

# “The Harsh Reality of Being a Woman” First Bra Experiences

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## Article abstract

The first bra purchase, which implies the first bra wearing or at least the first bra specifically purchased for the young woman, introduces two phases beyond the demarcation of girl as woman: a lifetime of wearing bras and a lifetime of shopping for bras. In an effort to explore some of the consequences of using the term “rites of passage” in contemporary contexts, this article sets out to identify the elements common to the “rite” of the first bra purchase. It is an activity more or less inevitable in North American women’s culture; it is a commercial transaction, and thus can be affected by socioeconomic class status; and it is inherently associated with the transformations of puberty, both physiological and social (in van Gennep’s sense). Finally, although it is distinct from adolescent sexuality, it is nevertheless virtually inextricable therefrom and thus a gendered activity, one from which the male fieldworker is excluded for reasons that extend far beyond mere impropriety.

# “THE HARSH REALITY OF BEING A WOMAN”

## First Bra Experiences<sup>1</sup>

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It's like the harsh reality of being a woman, really... I would have liked it if there had been some kind of celebration or some kind of, like, "Isn't this great!" sort of thing. But really it was more a harsh introduction of wanting something, i.e. a bra, not being able to get it, cause your parents are like, "You're not ready yet," or "Wait 'til next pay-day," whatever the fuck they said, and then kind of having it and being like, "Wow. This is painful and I've got to have this for the rest of my life." I mean that was always the realisation about a thing like getting your period. Girls would always say like "I'm going to have to have this for the rest of my life now." It wasn't a picnic (Emily 25; 0:01).<sup>2</sup>

One of the thrills of studying the exotic is having one's exoteric assumptions tested and found incorrect. Both as an adolescent boy and continuing through the delayed adolescence that has been my adulthood to this point in time, the cultural myths of a cult of womanhood, wherein initiate met elder and the changes from girlhood to womanhood were met, explained, and celebrated, had been perpetuated by the popular

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1. This article was originally prepared for Dr. Paul Smith's "Custom" course in the Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Many thanks go to the other students of that course, all of whom were women and all of whom were willing to share their own experiences. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in May of 2003, in a panel titled "Re/visiting Self and Community Through Narrative," convened by Dr. Diane Tye.
  2. All names are pseudonyms. The numbers correspond to the track number and time elapsed on the interview disks.

culture and the disinformation of the schoolyards I had come to trust. Caring mothers on situation comedies which dared to hint at, although not linger on, the embodiment of young women — Clare Huxtable, Elyse Keaton — were held up as paragons of motherhood. Winnie Cooper arrived at the bus stop on the first day of junior high transformed overnight from Kevin's non-gendered friend to an object of desire.<sup>3</sup> The all-boys school I attended during those crucial years from age nine to thirteen and its proximity to an all-girls school further entrenched my etic presuppositions about what that other gender was up to.

### First Bra as “Rite of Passage”

My initial intention had been to study the custom of the first bra purchase, with the idea that it may have come to be a substitute in twentieth-century North Atlantic culture for first-menstruation rituals. My choice had been influenced by the undeniable breast fetishism of North American contemporary culture, and the assumption that the act of purchasing a “speciality” item within this context initiates certain identity questions. The notion of referring to this process as “ritual” was also not a conceit, based on the same sorts of ubiquitous hints from the popular culture: a recent *New Yorker* article on furs makes the claim that, “The relationship between a furrier and his client is an intimate one, the creation of a fur coat being as ritualized a process as the fitting of a first bra” (Collins 2006: 48).

But even with my first interview, I grasped that first bra stories were going to be varied, and I quickly established that the episode of the first bra was but one stage in an extended liminal phase of the physical, but more importantly social, transition from “girl” to “woman.” This phase could last, according to one informant, from the ages of ten to twenty (Maria). The bra became an important external marker of that transition, and was one that could be eagerly yearned for, actively rejected, or simply accepted, incumbent on tensions between sex and gender.

As many of the decisions on how to facilitate the change from girl to woman are socially constructed responses to biological change, it is

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3. The references are to characters from, respectively, Bill Cosby's *The Cosby Show*, Gary David Goldberg's *Family Ties*, and Carol Black and Neal Marlens' *The Wonder Years*.

best to speak of these within the framework of van Gennep's "social puberty." Kimball writes that

Van Gennep was also insistent that puberty ceremonies were misnamed, since this type of rite occurred at ages which had no specific relation to the physical appearance of sexual maturity. He considered these rites to be primarily rites of separation from an asexual world, followed by rites of incorporation into a sexual world (Solon T. Kimball, "Introduction", in van Gennep 1960: ix).

Jodi McDavid has made use of van Gennep's concept of social puberty in her work on university life as extended rites of passage (2002). As the social pubescent makes this transition, the absence or decline in the secular West of social puberty ceremonies entails instead a series of individuated, disjointed moments: first pubic hair, first period, first bra, first shave, first make-up, first kiss, first betrayal, first betraying, first cigarette, first drink, first glimpse of adult nudity, first display of adult nudity, first sexual experience, first orgasm, first driver's licence, and so forth. The order for any of these is not preordained, and, with the probable exception of the first three for women and the first one for men, they may never occur nor need they occur (nor, of course, are they all implied in traditional puberty ceremonies). They do, however, imply a shift from one set of expectations to another, even if those expectations are solely from the perspective of the pubescent herself. What is being negotiated is the social construction of adulthood as a stage different from childhood.

