of gender and sexuality studies at Rutgers University,

discusses how individual bodies can catalyze revolutions. She discusses now ex-member of Femen, Amina Sboui, a Tunisian woman who protested female oppression, and the oppressive nature of imposed modesty by posting topless pictures of herself. Sboui eventually separated from Femen because she felt that the groups attitudes towards Islam were offensive.

Femen has often been derided for its Islamophobic tendencies. The group regularly protests against all religions including Christianity, but their topless protests against the mistreatment of women within Islam have been regarded as crossing the line. In another article entitled “Put Your Shirts Back On: Why Femen is Wrong” (2013) by Uzma Kholsy for *The Atlantic*, Kholsy tells us that the group believes that the Hijab is a symbol of oppression, and that Femen has frequently conflated submissiveness, and oppression with wearers of the garment. She believes that Femen is misinformed. This sentiment is shared by anthropologist Chandra Mohanty in her article “Under Western Eyes” (1984).” In her writing, she explores how Western feminists have often been under the false impression that they need to “save” non-western women from their various “oppressive” cultures. This serves to minimize the agency of non-western women, and obscures the fact that such actions are often motivated by colonialist, and racist ideologies. Although Femen’s stance on Islam is not surprising, given the groups radical nature, I do find it disturbing, misguided, and culturally insensitive. This topic could be a fascinating chapter in and of itself, but I shall attempt to stay on topic, and analyze the group as a whole.

When the group began, one of their main goals was to protest the rampant prostitution and sex slavery trade in the Ukraine. In the film, the women often juxtapose prostitution with protest. The message they want to disseminate is that the women typically understood as passive, and docile have voices, and opinions, that women, (specifically stereotypically beautiful women

who they felt were often perceived as prostitutes) fought back. Clearly Femen's target population is limited. Women who are forced into prostitution can be any shape, size, race, or age. In the past, feminism has never been used to benefit 'beautiful' women alone. Although, it is arguable that it has often targeted and benefitted, wealthy and white women, before it has assisted working class women, and women of color.

One of the ways Femen members branded themselves in order to reach their target audience, was by recruiting women with stereotypically beautiful faces and bodies. The logic is, that it would be beneficial for the world to see such women occupying different kinds of roles, and being vocal and empowered, rather than submissive, and obedient. For this, the group has come under fire from numerous sources including their own token 'non-beautiful' member. In *Ukraine is Not a Brothel* an activist who goes by the name Alexandra says, "The protests that I am in are absurd, it's when they need to mock something, to have such a large girl in a Femen protest, it's shocking... they position themselves as feminists, but it seems to me that, in order for them to become real feminists we need to wait for some time to pass." With these words, Alexandra lets us know that she is very much aware of the fact that she is being used as the laughingstock in Femen protests. She serves as a juxtaposition to the slender and youthful bodies of the other group members. She has previously been dressed up as Putin or some other 'villain' in Femen protests, and her toplessness is seen as grotesque and laughable because of the size and shape of her body.

That being said, Alexandra must feel that her role in Femen is doing more good than harm, and that the organization overall is accomplishing something, especially given that she continues to be an active member of the group. It is also clear though, that she critically questions her role within the group. Nowadays, with body positivity, and inclusivity being such

buzzwords within feminist circles it is difficult to reconcile the blatant ‘body shaming’ that occurs within the ranks of Femen with the rest of their feminist agenda.

In her article, “My Body is My Manifesto,” author Theresa O’Keefe writes a scathing review of the groups tactics. She feels that the utilization of young, lithe, predominantly white bodies is deeply problematic. She writes,

It should come as no surprise then that FEMEN activists are all in their 20s and 30s.

FEMEN also exemplifies feminism through its use of the 'sexy' female body as a protest strategy, with 'sexy' defined according to the templates of hegemonically masculine ideals, which reify the ideal female body. FEMEN need the male gaze⁶; they explicitly seek to capture it. They take the commodification and objectification of women's bodies and use it to sell a message. (2014, 10)

O’Keefe objects to the fact that Femen is not only selling sex appeal, but that they are selling a type of sexiness that stems from patriarchal beauty norms and is antithetical to a true feminist agenda. She believes that although the women think they are ‘flipping the script’ in fact they are reinforcing sexism. I agree whole heartedly with O’Keefe that it is backward and harmful to exclude women from Femen protests based on their physical appearances. Diversity of race, age, shape, and size, could only benefit a feminist organization. However, flawed as it is, I still find Femen to be an effective tool for fighting patriarchal norms, a point I will elaborate later on.

⁶ In 2018 the Oxford dictionary defines the male gaze as - “The perspective of a notionally typical heterosexual man considered as embodied in the audience or intended audience for films and other visual media, characterized by a tendency to objectify or sexualize women.” The term was created by feminist activist Laura Mulvey in 1975. It is relevant here because it speaks more to a cultural gaze than an individual man’s perspective.
https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/male_gaze

This brings us to another fascinating contradiction. O'Keefe points out that Femen is in fact selling their sex appeal in order to garner attention, which makes them dependent on the very men they wish to challenge. When carried to its logical extreme, how does this differ from the prostitution Femen so despises? In fact, it seems that although they claim to wish to empower women, their main focus is on men. Although it is commendable that they are attempting to change the hearts and minds of men in power, it is still striking that their tactics revolve around attracting the male gaze, and seem to actively exclude so many potential female allies, women who poses both the intelligence and bravery a Femen protest requires but who do not have the physical attributes Femen demands.

O'Keefe goes on to quote supposed Femen founder Anna Hutsol on why Femen chooses to operate in this way, using breasts as a device to garner attention, as opposed to attempting to normalize breasts in the way that Free the Nipple does.

Hutsol explains that this is somewhere between performance and the market: 'I think if you can sell cookies in this way [through mass appeal] why not also push for social issues using the same method? I don't see anything wrong with that' (Zychowicz, 2011: 221). With their 'our body is our manifesto' message, activists argue that they are reclaiming their naked breasts, that women's nakedness was always 'an instrument of patriarchy. It was always used by man's hands in fashion industry, in sex industry and in advertisements', and they are 'playing really with the stereotypes... We are making a sign that it's back now to its rightful owner, to women' (10)

Hutsol is very open about Femen using sex to sell their message, and she understands it as a practical way to sell feminism to people who would typically not think or hear about it. Although

this portion of the Femen ideology is concerning for O'Keefe and for me, Femen does deserve credit for radically re-appropriating female toplessness. Although some of their tactics are dubious, it is clear that in making the secretive and insidious nature of objectifying and taking advantage of women public, they are getting intense reactions.

Femen is not simply feminism at its best or worst, it is both and neither. If Femen were simply a failed attempt at feminism their protests would be greeted with warmth and enthusiasm by the public, politicians, and police. The simple fact that their appearances are feared, and become profoundly disruptive, speaks to the fact that they are doing something powerful. The fact that police are so regularly violent with them, and that bystanders often become violent as well, suggests that Femen is successfully hitting a nerve with conservative, and sexist people.

O'Keefe sees the group as reifying patriarchal norms, and giving men what they want, but in my opinion, being topless, angry, and loud, in public is rebellious, even if the activist looks like a Barbie doll. It is a reclamation of the female body, and it is an effective one given that it spawned Free the Nipple and countless other topless feminist groups, groups that have moved beyond Femen's structural issues, and include women of any and all persuasions.

When it comes to Femen, my tendency is to be lenient, because every movement starts out with controversies and complications, and what we might productively ask is, what are the overall intentions of the group? What are their goals? Have they/do achieved them? The group began with the honorable intention of bringing awareness to issues facing women and the LGBTQ community in Ukraine. They did so, becoming not only nationally but internationally known. The group wanted to demonstrate that women can be strong, fearless, and opinionated. They accomplished that through their visually arresting protests.