The notion of "extended liminality" is taken from Michael Robidoux's work on men's hockey, *Men at Play* (2001). Drawing first on van Gennep and then on Victor Turner, Robidoux establishes the world of professional hockey as inevitably a "liminal" sphere when compared to society at large. However, whereas professional hockey players constitute an explicit group, the socially pubescent girl is implicitly aware that others are going through the same or analogous changes but is without an explicit group going through the same changes at the same time. Different rates of physical, social and emotional development — and different perspectives on how to accommodate these developments — do not allow for the same group cohesion that purely external and institutional group rites allow.

Many of the external markers of pubescence comprise what Erving Goffman (1959) calls impression management. By exercising choice

over one's appearance (or that of one's daughter), one can define the situation. Bras worn when breast size does not require one communicates "something," just as not wearing a bra when one would be justified in wearing it communicates "something else." This communication may be to the self, to intimates, to peers, or to the undifferentiated public. Decisions of style and colour are further discriminate communicative acts.

There is little written on the bra in academic literature and virtually nothing on first bras. Although there seems to be an interest in the history of body shaping, from foot binding to corsets, bras are rarely seen within that same purview. Farrell-Beck and Gau's *Uplift: The Bra in America* (2002) is one of the few books devoted to the subject: however, their attention to first bras is scant and they are interested more in a historic account than an ethnographic study. Rhona Justice-Molloy (1998) writes of early adolescent bra experiences and the Sears catalogue in the early twentieth century. She does, however, provide a general statement that serves well as a framework for my own interests.

Generally in our culture, the wearing of a brassiere, the binding of the breasts, is a sign of maturity for a girl or young woman, as is binding the abdomen with girdles, control-top panty hose, and lycra panties. While there may be times when such binding is necessary and appropriate, why do we, as woman and girls, cherish and anticipate this restriction? What does the binding of the young body mean and what can it tell us about our culture? What is this potency of the young female body and why is it so powerful that it must be contained? (Justice-Molloy 1998: 111)

The questions I am asking, however, differ from those of Justice-Molloy, and from those of Farrell-Beck and Gau. I do not have the benefit of retrospect and my own context to frame the experience. Moreover, I am not as much interested in the contemporary theoretical approaches to female embodiment and its relation to power as I am in the personal interpretations of this particular moment in the life histories of my interviewees.<sup>4</sup>

4. I have also deliberately stayed away from the literature on women's attitudes towards their breasts after breast cancer. In addition to attempting an analytic emic approach, and wishing to use my informants as the baseline, I was also unprepared and unwilling to attempt to incorporate the existential crisis of breast cancer and its ramifications into the argument, precisely because personal experience narratives about breast development in adolescents have been for the most part overlooked and, in some instances, overshadowed by breast cancer personal experience narratives.

The six women I interviewed range in age from 18 to 36. Five of them were students in the graduate programme in folklore at Memorial University, while the other (Wendy, the eighteen-year-old) was in her last year of high school.<sup>5</sup> Each interview was recorded, save for Wendy's, whom I interviewed by telephone, and Colleen's, whose recording was erased in a technical misstep. Each woman knew beforehand what they would be asked about, but did not necessarily know that I would be seeking to contextualise the custom within the larger timeframe of social puberty and beyond. Based on the interviews, I also drew up a short, informal questionnaire which was distributed by email to women within the same age range, focussing more on the event itself than on the larger extended liminality of female adolescence (or at least as it occurs in this narrow sampling thereof).<sup>6</sup>

I had anticipated finding enough similarities between various instances to establish some semblance of a pattern. What I found instead was a broad range of experiences that were influenced by economics, by body image, by gender-identity issues, by popular culture and by the worldview of parents, siblings, peers, and the young woman herself. These attitudes were further conditioned by the age of the interviewees, as there are discernible patterns of differences between the women as close in age as seven or eight years.

The apparent lack of "ritual" in the purchase has meant I either had to find a new structure for discussing the first bra or apply existing structures liberally. Although the extended liminality holds true for both physical and social puberty development as a whole, it is still possible to speak of a van Gennep-style separation, incorporation, and transition structure to the time before, during, and afterwards. Within the context of an extended liminal period, a specific liminality (with pre- and post-elements) is identifiable as attention shifts from general issues of adolescence to the specifics of breast development and bras.

Despite there being very few things in the way of customary behaviour about first bra purchases, it is as if there should be. As such,

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5. I am grateful to Paula Flynn for introducing me to this person.

6. Although my group of informants arises within the context of graduate school, with an attendant implication of white middle-class, they represent a slightly broader spectrum than what one might originally surmise: they are from a variety of economic backgrounds, ranging from rural working class to urban upper middle class; some are of mixed parentage; some are lesbian or bisexual; and some are non-native English speakers.

I chose to frame the experiences with the keyword “contemporary rite of passage.” The term has become problematic and lost some of its initial weight in part due to its successful entry into the popular consciousness: much like “angst,” “nostalgia,” or “urban legend,” its seeming ubiquity undermines any efforts at exercising intellectual control over it. It is invoked — not ill-advisedly, but with greater or lesser emphasis on precision — to describe and define such behaviours as far-ranging from “traditional” rites as Pez convention attendance (Fogle 2002), participation in the Montréal underground music scene (Matte 2002), university welcoming parties (McNeill 2004), and attendance at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Reitz 2003). Used cautiously and in a manner which still allows for its refinement, it is nevertheless a useful term to indicate a basic argument of the presence of events which are transformative and which both indicate and facilitate an irreversible progression from one state to the next.