Lastly, the group wanted and continues to want to change laws and structures that oppress women. It is unclear how effective they have been in this. While they have certainly served as inspiration for others, and planted seeds of rebellion in the hearts and minds of many, they have never consistently targeted one issue for a long enough time in order to directly affect it. This means that, they have chosen such a broad range of issues to protest that their protests have not been directly responsible for changing laws regarding women and the LGBTQ community. In this way, and in many others they are similar to Free the Nipple.

Free the Nipple

Free the Nipple is a movement that has been difficult to research because it is so new, and perhaps because it has not been taken too seriously by academics. The majority of my information came from less traditional online sources. Youtube was one of the most useful of these. Elisa Goodkind and Lily Mandelbaum are a mother daughter duo of body positivity activists, film makers, and authors, who founded a YouTube channel called StyleLikeU.⁷ They have 352,000 subscribers on their channel which focusses on in depth interviews with, artists, activists, and tastemakers. Recently They interviewed Lina Esco the creator of the Free the Nipple Movement.

According to her StyleLikeU interview, Esco has strayed far from her strict Catholic upbringing. She ran away from home at the age of fifteen searching for purpose, and hoping to escape her repressive household. She found a group of artists, who, although fascinating, and inclusive, tragically introduced her to heroine. Esco lived on the street, addicted to the toxic drug for a year before getting herself clean. She eventually found acting and activism but not before surviving a suicide attempt that landed her in the hospital.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvGFbK8xBrg>

I would assert that, Esco is a rare, and uniquely resilient woman. After recovering from her addiction, and excelling in her acting career, Esco decided to risk her newfound success in order to direct, co-write and star in the movie *Free the Nipple*. The acting agency she was working with at the time, dropped her, the movie was shut down multiple times because of censorship regarding toplessness, and yet she persisted, believing unwaveringly in the importance of her message.

The movie was inspired by one or two real plot lines, and people in Esco's life, however, the claim at the beginning of the film, that it was 'based on true events,' is false. IMBD a well-known online movie database, actually writes that the film was based on a true story, as do multiple other online sources. These sources are mistaken as Esco has since made it clear in both her StyleLikeU interview and in other articles, that the film was purely imaginative.

The film follows a woman named 'With' (played by Esco) who is working as a journalist when she discovers a character named Liv, who along with a few of her friends is running topless through New York City. She befriends Liv and then quits her job as a journalist and dedicates herself full time to creating a group that will go around the country protesting unequal laws around toplessness.

In the movie, the group is unabashedly and openly inspired by the group Pussy Riot, (a Russian feminist activist group,) and Femen. The group meets nightly at an abandoned swimming pool, and clearly mimic the aesthetics found in documentary footage of both Pussy Riot and Femen. Explicit poverty, secrecy, and militancy are highlighted through their obvious lack of resources, the clandestine nature of their meetings, and the pink masks they wear which are an homage to the masks worn by members of pussy riot.

In the film With says,

I think if you wanna impact mass culture in America you need to take this to the next level. I think you need to go really big, national publicity stunts, viral campaigns, armies of women in every single city. I think you need to make so much noise that these policy makers have no other choice but to listen.

We see that With is modelling her movement after movements like Femen. In the film, she aims to target political events, and is planning a topless protest in Washington, she says, in the quote above, that she wants “armies of women in every single city” who will protest topless. Her goal is to change unequal policies surrounding toplessness in the United States. She also intends to change popular assumptions about the female body and what it signifies.

What is amazing about this film, is that, despite its low budget, and crew of novice actors, people took it seriously. The movie and the social media frenzy Esco created in its wake, were enough to convince a mistaken general public that it was based on true events, especially because the film claimed to be just that. When I started researching the movement for this project, I realized that there is no group of women who are members of Free the Nipple in the same way that there are a core group of women who make up Femen. Femen has a handful of women in each city they are established in, who run a headquarters, and coordinate with every other branch of the movement. They have leaders in each city, who run the protests and who report back to Inna Schevchenko, the leader of the group. However, for Free the Nipple, there aren't 'real' group members, in fact there never have been. It was just one woman, who made a movie, and created an Instagram Hashtag that catalyzed a national frenzy.

Esco foreshadows her success when her character says, “We live in the technological age of social media, where one idea can reach more people in one week than Jesus, Buddha, or Moses can reach in over thousands of years... look what happened in Egypt, that started with

one guy and one Facebook post!” Esco’s, character is supremely confident in the power of social media. Although it strikes me as a bit vain to compare oneself to Jesus, Moses, and Buddha, Esco has become a kind of prophet, spreading the gospel of equality across the world. Her message became so widely spread that according to her StyleLikeU interview, both Facebook and Instagram changed their restrictive policies on breastfeeding photos. Moreover, many topless groups, have erupted since the Free the Nipple campaign was launched.

Her unique format has made each and every woman who bares her breasts a part of Free the Nipple. Free the Nipple’s Instagram page has images of women from all over claiming the moniker. (Free The Nipple has an Instagram following of 311,000.) This contrasts greatly with Femen’s policies. In fact, their website explicitly states that any person or group claiming to be a part of Femen, who is not written or posted about on the official website is a fraud. This protects the group from libel, it also builds their brand, but most importantly it gives the group a clear structure, and they can articulate clear goals.

What is fascinating about Free the Nipple is that in the movie, the movement was much more similar to Femen in its structure. What the movement has accomplished simply through word of mouth is astounding. The fact that each and every woman who decides to call herself a member of Free the Nipple can be just that, means that the movement is enormous. The fact that so many women have chosen to do so suggests that Esco truly had her fingers on the pulse of widespread sentiment. If the movement hadn’t been incredibly timely and resonant it would surely have died in the water. The structure empowers individuals, and small groups to feel as though they have the ability to make change. However, I wonder if this sprawling collective is capable of accomplishing its goal of changing statewide laws surrounding toplessness.

Women haven't gathered in "armies" to protest toplessness as the character With would have liked. In many states, women who go topless can be put permanently on the sex offender registry. The average woman is unlikely to risk her job and her familial and social life for a seemingly small privilege. Moreover, the kind of passionate feminist activist who would be willing to risk it all for equality, is unlikely to risk it all for this particular cause. Being put on the registry means being unable to work with endangered populations. This means that these activists wouldn't be able to work in women's shelters, or in education, and they wouldn't be able to be effective activists in other realms after having protested topless once or twice.

This might change if the movement was organized, and like Femen, had high powered lawyers. If Esco lived out her film, and actually gathered four or five women who were willing to be arrested, and who were supported by a legal team, she might have eventually have gathered an army of women who were willing to join them, and she might have been far more effective in changing laws. However, Esco, like most women has a life and a career she is pursuing. Her life as an actress would effectively end if she became the kind of activist she plays in her film. While it is powerful to suggest that each and every woman can embody, and be Free the Nipple, it is also isolating because it puts the weight of changing the world on each woman's shoulders... or breasts. If the incredibly successful Esco herself is not willing to sacrifice her career in order to form a protest group, what woman will be, and how will the laws ever be changed?

Femen, and Free the Nipple, Similarities and Differences

In her StyleLikeU interview Esco says,

This is what I had to do in order to start the dialogue of equality...the nipple is the Trojan horse, without it we wouldn't be here, I wouldn't be here talking to any of you guys, because if I would have made a movie and a movement called equality and no one was

going topless, no one would be talking about this issue. When I want to see a woman topless I can see her at a strip club, or in a porn magazine, or online, why isn't there healthy images of women owning their bodies? Owning being topless?

Here, Esco says two different things. The first is that toplessness has enabled her to start a conversation about equality. Much like Femen, Free the Nipple capitalizes on the taboo nature of breasts in order to draw attention to larger inequalities facing women. However, Esco's movement is also very much about body positivity, normalizing the female body, and toplessness itself. She wants to enable women to be topless, and believes that the movement will be successful when it is no longer necessary.