### The Decision

The purchase of a first bra begins with the realisation that there is a need for one. This need may be a reaction to physical development: the breasts have begun to develop and require some form of structured covering. Just as often, however, the need is socially mandated: it is simply time that the young woman has a bra, regardless of the size of her breasts. This realisation may be made by the young woman herself or by another person, typically her mother. For the eldest two of my interviewees, the decision was more or less made for them by their respective mothers.

I would have to say that that question [of need] is dependent on the generation, because at the time I think that it was felt that I needed a bra. But I think nowadays, I don't think I would have needed a bra, because there was less of a tendency to go braless, at least in conservative society, which my parents were, very conservative. And so I don't feel that, y'know, my breasts were especially showing at that point, certainly not needing any support of any kind. But at the time as soon as there was any indication, I think, that you had breasts it was time to get a bra (Maria 3; 0:35).

Y'know, my first bra was totally about my mum, and her wanting me to have a bra, 'cause I was... I think I might have been like fifteen when I first wore a bra. [I: Oh, that old?] Yeah, and I think physically my body didn't require me to get a bra earlier than that. I mean, I have...

small boobs anyways [laughs]. So it wasn't... it was not a big deal. But I do remember some of that experience and I remember my mum saying to me "you know, I think it's time that you wear a bra because you are... you *are* a young girl, you are not a young boy, and you should have a bra." And I think for my mom that was all around the tomboy-ish stuff too, right? "You're a young lady now and you should have this, so let's go and find you one" (Beth 4; 0:14).

Alyssa and Emily, the two in the middle of my age range, came to the decision themselves, but with different emphases.

I had been pressuring my parents for a long time, because, like, most of the kids in my class had training bras and stuff. But at this point I needed, like I actually *needed* a bra. I was in grade six, I think, or grade five — I can't quite remember to be honest. I've tried to block it from my mind I think [laughs]. But anyway, most of the kids in my class had bras but they were all training bras. But I was getting to the point where I actually needed a bra (Emily 2; 1:27).

So I got my period while I'm [at camp] and come back, and ... felt that perhaps I should have a bra. It also coincided with, when I was in sixth grade, we were in P.E. one day, and I was preparing to run a race, or something, and L. M., who I'd gone to school with, like, for ever, is standing behind me. And he looks down and he says "You forgot to shave today!" And, of course, I had *never* shaved. [So] his assumption that I *did* shave and had not that day led me to believe that I needed to. So all this kind of coalesced in sixth grade, and I thought, "I need a bra." So my mom bought me one (Alyssa 4; 0:00).

The last two women, Colleen and Wendy, were even more proactive in their decision making. In the summer before her move to a larger downtown school, Colleen decided that she wanted a bra, and took one from her elder sister's closet. She had been wearing it surreptitiously for over a year by the time her mother suggested that it was about time she have one. Wendy, on the other hand, decided that she wanted a bra although there was no physical need, and when the opportunity presented itself, she bought herself one. Her mother has never been bra shopping with her, and they have never had any "mother-daughter" discussion about bras.

Only Emily directly asserted that she needed a bra because her breasts had developed to the point where they showed and/or required some support and restriction, and she was the only one to skip the training bra and go straight to the standard bra. Both Maria and Beth may have needed one, but their mothers' reasons were as much if not



more for propriety and for being “a young lady” than it was physical need. While Beth’s initial reluctance and self-professed “tomboy-ishness” allowed for her first bra to be delayed beyond what her mother might ideally have preferred, for the most part the timing served to indicate a demarcation between girlhood and adulthood. Whether it was the mother’s or the daughter’s call, there was little open tension concerning the need. Some of the responses to the questionnaires bear out the negotiations of the decision.

I think technically, [the decision] was [my mother’s], but I was pretty curious (my older sister is more voluptuous than I and I was always trying on hers). I was not the type to bring it up, however, because there was no way I’d be talking to my mother about personal matters like this, voluntarily. No touchy-feely stuff for my family (don’t get me started on my first period)... For my part, I think it was a little jealousy, but I believe my mother felt physically it was time (although she wasn’t exactly the “you’re a woman, now” type) (HS).

My mother initially thought I should start wearing one even though I really didn’t need one (I was thirteen and not really developed... which was worse since I was already one year younger than my classmates and have always looked younger than my real age)... I was starting my first year of High School where we had to wear uniforms. Since we had to wear a practically see-through white blouse, my mother and I thought that the little “camisole” might not be as befitting in this context (LJ).

[The decision was] jointly Mom’s and mine.... You start to show, so there’s a physical need, although they don’t offer much physical support; there’s certainly a social factor in that no matter how old you are there’s an awareness of the “need” to smooth yourself out, not needing to show more than you have to.... It was all pretty reasonable to get one at that point.... There was no question that I’d need one at some point, so it wasn’t a question of will I or will I not go braless; it was just a matter of when I’d finally get one. When you start to show is as good a time as any... [It] was never a case (at least at that age) of making a statement one way or another. However, I’m sure there were some unspoken rules of “decency” in that at some point it wouldn’t be appropriate to be sticking out of your clothes (fine, the nipple issue) (RJ).

I developed early, as chubby girls are wont to do, and since no other girls in my class were really wearing bras at the time, there was no great social pressure. I certainly didn’t have a clue that I needed one, but one day Sheila ([my] nanny) gave me a second-hand training bra that

used to belong to her daughter. I thought it was very cool, and I felt very cool to be the first one to be wearing one.... Sheila told me once that if I didn't wear a bra that it would look funny, maybe not in those words, but I don't remember thinking "Wow, if I didn't feel so comfortable around Sheila, this would have been a really embarrassing conversation." My parents were the ones that really made it uncomfortable. Once my mother found out I was wearing a bra, she made sure to announce it to everyone in the vicinity (GH).