The high profile of Femen however, might suffer if toplessness were normalized. Their protests depend on sexism, the objectification of woman, and inequality around toplessness. However, perhaps if we ever reach a time in which women can comfortably be topless, without consequence, complete equality in other realms will also have been reached.

After covering the early history of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s I have been interested to explore the contrasts that emerged from this period, their strengths and weaknesses. Femen and Free the Nipple, have many failings, but so did the feminist of the 1960s and 1970s. However, based on my research I believe that feminism is still alive and well. I hope my overview of these movements will enable us to have greater perspective when it comes to chapter three and the young women of Bard College, that this history and summation of current events, regarding breasts, will shed a light on current discourses amongst my peers.

Chapter 3 – Breasts at Bard College

For this section of my project I interviewed cis-gender, self-identified feminist and womanist women at Bard college about their relationships to their breasts.⁸ I interviewed eight women of different sexual orientations, races, ethnicities, and religions. Most of my interlocutors were friends, and two were acquaintances who expressed interest in being interviewed. I also conducted a focus group with one close friend and two women I had met more recently who were excited to be a part of the project, because they found the idea of discussing their relationship to their breasts interesting and felt that my project offered a unique opportunity to express their views.

Before conducting my interviews, the IRB approved my interview questions and consent forms, after a few minor edits. Each interview was different, but they tended to take between an hour and an hour and a half. After each interview I asked my informants to draw an illustration with the prompt “how are your breast making you feel in this moment/how do you feel about your breasts in this moment?” The illustrations took approximately five minutes each. For my individual interviews I asked each woman the same set of questions.⁹ In addition each woman chose her own pseudonym, which is why my project is full of such colorful and creative names. I created questions that I hoped would prompt women to think about how their relationship to their breasts had affected and had been affected by society, family, friends, and romantic partners. More importantly I attempted to create questions that would prompt women to think about how they might feel about their breasts if they were not constrained by these outside influences and

⁸ The age range was from nineteen to twenty-two. All of the names used are pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of my interlocutors.

⁹ See appendix.

pressures. I also hoped to encourage women to talk about physical experiences related to breasts and the female body that aren't often explored.

As a student of anthropology, I have learned that no one exists in a vacuum and that it is impossible to ever truly remove oneself from the context of one's social and cultural context. However, I wanted to create a physical, social, and conceptual space free of judgement that would enable self-exploration, and encourage women to speak their minds on the subject of breasts, the female body, and the female experience that many of them had never talked about in a comprehensive way.

I believe that the information I gathered from each interview was relevant and helpful for my project. I also believe that the majority of women who were interviewed enjoyed the experience and found it personally meaningful. Many of them expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to think and talk about their bodies in a new way, while others expressed excitement at the prospect of sharing the questions I had asked them with their friends, and continuing the conversation with other women. A couple seemed fairly neutral about the experience overall, but still chimed in with the hope that their interviews would provide valuable information not only for me personally but for other women who might read my work.

Although it was incredibly difficult to choose, I feature three of the most articulate and unique voices in this chapter. These women showcased both how distinctive each interview was, and they also demonstrated how many connections I found within a diverse array of voices and opinions. Although I made it an option for each interlocutor to choose her interviewing location, all of the women wound up for various reasons choosing my home. We sat side by side in my living room often with tea, sometimes with quiet music in the background.

This structure enabled me to better witness both new and repetitive behaviors in my interlocutors. My first interview was with Eden who has an intensity and gravitas that is balanced with a warm and joyful energy. Our interview was punctuated with eruptions of laughter. The next interview I chose to highlight was with Patricia who has a quiet, quirky, straightforward manner. I was struck by her incredulity in the face of societal norms she disagreed with, and her desire to listen to country versions of Christmas songs from the 1950s for the entirety of the interview. Lastly, I chose to write about Anne, whom I did not know well before the interview. She talked with great candidness and poise. She seemed to truly delight in the process of self-exploration and managed to surprise even herself with some of her answers to my questions. She brought a combination of openness and self-confidence, personal insight, and political insight to our conversation, which I greatly respected and enjoyed.

In fact, each and every woman whom I interviewed had something profound and valuable to say. They each taught me something new, and at some point or another moved me emotionally. I felt closer to each interlocutor after our interviews, and I felt grateful for the opportunity to witness their journeys, immense strength, and vulnerability.

Eden – “I’m the god of my entire body.”

Eden who identifies as African American, and an intersectional feminist or a womanist, (although she doesn’t like to label herself) is a close friend of mine, and she radiates warmth and wisdom. In most of my interactions with Eden, I learn something new. She is both creative, and logical, and I found her interview particularly enlightening and moving because she made me think about the female body and breasts in a whole new light. In this interview Eden and I discussed the notion of separating and fragmenting the mind from the body, and how this has

been a helpful and empowering practice for Eden. We also discussed how breasts connect us to other people, particularly women, because they are, for Eden, deeply feeling organs.

When I asked Eden whether she felt that breasts were different in some way from other parts of our body she said. “Breasts have an important biological purpose, us giving them social attention, has largely reaffirmed that. Those two things work interchangeably. I don’t think there is any culture that doesn’t acknowledge breasts... They hide it, but that is one of the fullest forms of recognition...ever.” In this quote, Eden indicates that one of the reasons she feels breasts are important is because of their powerful biological ability to sustain life. She tells us that breasts are particularly relevant and noticeable in most cultures, particularly in cultures in which breasts are hidden from view. She suggests that our hiding breasts, in fact, draws all the more attention to our cultural fascination with them.

The day before I interviewed Eden I asked her to look through my interview questions, because I wanted to gauge her opinion about whether she felt the questions were relevant. I told her about my concern that I might be inadvertently encouraging women to fragment themselves into separate parts. In her book *Woman in the Body* anthropologist Emily Martin defines fragmentation as a process of problematically objectifying oneself (1987, 58.)

Martin discusses the notion of fragmentation. She writes, “The central image women use is the following: *Your self is separate from your body*” (1987, 77).

Martin goes on to explain that many women struggle with feeling that their bodies are uncontrollable entities that they themselves are separate from. Martin challenges this notion by explaining that sexual experiences, birth, and other bodily experiences are very much governed by the emotional experience of the woman (1987, 58).

I resonate with Martin's analysis of the mind body connection. I hoped to explore concepts of connection and disconnection between mind, body, and spirit in my interviews, and I wanted to steer my interviews away from the objectification and fragmentation of women. That being said, my questions asked women to think about their breasts as separate from themselves because I was trying to get at answers that relate to this specific body part.

When I asked Eden if she felt her breasts had a purpose she said this:

They aren't for anything. They're a part of me, but they are also beyond me. They have to be here. Not just have to, but want to be here too. I think they are just here to be, and live, and take in experiences, and give a lot too. I don't see them as having a purpose, I see me as having a purpose. My purpose is to take care of them. I see them as having a purpose for feeding (babies,) I see that, but in everyday, real time, it's me who is supposed to make them look good, dress them, I'm supposed to make them comfortable. This shirt is for them. I'm supposed to make them look and feel good, that's my purpose.

Eden turned my question on its head, and forced me to think about my own body in a whole new light. Instead of attempting to pinpoint the purpose or value of her breasts, Eden decided to reframe the question, making it about what her ultimate purpose was. Instead of questioning how her breasts might serve her, she questioned how she serves her body. I found this inversion intriguing, so I asked her to elaborate. "If you were taking care of a baby, part of you is taking care of it because you believe the baby has a future, the baby is going to grow up and do something. Do you feel like your breasts have some kind of destiny?" Eden responded,

The way I would say it is optimal state. A state of being most content or most happy.

That is what I am seeking. I'm one of those people who thinks that the purpose of life is

to feel things, and mostly feel happy if you can. I do see them as having an optimal state, a state of flourishing, and being most alive.