I think it was mutual [between mother and self], actually.... I think the general agreement was that I'd get all floppy if I didn't wear (indeed, if I didn't *sleep* wearing... as I still feel compelled to do) a bra religiously. And that floppy girls are thought to be undesirable. Or something. [Was there a struggle to convince / to be convinced?] Not really — I'd had a holy terror of the aforementioned floppiness instilled in me at an early age (OH).

Alyssa's suggestion was supported through all my interviews: the onset of puberty as indicated by one biological development was often the impetus for anticipating the imminent arrival of further biological developments. Menarche and hair growth (the women only spoke of leg and underarm hair, not of pubic hair growth) join with breast development to form the three significant biological changes observed by young women. Widening of hips, broadening of shoulders, and the pubescent height growth spurt were not mentioned in the interviews as significant.

Unlike menarche but like hair growth, breast development is a gradual process. Whereas there is a discernible — and, going by both the interviews and the literature, often traumatic — moment at which one changes from being a non-menstruating woman to being a menstruating woman, the moment one changes from not having to having breasts is essentially a matter of judgment. However, unlike menarche (except under exceptional circumstances) and, for the most part, unlike hair growth (which can be either concealed or removed), breasts are a visible manifestation of pubescent change. Although one can delay one's response to breast development, eventually there comes some form of recognition of the breasts as a social reality and as constitutive of the adult woman form. This recognition, however, can again be independent of physical breast development, as was described by all of my interviewees save for Emily. Emily tried to put the occasion of her first bra into the overall picture of adolescent changes.

Wearing makeup was a big thing, or being able to shave your legs or your underarms was a big thing, and being able to wear a short skirt and all this kind of stuff were the things you were trying to, I guess, *get*. Some of them were biological and can't be helped, like the bra.... I mean, maybe some parents would let their kids wear a training bra. My parents weren't those kind of parents. So, for [other girls], that might have been a social thing; for me it was a biological thing, you know. I mean, getting your period is a biological thing: you can't help that or not, but you can be ten years old and you can be wearing make-up, if your parents are okay with it.... My parents thought I'd grow up fast enough, and they just weren't in any hurry to see me do these things (Emily 5; 0:42).

The influence of age-group peers, particularly within the structures of the education “grade” system, also serves to perpetuate the social requirements for a bra. As the expectations of change are shared by a group of young women, different rates of development clash with socially anticipated rates of development. Many of the interviewees could recall the “stigma” attached to the one girl in their school who developed breasts earlier than the rest. A similar stigma was attached to young women who developed later. Issues of early and late development — and, interestingly enough, rapid development — are contiguous with issues of breast size. Christine Hope (1980), amongst many others, has noted the relationship between breast size and perceived sexual appetites.

Women take steps to shape and control the bustline they show to the world because the breast size others perceive has real consequences for women. A flat-chested woman will not be initially perceived as sexually available (or even perhaps as a mature woman) unless she does something to increase her breast size; the woman with larger-than-usual breasts will be initially perceived *only* as a sex object if she doesn't take steps to disguise her endowment. Both women have the problem, at least in some situations, of presenting themselves to be something other than what they really are in order to be taken seriously (1980: 230).

Bras can act as a form of “conspicuous concealment,” where attention is drawn to the effort to control the breasts. This drawing of attention may be either deliberate or unintended (and, of course, unwanted).<sup>7</sup> Certain environmental factors serve to facilitate or hinder

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7. It is significant to note that, in their guidebook to adolescent changes for young women, Madaras and Madaras introduce the issue of sexual harassment within the context of breast development and bras.

the concealment or the display of the bra and breasts: for Alyssa, who was raised in the Southwest United States and who wore little more than a T-shirt to school year-round, it was practically inevitable that her bra would be partially seen, while Maria, who grew up in the Northeast United States, would be wearing multiple layers of clothing and could go an entire school year without noticing that some of her peers had started wearing a bra. The contemporary fashion (extrinsic from the recent trend towards deliberately conspicuous bras) also affects the communicative efficacy of bra wearing.

Finally, for the adolescent girl, there are moments of public undress which do not allow for concealment. The interviewees' experiences of elementary, middle, and secondary school locker rooms vary widely. Beth's school, an all-girl Catholic school in a metropolitan Canadian city, had access to private cubicles for changing, while both Alyssa and Emily's public schools had more or less communal rooms. To prevent exposure or semi-exposure, young women develop changing strategies, either moving to toilet stalls (which in turn becomes a conspicuous behaviour) or using shirts as "tents" under which they could exchange clothing, or indicating a Goffmanian "backstage" space which implies both privacy and the respect thereof. One cannot assure that one will not be seen in any stage of undress, however, so the impetus to wear a bra if only for the sake of being seen by other women is again encountered.

The wearing of a bra signifies — to the indiscriminate public, to peers, to intimates, to family, and to the self — that someone — the young woman herself or a parent/guardian — acknowledges a shift to adulthood or semi-adulthood. The bra is an outward marker of the effort to control the size, shape, and/or movement of the young woman's breasts. As an exercise of a deliberate choice it serves to identify and mark this transition, and becomes a mediating point between physical developments and purely social developments like make-up, high-heeled shoes, curfew renegotiation, and so forth.

Calendar customs are scheduled and primarily mandated by the convention of cyclical time, as are most personal customs, whose scheduling is primarily mandated either by a similar cycle (birthdays, anniversaries, or other markers of a periodic lapse of time since a previous marked event), by participation in a semi-personal group custom (graduations, initiations), by the confluence of scheduling

opportunities (weddings), or by a precipitating event beyond the control of the organisers (funerals). But the scheduling of a first bra is so inveighed with social negotiations and evaluative judgments that it constitutes much of the custom itself. The issue of “when,” therefore, is the most crucial element in the custom itself.

### The Purchase

As has been alluded to already, there was very little consistency among the interviewees about their purchase experiences. Wendy bought her first bra independent from a formal parental or guardian figure when she was out shopping with her slightly older cousin on a family trip to the United States. Colleen had already been wearing the one she “borrowed” from her sister. When the moment came for her mother finally to suggest that it was time for a bra, they happened to be in a store. Against her mother’s wishes, Colleen did not wish to be measured in the middle of the underwear section, and insisted on determining the size at home and making another trip. Alyssa, having asked for a bra from her mother as a consequence of getting her first period and the development of leg hair, was not even present for the buying of it.

I: When your mother gave it to you, was there any kind of presentation, or pulling you aside, or was it “There’s something on your bed: go look at it?”

A: No, my mom was never a “There’s something on your bed: go look at it,” but all my friends’ moms were, which was funny.... I don’t remember pomp and circumstance about my bra but I remember that I knew she was buying one for me, and she picked out one that she thought was suitable for a sixth grader who was twelve years old and had no breasts, and brought it home. And I tried it on and put a shirt over it, and came out and asked how it looked (Alyssa 9; 0:04).

Emily had a completely different experience.

My mum was really sick when I was growing up... because she had a muscle disease and she had to be in a wheelchair... [This] is when I had to go out and get a bra and everything, and she didn’t like going in public because it was difficult with the wheelchair and also I think she felt self-conscious. And so my dad had to bring me to buy a bra.... So we went to this store [in her local shopping mall] and it was a department store, kind of like a Zeller’s or something: more like a

Woolworth’s, I guess... Not a speciality store, just a department store. Then my dad kind of was, like, hovering around, not wanting to go in the bra aisle or not wanting to, like... I don’t know. He kind of kept walking by, like, in the big centre aisle, because the bra aisle was kind of like off the main area, I guess. And, you know, waiting for me to pick something out because he was going to pay for it, or at least give me the money then to pay for it, not wanting to give me the money and just drop me off at the mall, cause I guess at that age they just figured I was too young for that kind of thing. And I guess my mum kind of probably envisioned my dad helping me more than my dad envisioned helping me (Emily 2; 0:21).

Of the six women I interviewed, only Maria and Beth bought their first bras with their mothers (although, again, Colleen’s mother may be surprised to hear this). Their stories are roughly parallel, but with different emphases as a result of their retrospective interpretations.

M: We got it from Sears... because mom had a Sears Card: she could make minimum payments and buy all of our school clothes there. From [her home town] it would be half an hour to forty minutes, something like that.... There was another Sears... which would have been about twenty minutes closer, but I think we went to the one in P. [because it was larger]. Not that you have a whole lot of selection when it comes to training bras, I think is what they were called then. I don’t know if people still refer to them that way. They were just little polyester triangles and a little clump-of-flowers appliqué in the middle. And I remember mom talking to the salesperson, which was of course some woman in her sixties, which was ancient at the time, and I remember being embarrassed about that. You know, mom was discussing her daughter’s need for a bra while I just really wanted to get the hell out of there. But at that point it’s not even a question of cup measurement or anything like that: you just basically find out how big you are around and that’s about it. So it wasn’t a huge issue as far as what went on. I do remember trying it on and being embarrassed but....

I: Embarrassed even in the confines of the change room?

M: Well yeah cause *mom* was there!

I: Okay, mom did come in.

M: Yeah, so... and at least for me you want it to be “Okay, this is something I have to go through. Let’s just go through it and call it done and we’ll just move on from here.” And so she’s asking things like “Is it comfortable? Is it pinching?” And it’s like “*It’s fine!*”

I: Was she sort of doing the readjusting thing with the band?

M: *No!* No, no... no: well, let me think now... No, not really, she was just asking how it was fitting rather than physically manipulating it or anything. It was just one of those, "Christ, can this be just over now? Can we just, y'know, go to McDonald's or something?" I remember... It sounds now like I had this huge angst about it, but it was more of an irritant, I think, that I had to deal with this *thing*, because people thought that it was *time* or whatever (Maria 8; 0:02).

B: I was even talking to [Maria] about, "well what was your first experience?" and she was like "Oh my god, it was this and this." And in relation to that it was so funny to think about me really not having a clear memory of having my first bra. And I think that's... I think that really does have to do with, not how I identify... well, I guess in part how I identified not as a young... I want to say stereotypical but typical teenage girl who... where there's a really kind of mapped out thing that you do, right? Like you start to get breasts and you go and buy a training bra and it's a big deal and kind of a ritual with your mother... So I think for me it was really... I think I felt really kind of pushed into it. Now, talking about this today it's funny because I think that my temptation is to say I felt pushed into it by my mom, to go and have a bra. And I think that probably has a lot to do with me worrying about those kind of scripts for young girls. "It's time now to have a bra and you have to be like this and this is the kind of bra you will wear and it will, y'know, mark you as a nice young teenage of girl." That kind of thing. I think that for me, it was kind of a pain. It was kind of a pain, yeah, to have to go out and get a bra....

I: Do you think that perhaps one of the reasons it wasn't a big deal made about the shopping trip was precisely because you didn't necessarily...

B: Totally, yeah. I'm sure that I was... I know that I was dragged out. "Come on, [Beth], it's time for you to get a bra. You have to have one now" [Laughs] (Beth 6; 0:23).