Eden understands her breasts and herself as being linked in their life goals. Eden says that she feels that the purpose of life is to “feel things, and mostly feel happy.” Her breasts have the same purpose. When I asked Eden what the purpose of her breasts is, perhaps in Eden’s mind, I was also asking her what the meaning and purpose of life is. If so, this suggests a profound connection between Eden’s understanding of herself and her breasts.

I continued to question Eden, “Yesterday we were talking about... are you your body? Are you your breasts? When you are taking care of your breasts are you taking care of yourself? Or are they separate?” She replied,

It isn’t even like it’s a separation that is inherent. It is a separation that I have created so I can fully attend to myself and recognize that I should take care of myself. When I separate my mind from my body, I feel for my body more. More sympathy, more compassion. I feel like I am responsible for it. That is why I create a separation. So that I can look at it and say, if this wasn’t me, if this was a baby, how would I interact with it. I don’t want to overfeed a baby, I don’t want to tell a baby they’re ugly. That is how I make that separation, so I talk to my body more and listen to it more too.

Here, Eden talks about consciously separating her mind from her body. In doing so, she is able to create a critical distance that helps her to care more responsibly for her body. When the two are not separate, Eden feels that it is more difficult for her to care for herself. Earlier in our interview, Eden referenced how her moods affect the way she treats her body, for if she is depressed she might over-eat, and if she feels unattractive she might hide her body in baggy clothing. By attempting to see her body as separate from herself, she can think about it as a

“baby” and care for it accordingly. This strategy seems highly effective, and ultimately helpful to Eden. Initially, it struck me as unfortunate that Eden felt that she couldn’t provide herself with adequate care simply because she is worthy of care, that she must see herself as not fully herself, in order to have a deeper sense of empathy for her body.

Eden went on to elaborate about how she understands her relationship to her body, “I look at myself as a collection of cells, every one of my cells is a living entity in and of itself. It has all its own organs, its own mind, its own nucleus, its own energy, its own functions, its own life in itself. And I’m... I guess I’m the god of that. I’m the god of my entire body.” This powerful statement gave me pause for reflection. Later on in our conversation, Eden compared herself to a public servant, suggesting that she had great power, but that her ultimate purpose was to care for her constituents (her body, its cells, and its parts.) This makes me reconsider my concerns for Eden, It is clear that she has empathy for herself. The above quotation makes me think that Eden has simply found a unique way of reimagining her relationship with her body, a strategy that protects her from a world in which women are so often taught relate to themselves as a cruel judge, instead of a loving and benevolent god.

Throughout our conversation, Eden made it apparent that breastfeeding was, in her opinion, one of the breasts most significant abilities. Another component was the breasts ability to connect Eden with other people, specifically women. She said, “They help you connect with other people in your society, especially other women.” I asked her in what way she felt this was the case. She elaborated, “What’s the word? Solidarity. Commonality. People love being with other people like us, we just want to be understood. So, women love women.” Eden identifies the breast as being an outward signifier of a female identity, and she feels that it helps other women

to pick each other out of a crowd, enabling them to identify others who they may have something in common with.

When I asked Eden about acts of courage regarding her breasts she described a time in her life in which she was depressed, and how taking action in terms of owning her body helped her escape from a feeling of lethargy. She said, “I don’t want to go back to that, I would rather feel something.” So, in addition to many other life changes, Eden has pushed herself to wear two piece bathing suits for the first time, not to wear restrictive bras, and to be topless around friends, and in public from time to time. However, she also said, “It doesn’t even feel like courage to me, I want moments like this everyday, I don’t want to elevate them to something that’s only supposed to happen occasionally. Courage is something that you have to... pull out of yourself, I think these things should happen everyday.” Once again Eden destabilized my question, alerting me to the fact that, for her, courage is something that happens only rarely. She wants to normalize such actions so that they become simply a way of life and not a performative stunt.

For Eden, awakening herself to her body’s needs is paramount in her search for good quality of life. She said, “When I’m happy I just don’t want to have a top on. They just want to be out in the open and feel more things. Happiness makes you want to go outward. When you’re happy you want to build relationships, you want to build things, and create things and connect with the world more.” Being topless helps Eden to embrace her environment. Eden experiences her breasts as feeling organs, and having them exposed to the elements enables her, on a physical level to sense and experience the outside world. She also feels that being topless helps her to foster relationships, perhaps because this state of physical openness and vulnerability allows her to create greater intimacy with those around her.

Eden later drew a self-portrait in which an eye is placed over one breast and a mouth over the other. Mouths enable us to take in and taste food, and things around us. Eden seems to feel that her breasts, when uncovered have a similar function, enabling her to feel more acutely than when they are hidden. When I think about physical features that help me connect with other people my eyes are important. If my eyes were constantly shielded I would find it difficult to communicate with others. Seeing, and being seen help me to foster intimacy. Perhaps, for Eden, her breasts function similarly.

Eden and I discussed how much pressure she felt from the outside world to conform to social norms in terms of her actions and her appearance. She previously felt pressure to have a breast lift because she felt that others perceived her breasts as distorted. Now she feels differently, and has managed to overcome, to a great degree that social pressures. I asked her, “What quality do you have that keeps you from fully internalizing social messaging about your breasts?” She responded,

There is a part of me that just thinks that I know everything. (Laughs) I don't want to be pig headed, but I recognize when things just don't make sense, I think I always have. It's that trait, but it's also experience, and I realize that by being passive about things, that's how I got depressed. By not having agency, by letting people move me when they wanted to move me, that's when things did not go well for me. I have the ability to control my feelings towards myself, and my actions towards myself. Its confidence, in that I am the most responsible person, that I am the only person that knows what's right for me.

One of the most personally valuable components of this project has been learning from the women around me about how they manage to maintain their independent spirits and sense of agency. In the quote above, Eden let me know that she hasn't always felt as strong and

independent as she does now. What made her decide to become her own guide, and listen to herself, before she listens to those around her were her former experiences of depression. She realized that others were not giving her what she needed, and that when she took charge of her own body and life she fared much better. In addition, she feels that in some ways she has always known “what makes sense” and what doesn’t. She feels that she is able to see through cultural norms and to pick and choose those that make sense to her.

When I asked Eden to draw a portrait of her current relationship to her breasts, underneath the image she drew of her breasts she placed a large fork and spoon. I was taken aback by this image. Firstly, I wanted to know why she had placed an eye and a mouth on her breasts her response was,

This is how my breasts feel, this whole conversation has been about them, so they feel fully acknowledged, so I drew them with the sensory organs that I like the best, which is the mouth, and my sight, I love those senses the most... they have the mouth and eye of a teasing old woman, they’re saying, ‘Ha! You’re talking to me, I want more! Feed me more’ so I drew a fork and a spoon.”

I asked, “so the fork and the spoon are for your breasts?” She replied, “Yeah, they want more, they’re like, “feed me more affection feed me more attention.””

Eden felt as if her breasts were hungry. The food they needed was from Eden herself.

Earlier in the interview I asked Eden, “If your breasts could talk what would they tell you?” She said,

“‘Talk to me!’ They’d probably tell me to talk to them, sometimes I like to stare at my body, and my body would probably say, ‘what are you doing? Are you sexualizing me? Have something deeper.’ My body doesn’t want to be ignored, bodies crave affection,

attention, they reach outward, your body has sensory organs for a reason, you have sensory organs so you can connect with the world, and in turn so it can connect with you. The body is so unapologetic in those ways, it's just like, yeah, I want this, give me this. It would probably just say 'talk to me, say I love you.'"

Here, Eden illustrates that what her body wants is Eden to give it time and consideration. It wants to be heard, and cared for, with something deeper than a passing pleasure in its physical appearance. Eden admits to objectifying her own body at times when she looks at it, but her body itself wants her to "have something deeper."

Interestingly, when I asked Eden to give me a metaphor for what it feels like to live in her body with her breasts, she told me,

Have you ever walked from a clearing into the woods? There is an opening, and you want to go through that opening, you are in a clearing but then you see that there is something else you could go sink into, and you want to sink into the forest because it is a change of environment.

In this metaphor, Eden describes her breasts as a forest, something that can be entered. Initially, I imagined that more women would discuss their breasts as giving as opposed to receiving, but Eden's metaphor is all about drawing people in. When I imagine someone entering a forest, I picture the forest consuming them, that they slowly fade from my vision as they are swallowed by trees. In this sense, and with the more obvious and direct imagery of a mouth, spoon, and fork, Eden understand her breasts as hungry, consuming, and in need of nurturance, as opposed to being consumable, and nourishing for someone else.

Patricia – "Yes, I do think breasts are innately meaningful."

In our interview, Patricia a white ethnically Jewish woman, who identifies as a feminist, touched on many of the same topics as Eden. She talked about how she believes her breasts have relevance both in a maternal sense and as creators of female community. Moreover, since arriving at Bard and she is reevaluating her perspectives and life choices, she has decided to reclaim and redefine her body as her own as opposed to relying on other individuals and society at large to define her lived experience.

When I asked Patricia if her breasts were powerful, if they gave her power, or took it away, she said.

I guess they are politically powerful, I would like to experiment with topless protests, They're so loaded with this history of puritanical... (trails off) well a history of modesty and having to cover yourself up, but then also the history of breasts being sexualized in porn and stuff, those are two really different ways of thinking about breasts, and I think that creative people can use those two connotations, as well as many other ones, to a political advantage, by exploiting it, or making the decision to be topless in a context you're not supposed to be topless in.

Here we learn here that Patricia is intrigued by topless protests, and would be open to participating in one. Patricia believes that breasts are politically relevant and powerful because in our culture they are often hidden away, or exposed in a pornographic context. Patricia understand that some tension exists between these two realities. I think that Eden would say that these two seemingly different categories are actually very much connected, and that, in fact, the "modesty" of covering one's breasts reflects our societal understanding of breasts as solely sexual, and feeds into a fetishized understanding of them. Patricia goes on to say that she feels that this sexual taboo on breasts can be manipulated and used for political gain. Perhaps she is thinking of

groups like Femen that draw attention to political causes by taking advantage of sexual desirability, which is often used against women.

However, throughout our interview, Patricia stated and restated how confused she was by the sexualization of breasts. She said, “The whole sexy thing... I don’t get it! Obviously boobs are sensual, and they have curves and they’re bouncy or whatever, but it honestly makes no sense to me that they are so sexualized.” For Patricia breasts aren’t sexual. While she appreciates that they are visually appealing, she has trouble conceptualizing them as being highly sexually desirable objects. Perhaps this is one of the traits that would enable Patricia to participate in a topless protest. Given that she doesn’t believe her own breasts are sexual, and doesn’t objectify or sexualize the breasts of the women around her, it might be easier for her to detach herself from feelings of shame or uncertainty in such a scenario.

All of the women I interviewed understood that other individuals and dominant society understood their breasts as being sexual objects. However, Patricia along with three other women didn’t feel that their breasts were particularly relevant to their own sexual pleasure, while interlocutors Ella, Betty, Eden, Clay, and Anne all felt that they’re breasts were relevant to sex and sexual pleasure, to varying degrees. Every woman I interviewed felt that the ability to create milk and sustain life was important to them, whether or not they utilized it in the future. The maternal breast came up in every interview.

Patricia was no exception, she felt strongly that her breasts were maternal. We were discussing whether or not breasts were imbued with innate meaning when Patricia voiced these thoughts,

Yes, I do think breasts are innately meaningful. First of all, the whole milk thing, that’s number one, and your breasts are really connected to other systems in your body, like

when you get your period they get really sore, and they're connected to maternity, and honestly, femininity. And a lot of female bodied people that I know that wear binders, it seems like they want to shed the best parts about boobs. Actually, I take that back. I guess trans people wear binders because they don't want to be women. Their intention is to take away the visual of having boobs, but if you actually get your breasts removed, then I feel like you are kind of severing the whole maternity thing... like having the ability to use them for something.

Patricia contemplates the restraining of breasts with binders, and the removal of breasts through surgery. Thinking about what she would feel like if she didn't have breasts seems to help Patricia crystallize her understanding of why they are valuable to her. Patricia attempts to process what it would feel like to not want breasts. She feels that removing her breasts would be a great loss, because she would be losing the physical ability to breastfeed, which she understands as a great gift.

She can easily understand not wanting to have breasts from a "visual" perspective perhaps because Patricia is not interested in being objectified or sexualized by others. However, it strikes Patricia as strange to want to "sever" a part of one's body that is so functional. Patricia also largely associates breasts with her female identity, which feels deeply attached to, therefore making it difficult for her to imagine herself without breasts. Another interlocutor, Betty, felt very similarly. She disliked having breasts for aesthetic reasons. She felt that they made her vulnerable to unwanted male attention and she didn't feel that her romantic female partners cared much about her breasts either. The only reason she wanted breasts was for their biological capabilities, for sexual pleasure, and for breastfeeding.

Patricia goes on to discuss how she feels her breasts connect her with other women,

Identifying as a woman... It's kind of cool that we all have this feature and its always a physical or visual part of the body that you can identify other females by, but also, its something that people can share and bond over. You can have little stories about your boobs, even this conversation that we are having right now, can really only be had by people who have boobs, no one else would understand it. It's just a special little secret, a shared, community, or bond.

Although it is not true that all women have breasts, and that breasts aren't always the most accurate way of deciphering whether or not someone is a woman, it is true that the majority of women have breasts. In her interview, Eden voiced a similar thought to Patricia's, suggesting that women are drawn to other women in part because they share a similar physical experience. I would add that having a female body (and identifying as a woman) also creates a certain amount of shared social and emotional experience within our society. Patricia believes that this helps her to bond with other women, of all kinds, she references our conversation saying that only other women would be able to relate to it. Similarly to Eden, Patricia feels that this creates a strong and unique attachment between women.

Another trait that Patricia, Eden, and all of the women I interviewed shared, is the desire to give their own breasts more attention and affection. When I asked Patricia to tell me what her breasts would say if they could speak she said, "I think they would tell me that I need to hang out with them a little more." Earlier in the interview she said, "they don't really get enough love." Patricia feels that she needs to spend more time with her breasts and give them the love that they deserve but do not always receive.

In the majority of my interviews, this question prompted my interlocutors to look down at and or touch their breasts as if needing to check in with them physically, and to become more

deeply in tune with what their bodies were feeling. A number of my interlocutors lifted their shirts or peeked inside, almost as if they needed to be reminded of what their breasts looked like in order to understand how they might be feeling. At this juncture of our interview Patricia gently patted her breasts suggesting to me that “hanging out with them,” and “giving them love” meant doing so in a physical way, reconnecting with her body by spending time thinking about it, and through physical touch.

Patricia has recently come into a new understanding of her body and her breasts. In her interview, Eden felt that in the past others had influenced her relationship to her body but that reclaiming her body had been a deeply gratifying experience. Patricia has also reclaimed her body especially since arriving at Bard.

The whole arch of my middle school to high school experience was kind of wanting to have sexual, or physical, or emotional maturity, and then when I physically got there, I was like, ok I’ve had sex, I have boobs, I went through puberty, now what? Then I started going to Bard and I was like, I don’t need to do all of these rites of passage anymore, now I can think about how I *really* relate to my breasts, instead of how I *should* relate to my breasts.