Both women make explicit reference to a reluctant rituality of the first bra: Maria's rhetorical "Okay, this is something I have to go through. Let's just go through it and call it done and we'll just move on from here," echoes Beth's "where there's a really kind of mapped out thing that you do, right? Like you start to get breasts and you go and buy a training bra and it's a big deal and kind of a ritual with your mother." Implicit in these remarks is an anticipation (at least as seen in retrospect) of a semi-public display of the perceived need. In other words, the

purchase announces to the world, if only in the incarnation of the salesperson or cashier, that this girl is now transitioning into a woman. The engagement or lack thereof of the salesperson is indicative of the level of public involvement desired by the definer of the situation.

I don't remember very much. No measurement. Definitely tried on for fit (basic rule is for practicality's sake you should always try it on first! And why not learn that at the earliest age....) Mom helped in picking, let me try it on, came in to ensure fit, no help from clerk, and I don't think she wanted any help either (RJ).

I got to choose the bra I wanted. My mother did not make a fuss out of it, but she did come in the dressing room with me and was attentive towards the right size (the smallest you can find!).... The reason why we went to Woolco, well, it was cheap, and at that time, lingerie stores made me giggle!... My mother "assisted" me while I was embarrassingly turning red in the face, but at least we were alone in the dressing room! (LJ)

On a fundamental level, the first bra is a commercial transaction, so one can refer to the literature on the custom and rituals of shopping. Marisa Corrado (2002) has written on the role of bridal shop workers as specialists, facilitating much of the decision-making process in the costuming of what is one of the most pivotal rituals in some women's lives (particularly in regards to clothing). Corrado's approach may have limited efficacy here, however. Although some of the women I interviewed have gone to speciality stores since, none of the interviewees and none of the questionnaire respondents purchased their first bra in a speciality store. For those who went to the store with their mother, which was the experience of the majority in my fieldwork, it would have been like many other clothing transactions, with similar tensions between mother and daughter on aesthetics, economics, and body issues. Overtop of this is, perhaps for the first time, new body issues and a tacit discourse of sexuality.

One of the greatest influences on the acquisition of the first bra, as has already been touched on above, is the relationship between mother and daughter. In self-described conservative households, like Maria's and Beth's, the discourse of sexuality is marginalised, so any pseudo-public display is anathema. In a household like Emily's, where responses to physical development are more reactionary than anticipatory and where her mother's condition obfuscated the typical mother-daughter hierarchy, there was an expectation of social independence without



the economic independence to make that viable. Alyssa, at perhaps the other extreme, was comfortable enough to devolve freely to her mother the responsibility of choosing her first bra: elsewhere she told me that “I had a *good* mom who was good at stuff like this.” Colleen and Wendy did not feel the need for consent or approval from their respective mothers, the former as a shy reaction to a conservative household and the latter a decision allowed for by economic liberty. The bra acquisition is an extension of the mother-daughter relationship: to generalise (or to play armchair psychiatrist), healthy relationships beget healthy experiences.

### Afterwards

What prompted the tripartite approach to this study of the bra were the different experiences of what occurred after a bra was acquired. Inasmuch as rites of passage can be understood as a transition from one set of rules and expectations to another set, each experience deals in its own way with the struggle to adjust to the new rules. Just as the decision is a reaction to the changing woman within the social group and a recognition of the need for negotiating that change, there is a phase of reincorporation wherein the woman marked as having changed returns to the social group and reintegrates herself.

One of the questionnaire respondents indicated that the recognition of the bra was one of the first post-acquisition moments.

The first time my father hugged me after I was wearing a bra, he noticed that he felt the straps in the back, and made a really big deal out of it. Sadly, we were saying goodbye at a train station and my whole extended family was around, and they all made remarks about how I was developing and growing. Again, I choked back embarrassment and bile (GH).

Maria had a practical issue.

M: What I do remember is another whole conundrum of how do you put it on? It was years before I realised that there was more than one way to do it. Some people hook it in the front, twist it around, and then put the straps on.

I: Had you always put it on the one way and like, sort of desperately tried to do it up behind your back? Was that the way it had always been?

M: Yeah, 'cause ... there's *no* instruction that comes with it! Y'know, and maybe when you're trying it on in the changing room maybe you get it hooked for you. And then, boom, you're having to cope with this elastic thing which may have a mind of its own.

I: I guess unless you had seen people putting bras on and off...

M: Which of course we had *never*, because, even on TV, that would not have been allowed. You're not supposed to see that sort of thing. And certainly *Mom* wasn't going to show us (Maria 16; 0:00).

Maria eventually learned the different techniques from her younger sister, who played on sports teams and thus was exposed to other women changing clothes. One of the respondents had a similar reaction, writing "I believe I did have some questions about how to put it on with ease" (HS), but was able to get them answered. The sheer mechanism of the bra, both in its donning and its removal, involve not only techniques but strategies that develop over time with familiarity. Whether learned through instruction or through trial and error, both are elements of the reincorporative phase.

Alyssa, who felt it was appropriate to get a bra because of the interconnectedness in her mind between breasts, menarche, and body hair, despite the self-admitted absence of any need for support, was also able to exercise discretion over whether to wear it.