Patricia completed all of the traditional rites of passage she was expected to complete in middle and high school, but now that she has, she feels better able to define her own relationship to her body and less inclined to adhere to traditional expectations in the future. Much like Eden she has experienced what it feels like to be guided by others, and is attempting now, to discover what it feels like to be guided by herself. For Patricia this means that she no longer wears bras, and that she is more open about being topless, especially around other women.

Anne – “I don’t want to feel bad for keeping my body private.”

Anne who identifies as a bi-racial woman of color and as a feminist, shared many of the feelings that both Patricia and Eden had expressed about self-love and appreciation. She also felt that breasts connected women on a physical level to one another. That being said, Anne differed from both Patricia and Eden in her feelings of discomfort surrounding public toplessness. This was one of the main points of disagreement amongst my interlocutors. They each fell somewhere on a spectrum of being passionately in favor of female toplessness in public spaces or opposed to it. Other points of difference involved self-confidence and body image. Some of my interlocutors were very satisfied with their breasts, others were not. Some were pleased with the appearance of their breasts because they fit with dominant beauty norms. Others were pleased with them because they were embracing body positivity, and felt that appreciating their bodies was a feminist statement. When I asked Anne how she felt about women being topless in public she said this,

I cannot picture a bunch of women at the park topless, I just can't do it, therefore I don't know if I'd want to live in that society. It is so easy to just say 'Yeah, we should all have that freedom. I definitely think that it is fucked up, and any woman you talk to would think that it is incredibly backward, and mean, that a man can be topless in the middle of the street and a woman can't, that just makes zero sense. It speaks to the sexualization of the female body; but I don't know that I want to be at that same park and see a bunch of men topless either. I would rather we all be wearing shirts. There is a discomfort for me in total exposure. I don't want to feel uncomfortable, and I think it's bad that I am, but that doesn't mean that I'm not. I'm frustrated that I feel that boobs are private, I don't think that they should be, but in my mind I can't picture it differently. I want to feel comfortable being topless from my liberal side, but from my conservative side I feel like,

No! I shouldn't have to show my body all the time. It is my own, I should be able to cover it up. I don't want to feel bad for wanting to keep my body private.

In these words, we see Anne face an internal struggle about her personal versus her political views, and her liberal side versus her conservative side. Anne makes it very clear that she wants equality across the board for people of all genders. However, unlike Patricia, and Eden who are open to experimenting with toplessness in public settings, Anne feels that we would all be better off if no one were to be topless in public. She feels a sense of discomfort with being topless herself, and with the notion of seeing other people in a state of undress. At the same time, her liberal consciousness makes her uncomfortable with her own discomfort. She seems to penalize herself initially for her more conservative leanings but ultimately decides that she is entitled to feel the way she does about modesty and privacy. Some of my other interlocutors Ella, and Fiona felt similarly uncomfortable with the notion of public toplessness, for the same reasons that Anne expressed, while the rest of my interlocutors supported the notion.

Anne also talks about the fact that she has never seen women being topless in public, and that it was therefore difficult for her to imagine this. In my focus group we discussed toplessness, and interestingly, each of the women had had an experience at a beach in Europe where a kind of snowball effect had taken over, some more drastically than others. Interlocutor Cordelia, described an instance in which one woman took her bikini top off and then ten minutes later another did, and then another, until a small group of topless women had gathered without any discussion, planning or exchange. This makes me wonder how Anne might feel if she became more acclimatized to female toplessness in a non-sexualized setting.

In fact, Anne went on to discuss how important representation is. She expressed that she had previously felt self-conscious about the size of her breasts, but because of seeing more small-

breasted women in the media this changed for her. Later she said that seeing bare breasts in social media did make her feel more content with her own body, and that it was slowly influencing her feelings about breasts in general. I wonder if there was more representation of situationally appropriate, non-sexual toplessness, if she would feel differently about it. However, I respect what she had to say, and understand her desire to equalize things by making modesty the default setting across the board.

Anne, without my prompting, went on to discuss her desire for other women to be more generous with their comments about her breasts. She said,

I wish, and this is a very loaded thing to say, because it has a lot to do with a lot of emotional dissatisfaction, I've never had anybody, even women, say I like your boobs.

That would be really nice to hear I think. I've never had anybody say, 'I love your boobs.' I wonder if that's because there is this feeling that we can't say that, because it is taboo.

Because of unrealistic beauty standards Anne feels self-conscious about the appearance of her breasts. She feels that validation from other women would alleviate a feeling of emotional dissatisfaction for her, yet she can't get that validation because she lives in a society in which her breasts are considered sexual and therefore are a taboo thing to discuss or compliment. This speaks to the kind of tension Anne struggled with when talking about toplessness. She feels on some level that breasts are sexual and should be private and covered, yet another part of her yearns for a more open dialogue amongst women about their breasts.

Anne felt similarly to both Eden and Patricia and the majority of my other interlocutors about her breasts as both maternal and as important in defining them as and connecting them with other women. When I asked Anne about what her breasts mean to her she said,

Breasts are meaningful because of their ability to provide life force. There are so many phenotypically different features between men and women, and I say that completely respecting people that identify as non-binary, but our breasts are the most obvious. When we are wearing pants we don't see penises, versus vaginas, when we are wearing shirts you see a breast versus a non-breast. They are this indication of self.

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner might say that she is shifting the cultural value of nature. In our society nature and the female body are devalued. Anne is "re-valuing" her body and its biological capabilities and understanding them as important. Anne feels that because breasts are physically visible they are an obvious indication of who is and who is not a woman. She goes so far as to say that "they are an indication of self." I questioned Anne further and she went on to say that she felt that losing a breast would be traumatic because she would be losing a physical marker of womanhood, which to Anne is very important.

Although time has not allowed me to fully explore each and every interlocutors interview and experience, I am concluding this chapter by showcasing the portraits my individual interlocutors drew along with one of their most powerful or intriguing quotes. I have placed the images in the order in which I interviewed my interlocutors. I hope that although my analysis of the images is limited, the images can speak for themselves, representing the women I interviewed and the feelings they have about their breasts. This section of my paper foreshadows how other projects like this could evolve, gathering stories and attempting as Ruth Behar did in *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border With Esperanza's Story* (1993), to translate one woman's experience at a time.

Portraits

“My breasts are like... Have you ever walked from a clearing into the woods? There is an opening, and you want to go through that opening...you see that there is something else you could go sink into, and you want to sink into the forest.” – Eden



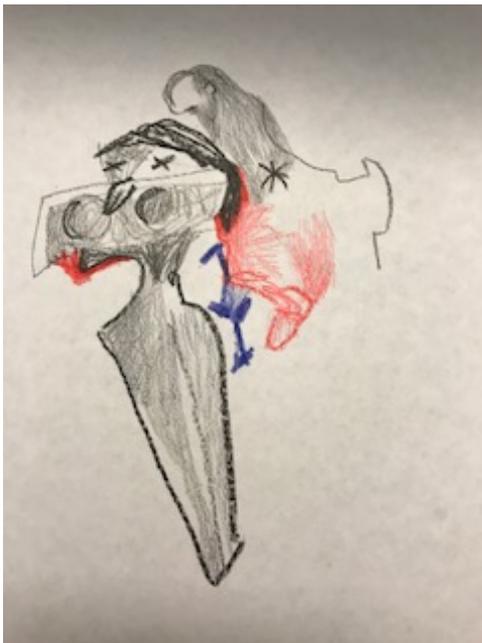
“They are like two penises on my chest, or two clits.” - Betty



“Someone asked me if I was wearing a bra. So I took it off, and I gave it to him... When someone has seen my breasts, they know me.” – Ella



“A metaphor for my breasts? My torso is a fish tank full of water, Styrofoam blocks are kind of like the top of my breasts... and then two hooks are the inner musculature of the breasts, attached to a cherry tomato which is kind of like that hanging sensation” - Patricia



“I was like, mom I think I have a rash, and she said, ‘no you’re just growing boobs’” – Fiona



“Being with other people topless, used to be vulnerable, but now, it would just feel like every other Sunday. Our group really showed that to me, it could be so normal. It is so normal!” - Clay



“Holding them is always a spurt of fun.” - Anne



“My breasts and the breasts of other women are kind of like tulips, they’re one of the most exported flowers in the world... They’re seen as a commodity, they are simple, and they aren’t the most impressive flower, but they are desired.” - Artemis



When taken together, these portraits provide a glimpse into the unique and divergent understandings that my interlocutors have of their breasts. These kinds of stories enable us to understand that women have a lot to say about their bodies and lived experiences. The kinds of

compelling things they chose to share suggest to me that this isn't the end of a conversation, but the beginning.