So my mom got me one, and I didn't wear it all the time because I was then mortified to have it, and I discovered that it really does show through T-shirts and stuff like that. But I had my friend R., who I'd gone to pre-school with, but did not go to the same elementary school with, and she was always, like, the grown-up one between us, like she wore make-up and had kissed boys and things like that. And so I was totally going to show her up by having this bra.... She did not have a bra at this time. And I called her and told her that I had one, and she was very dismissive of it. And said that she thought it was silly to get a bra before you had anything to put in it.... I thought that was pretty bad. So I really didn't wear it at all during sixth grade. In seventh grade, though... I'm now in a junior high, where we have PE that requires uniforms. So we have to go in a dressing room and take one shirt off and put another shirt on. And that was it. I still... I mean, I didn't have a need for a bra until I was like in college, so, y'know... there was that issue of see-throughness of shirts and being exposed in front of a whole bunch of other girls, but they were all wearing bras, so... (Alyssa 6; 0:06)

Alyssa's ability to be selective in her bra use was due in part to her bra being a social choice as opposed to a physical requirement. As a result, she was able to allow the social situation to dictate the rules under which she should operate: in sixth grade, when wearing a bra would have placed her in the minority, she could choose not to, while in the seventh grade, the opposite was true. For the lesser-developed woman the bra acts as an accessory.

I was teased by my brother when I started wearing a bra, because it did seem pointless (at least to me) and he kept on referring to it as: "The training bra"... I don't need to draw a picture?!... I wore it to school because of the dreaded uniform, but on weekends I wouldn't necessarily wear one... I still feel "free-er" without a bra today (LJ).

I wore it consistently since it marks the end of not needing one and the beginning of the rest of your life needing one. I don't remember blatantly liking or disliking it; it was just a practical piece of clothing (RJ).

In the interviews, I had been asking what the women thought of the range of choices currently available for younger women, as opposed to the standard white-triangle and rosette training bras of their time. If the bra is communicative, it only communicates when it is at least partly visible or noticeable. For many of the women, intrinsic to bra-wearing is the possibility of it being seen, by intimates, by peers, or by the general public. As the women moved from elementary school to the last years of secondary school — when the majority of their age-peers had undergone most of their physical development, the tacit sexual discourse had progressed from early-adolescent to late-adolescent, and bras were normative — individual expression could be attained not through wearing or not wearing a bra but through the choice of colour and style. The ambivalent place of breasts in early adolescence, with the stigmas associated with both early and late development, had dissolved to women's "ownership" or "proprietorship" of their breasts. The extended liminality of adolescence was growing to a close, and social puberty had served its function. The subtle communicative act of presenting oneself as a sexual being (again, if only to oneself) as a form of empowerment was seen as a positive thing.

I fill out a D cup, or in some bras a DD, so I can't NOT wear a bra. It's uncomfortable. I take much more pride in buying them though, probably because Mom de-emphasized the whole pretty factor of

buying bras. She never liked the coloured, fancy, underwired ones, and she tried to make sure I didn't either, but I kind of went the other way. I make sure that I always wear the best bras I can find with the best fit. It makes me feel sexy, and I think it is important as a female to know that breasts aren't this burden that you have to hide or squish or pretend don't exist. Having breasts and wearing a bra isn't supposed to make you feel shameful or weird, but unfortunately, when children start to develop and it makes them look like small adults instead of children, it's a weird phase for parents and they make it weird for kids (GH).

As the ability to exercise the freedom to express themselves through their choice of underwear is open to women at a younger and younger age, however, there is a growing uncertainty about the logistics, the repercussions, and even the possibility of empowerment for very young women. By not only foreshortening social puberty but pushing it to a younger age, the anticipatory adulthood becomes a confused message. What is a pair of breasts in a bra: an icon, an index, or a symbol? What does it denote and what does it connote?

In some communities, especially even the community like mine where I grew up, women are considered a commodity, and also a liability, and, I mean, that's why you have all these... I mean, if you look at medieval ages or you look at some place like India, where there's a lot of structure on, like, this... arranged marriage and stuff like that, I'm sure you see that from the time the woman starts to become marrying age, that there's all these ways of marking her as different from everyone, and kind of cloistering her and all this sort of stuff. Really, I think that's what it is for women: I think it's kind of like... I think it's telling that it's still that way and that it's actually become worse in some ways, for women, in that there's more, y'know, kids getting younger and having bras at a younger age. I mean, it's increased sexualisation.... I think at least now there's some room for, like... There's some room for self-expression and stuff, in a lot of the stuff for girls. I mean, if you look at someplace like LaSenza, where they've got all these bra and underwear sets and stuff like that, I mean, they never used to have stores like that in the Maritimes. I mean, maybe one here [in St. John's], one in Halifax, one in Saint John, but like a lingerie shop or something ... you start to have things like that, and I mean, they're fun, they've got pictures of different things on them they've got, y'know... Even things like underwear: I remember when basically you could only get coloured underwear but mainly white underwear and like, whatever, and only lingerie type stuff near certain times, like near Valentine's Day or near Christmas or something and all this kind of stuff. To the

point where now you can get even for women “fun” underwear and things like this (Emily 27; 0:04).

The fetishism of ideal female forms within contemporary North American society and the commodification issues it raises have been a mainstay of feminist critique (see Entwistle 2000, Thesander 1994, O’Sickey 1994), whereas third wave feminists like Naomi Wolf (1997) and contemporary culture heroes like Madonna (mentioned frequently by the interviewees) and the Spice Girls (see Davies 1999) have invited a hermeneutic of empowerment to women’s sexuality. But the differences between a woman of thirteen and a woman of thirty are, on one level, purely notional, and on another, profoundly not notional. The question raised by contemporary social puberty is precisely this one: when does a girl become a woman?

Emily’s perspective is probably shaped by her own post-bra experience, in a school which did little to foster a safe environment for the students, with tensions both between “country” and “townie” and between white and native peoples.