In her article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture" (1972) anthropologist Sherry Ortner claims that in our society, and in most if not all societies, women are associated with nature while men are associated with culture. Most cultures attempt to improve upon or surpass nature, and therefore, because women are understood as tied to it, women consistently take on an inferior role. She writes,

Woman is being identified with, or symbolically associated with, nature, as opposed to man, who is identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if woman is a part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress, her (1972, 12).

Here, Ortner tells us that because we devalue nature we also devalue women. In her book *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black* (2017 Athena Athanasiou analyzes the women's movement Women in Black. She quotes one of their spokeswomen who explains that the women in the movement are trying to radically reclaim conventionally female roles. She says,

The work of women in peace groups is presupposed; it is invisible trying women's work; it is part of our role to care; for others, to comfort, aid, tend wounds, and feed. The painful realization that the peace movement would, to some extent also follow a patriarchal model caused a serious dilemma for feminist-pacifists. We wanted our presence to be visible, not to be seen as something 'natural', as a part of a woman's role. We wanted it to be clearly understood that what we were doing was our political choice,

a radical criticism of the patriarchal militarist regime. And a non-violent act of resistance to policies that destroy cities, kill people, and annihilate human relations (2017, 60).

Essentially this spokeswoman is saying that she wants to give power to the traditional female role, to shine a light on its value and juxtapose it against a violent patriarchal regime. Instead of pushing women to take on traditionally masculine traits and become violent, she is modeling, through action, the strength, and nobility of the traditional female role, and suggesting that because it is superior, men and wider society should also adopt this caregiving, pacifistic, mentality.

In her article, “Lesbian-Feminist Gender Conceptions: Separatism In Christchurch New Zealand” (1986), anthropologist Michele Dominy writes about a separatist lesbian group that attempts to create a kind of utopic structure outside of the rest of society. She writes,

As a process of symbolic inversion, lesbian feminism attempts to create disorder in society to ‘turn classifications upside down or disintegrate them entirely.’ Not only do lesbian feminists reject maleness and male definitions of femaleness, they also attempt to destroy cultural systems of classification (1986, 287).

Here Dominy expresses that the women in this separatist community similarly to *The Women in Black*, are re-appropriating conventionally female roles, and giving them greater value and appreciation within their community.

The interviews I conducted fall neatly into this feminist strategy of symbolic inversion. Diverting attention away from their breasts potential to attract sexual attention from the male gaze, is a way of devaluing men and the male perspective, and elevating their bodies productive uses for themselves, and for babies and children. Each and every woman I spoke with told me that she felt her breasts most powerful trait was their ability to feed children, and a few implied

that this biological capability made women superior to men. Taking pride in, as opposed to devaluing the traditionally female role of breastfeeding and of motherhood is a way in which my interlocutors invert power structures. An alternate feminist strategy employed by post-modernist theorists like Judith Butler would be to attempt to eradicate the bodies meaning altogether, and to understand it as fundamentally irrelevant.

Over the course of my interviews I found myself being surprised again and again by my interlocutors. Each interview made me reconsider my own thoughts about breasts and the female body. I was overwhelmed with the diversity of opinions, creative metaphors, and wild illustrations that were elicited through my questions. Each time I heard a new thought or feeling I felt as though my worldview, and understanding of my own body expanded. However, the consistency with which the majority of my interlocutors discussed breasts as central to their female identity was surprising in a different way. Because women at Bard, specifically feminist, and womanist women, are highly educated and tend towards the politically correct, I imagined that more of them would voice a sense of separation between phenotypically female body parts and their female identity, and that more of them would understand their breasts as not an inherently female characteristic, and certainly not a defining one.

If I were to do this study again on a larger scale, I would absolutely include trans women, and non-binary people with breasts to see if they felt similarly or differently about how self-defining breasts are. Feminist theorist Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* argues that gender is a complete social construction, and that our bodies are/should be irrelevant to how we define ourselves. In her work she writes, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender... identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results” (1990, 25). Butler claims that gender in its entirety is

performative, which contradicts the claims of my informants who feel that their bodies, specifically their breasts are very much connected to their gender identity. That being said, none of my informants presumed to speak for trans women or non-binary people with breasts in terms of how their physical bodies affected their gender identity.

Anthropologist Emily Martin writes about how central our mind body connection is (specifically in regard to female reproductivity, such as childbirth.) Given that so many of my cis-gendered informants felt that their breasts were central to their female experience, I think it might be productive to further explore the connection between mind and body as constituted in the breast in terms of how the female identity is formed, to raise the question, to what degree are “our bodies ourselves?” How much does our biology influence and determine our identity? Are the two inseparable? Judith Butler might be put into a productive conversation with authors like Emily Martin, Sherry Ortner, Athena Athanasiou, and Michele Dominy, and even some of my peers and interlocutors. My interlocutors felt that instead of escaping their bodies or understanding them as limiting, they would rather assign new values and meanings to their bodies, and celebrate their biology, bodies, and breasts.

In terms of physical and emotional connections between mind and breast I heard many different and fascinating stories about how the two are fused. Eden told me that when she feels happy her breasts want to be exposed. Patricia told me that when she feels sad her breasts develop a “hollow pulling sensation,” and Anne told me that when she feels left out or excluded she feels a tingling or mild paralysis in her breasts. Fiona, Ella, and Clay all felt that their breasts were very much connected to other reproductive systems in their bodies, they experienced pain, and soreness in their breasts before and during menstruation. Overall, they appreciated the

feeling because it helped them understand that their breasts were connected to and in conversation with their whole bodies as opposed to separate and disconnected.

Once again, this information made me want to do more research. If I were to continue to expand this project I would also love to include women of all ages, to see if their experiences changed over the life cycle and across generations. I would be curious to discover more about the physical and emotional connection in regard to breast feeding and lactation. Because my study is so small, it can't truly be comparative, but it would be greatly interesting to find out how much consistency exists in regard to these kinds of physical and emotional experiences.

Lastly, the theme of love, self-love, and acceptance was one that affected me greatly. I was not particularly surprised that each and every woman I spoke to had had negative thoughts and experiences regarding her breasts and body shaming. Initially, it struck me as sad that the majority of my interlocutors felt that they did not send enough love to their breasts. Two of my interlocutors Betty and Fiona expressed deep feelings of discomfort in regard to the way their breasts looked, and all of the other women had felt similarly at some point in their lives. However, the fact that my interlocutors all recognized that they wanted to have a better relationship with their breasts gave me hope. Women like Patricia, Anne, and Eden as well as interlocutors, Clay, and Artemis all felt that they were in the process of reclaiming their bodies, of exiling feelings of isolation and shame and redefining their relationships to their bodies on their own terms.

Conclusion

My project contributes an overview of feminist relationships to the breast to the anthropological literature. It analyzes and summarizes historical texts, compares and contrasts social movements and ultimately highlights the personal and political views of a select group of young women. It explores political, physical and emotional relationships to breasts from a feminist and womanist perspective, which is something that has not been deeply explored outside of the context of breastfeeding and breast cancer research.

That being said, historian of science Londa Schiebinger explores the connection between the term mammals and mammary glands, in her article, “Why Mammals Are Called Mammals: Gender Politics in Eighteenth Century Natural History” (1993). She unveils a number of social and cultural factors that led to the creation of the term that classifies a whole set of animals, including human beings. Linnaeus chose to create a taxonomic structure with the breast as the central player. Schiebinger elaborates the complicated relationship Linnaeus had to female breasts; his admiration for their biological potential and his sexist assumptions about females and the female body. Perhaps, this complexity has followed us into our societies current relationship with breasts. Clearly, breasts have been a matter of preoccupation and interest for academics and scholars for a long time.

At the beginning of my project, I started out with some ambitious questions. What is so disturbing about women walking or lying topless in the sunshine? Why are women being restrained, arrested, and attacked for it if breasts don't represent some greater social/political tension? I can't say that I have or will ever manage to fully answer these questions, but I do feel

that after having spent the last two semesters thinking about them, I have begun to formulate some preliminary responses.

Emily Martin (1987) has been crucial in helping me to analyze my findings. She understands rules, and assumptions about the female body's reproductive processes as exemplifying greater inequalities and social and cultural assumptions about women. She takes ingrained scientific and social understandings of the female body and turns them on their heads, revealing profound sexism as the culprit in faulty logics. I have attempted to answer the above questions by invoking Martin and looking at our society's relationship to breasts with fresh eyes.

Based on my research, I believe that in our society, breasts (rightly or wrongly) are outward visible markers of womanhood and female identity. Because of this they have become a physical place in which our society's attitudes towards women and the female body are played out. They are both fetishized and obsessively covered, they are physically forced through clothing, surgery, and sometimes even makeup to fit into an ideal that represents a male dominated fantasy of what women's bodies look like, and should be used for. The women, (my interlocutors and I, members of Femen and Free the Nipple, as well as protestors from the 1960s-1980s,) who feel compelled through social and legal pressures to abide by these rules and social norms, do not necessarily interpret themselves or their bodies in the way the wider society does. When women attempt to rebel, by going topless, they threaten to overturn not only one social norm but an entire social structure. This is why women and their breasts are so often physically restrained, and ultimately punished for these actions.

Over the course of researching and writing my Senior Project, I have learned a great deal from each new chapter. Because I did the majority of my interviews before writing chapter one, going back in time, and learning about how my interlocutors were situated in a long history of

feminist rebellion was exciting. It helped me to remember just how much my interlocutors draw from (knowingly or unintentionally) their feminist predecessors. This particular phenomenon became even clearer when writing chapter two. Both Femen and Free the Nipple seem to understand themselves as wholly original, but it is vitally important to remember where we gain our knowledge from, and that we are standing on the shoulders of the brave women who came before us.

In researching chapter two I went back and forth between feeling energized and empowered by Femen, and Free the Nipple, and disappointed and concerned about their shortcomings. Once again, relying on my historical knowledge from chapter one, I was able to recall that no feminist movement is perfect or flawless and that the next generation of women will hopefully improve upon our current prominent feminist organizations.

In researching chapter three I was moved emotionally by the struggles and strengths of my interlocutors. Their self-awareness, political awareness, creativity, bravery, and openness were tremendous. At times I felt sad that they struggled as much as they did especially with issues like body shaming, and sexual assault, but the feeling I was left with after all of my interviews, all of my reading, film watching, and internet searching was a feeling of hope.

My grandfather often uses the expression “Hope Springs Eternal.” Sometimes he lengthens it to its fuller version “Hope Springs Eternal in the Human Breast” which is a line from a poem entitled “An Essay on Man” by Alexander Pope. The poem is about Pope’s optimistic belief that mankind has an essentially good nature and that god is benevolent and will grant us all peace in the coming days.

Given that this poem is focused on god and “man” and my being an atheist woman, it isn’t the most obvious of poems for me to relate to. However, the one famous line that I chose to

be the title of my project resonates with me personally and I believe, with the research I have done for this project.

In North America women live under an oppressive and discriminatory system. Women are far more prone than men to being sexually assaulted, and far more prone to being pressured into being self-conscious about their bodies. According to a recent report cited in *The New York Times*, nearly one in five women has experienced sexual assault (Rabin, 2011). According to a study published by University of Central Florida in 2009, nearly half of the girls in the study aged three to six expressed anxiety about being fat (Canning and Wynn, 2011). Women struggle to gain access to reproductive care, and safe abortions, and wage inequality continues to be an issue.

Every woman I interviewed struggled with feelings of inadequacy regarding her body and specifically her breasts. Every woman I interviewed had a story about being body shamed, and about being sexually harassed, or assaulted. Women who protest inequalities as simple as legalizing toplessness are harshly penalized both legally and socially.

Yet, I really do feel that hope springs eternal in the female breast, and in the hearts and minds of women. In a literal sense women and breasts have sustained us physically since time immemorial, and they will continue to sustain us for the foreseeable future. The women, (at least those I interviewed) behind these breasts are becoming more and more aware of their agency and potential power.

I believe that the kinds of conversations I have had over the past two semesters with my friends and colleagues signal the potential for great change. The women I spoke to and read about are not going to stop fighting for equality in their personal lives, and in the social/political sphere. They use tactics as extreme as topless protests and as mundane as going braless around

the house to liberate their breasts, bodies, and minds. I resonate with Pope's optimism if nothing else, and this project has bolstered my sense of hope for the future of equality, for women near and far, such as the women in international topless feminist groups, my friends here at Bard College and for myself, and my own ability to reclaim my mind and body as my own.

Appendix

Interview Questions

What is your first memory of breasts?

Tell me about the first sensations you remember connected to your breasts.

How do you feel that older generations of women in your family regard their own breasts? How have their feelings shaped your own?

How did developing breasts alter your relationships with friends or family. Did it change the way you related to people in any way?

How do you feel your culture, class, race, ethnicity, or religion has affected your relationship to your breasts?

What opportunities have you had to see other women's breasts? What opportunities have you had to talk about breasts with other women?

What does it feel like physically and emotionally to be braless. How does that experience change when you are, alone, with family, with friends, or in public?
-And topless?

Do you have any particular stories about acts of courage, revolt, or even fun regarding your breasts?

Are your breasts powerful? Do they give you power? Do they take it away?

Has any person, or experience, or journey altered your relationship to your breasts in a positive way?

A professor asked me why I was interested in breasts, "...what makes them different from a big toe or an elbow?" If our society wasn't so focused on breasts do you think you would still have an important relationship with this part of your body? Do you think breasts are innately meaningful?

What different forms of touch have you and your breasts experienced? Eg: Platonic, medical, erotic, humorous, affectionate, aggressive?

Have you altered your breasts in any way? Tattoos? Piercings? Surgery? If so, how has this affected your relationship to your breasts.

Do you have any rituals regarding your breasts? Eg: breast exams, self massage, meditation, journaling, or movement?

Do you experience physical sensations in your breasts that are connected to your emotions?
What kind of information flows between your mind and your breasts?

Some people believe that different parts of our bodies contain various memories and emotions; that our past experiences are held in our bodies. What memories, feelings, and emotions do your breasts hold for you?

If you are not using your breasts for a partner's pleasure, or to nourish an infant, what are your breasts for? What is their purpose for you?

Give me some adjective other than big, small, perky, or saggy, to describe your breasts.

When do you take the most pleasure in your breasts?

How do you feel your relationship with your breasts has changed over the years? What has the ageing process meant for your relationship with your breasts?

If your breasts could talk what would they tell you?

What image or description could you give me to help me understand what it feels like to live in your body with your breasts?

Drawing exercise: Would you be willing to do a quick art experiment? Could you take 3-5 minutes to draw how your breasts are making you feel right now, and/or how you feel about your breasts right now?

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