Guys coming up and like grabbing the back of your bra and pulling it back and going “Robin Hood” [upon release] or doing “Fall Winter Summer SPRING” [again upon release], or whatever, that kind of stuff. And they stop doing it after a while, but there’s a year there or something where people are like... fascinated by it and just also, like, don’t know what to do about it. I mean, as much as girls might feel uncomfortable about it, so do people in their family and so do guys at school, I think (Emily 9; 0:05).

Alyssa’s safer school was seemingly devoid of such harassment: she only remembers one such episode.

A: I remember one specific incident: apparently all of this trauma happens during PE. But we were in the lower playground (there were two playgrounds) — on the lower one, and we were doing, like, callisthenics stuff, like we were doing jumping jacks or something, so, you know, your clothes are being shifted over you or something. And someone standing behind me did the whole “*I can see your BRA-strap!*” thing, and I was, of course, mortified. [I: Male or female?] Male. That is the *only* thing I actually remember. I think the rest was anticipation of distress.

I: Okay, so no one snapped your bra strap?

A: No, no one did. Girlfriends did, like jokingly, you know, and it was never... like when we would be hanging out at someone's house or something, they would do it, but it was in a situation where no one around was worth being embarrassed in front of (Alyssa 14; 0:29).

Maria noted that bra snapping happened to other girls, but she was the younger sister of two large and popular brothers, and was more or less left alone. Both Colleen and Beth were at sexually segregated schools, and thus unexposed to such situations. Wendy, on the other hand, grew up with the bra being less of a novelty for her male peers, and experienced a certain freedom from harassment, which was a possibility alluded to in my interview with Emily.

I: How much does [harassment] occur nowadays, in an age where the fact that...

E: Like maybe it becomes less a big deal because it's always there?

I: Maybe it becomes less a big deal because it's always there. Y'know, "Yes, I've changed, and that's fine, and what are you going to do about it?" Even the idea of the visible bra strap, the interesting bra strap as opposed to some kind of utilitarian piece of ribbon, but the clearly visible bra strap is a recent thing, but it seems like an empowering marker of some description. Like wearing the bra that matches the tank-top.

E: Yeah, like Madonna, wearing a bra as outerwear, that kind of thing.

I: Yeah, well it starts with that but it certainly hasn't ended with that, where you've got a sexuality and girlishness at the same time, which is creepy, on some levels, but on the other level it's...

E: I guess you'd have to talk to girls of that age and see what they think. (Emily 29; 0:27).

The issue of harassment is part and parcel of the discourse of power inherent in feminist thought. With the heightened attention brought to difference and otherness within an adolescent context (particularly within the confines of contemporary schools), not only between young men and women but amongst women, breast development and bra acquisition, demonstrated to be inexorably linked yet distinct facets, draw attention as visible markers of difference. A further characteristic of this extended liminality is the instability of power relationships as

participants are in a state of flux and a state of realignment with each other.

Particularly when the transition from childhood to adulthood is being negotiated, having a bra (the post-liminal state) has as many repercussions as not having one (the pre-liminal). Many of the arguments from the section on the decision making process can be carried over to this phase, as they both concern the young woman's place in relation to the rest of the group.

### **Conclusions and the Fieldwork Experience**

Entering into this project I had envisioned something more or less "fluffy," expecting to hear light-spirited tales of changing booths, local character salesladies, and mother-daughter bonding. Instead I found the whole experience rather depressing, as I was confronted with women's stories of despair and frustration concerning changes to their young bodies over which they had no physical control and, more often than not, little social control. There are many stories of first periods, possibly because, however anticipated, it is never expected and thus a more dramatic moment. But a period can remain more or less private, while breasts are, as it were, out there, and thus an ever-present public reality and marker of distinction from maleness, girlhood, and/or other women.

As a male, married, heterosexual fieldworker, my biggest hurdle was my own social awkwardness. I was privileged to have more or less at my disposal a peer group who would allow me to ask personal questions which typical decorum would leave unasked. Even so, the interviews I did were few precisely because each one involved a certain summoning up of courage to even ask for an interview. In exchange I tried to be as respectful as I could. One of the things I had noticed during the research phase of this work was the tendency to use some sort of humour to diffuse the issue but which, at the same time, seems to undercut both the validity of the topic as a point of discussion and, more importantly, women's experience. This was the case not only in the popular literature like magazines for pre-adolescent girls but even in academic literature like Farrell-Beck and Gau's *Uplift*. During interviews I made an effort to avoid "boobs," "tits," and other euphemisms until, at least, the woman I was interviewing used them herself. When presenting on this topic, I was assured that I could be less

formal (or less worried about causing offence), but I question whether I would be allowed such latitude outside of a peer-group context.

A further complicating aspect to my gendered fieldwork concerns the subtext of the interviews: to wit, at some point the content of the interview is determined by the context of the breast size of the woman. I could not bring myself to ask for or commit to a recording media each woman's breast size. As all the questionnaires were sent to peers and all but one of the interviews were not only face to face but also with peers, in my role of exegete I could bring that knowledge to the table. While it would be a lie to make the claim that I have never noticed the breast size of any (or, putting cards on the table, each) of my woman peers, it is fair to say that from the confines of my office desk it takes me a moment or two to recall, and on several I honestly draw a blank. I was made conscious of this exegetical hiccup during my phone interview with Wendy, whom I have never met face to face, and whose responses I had some difficulty interpreting. (It was made clearer when I sent out the questionnaires: many of the responses were in a shorthand which anticipated that I "knew" their breasts.) Of the five women I interviewed in person, only one had large breasts from an early age, and only she had experienced systemic harassment. Was Wendy's lack of harassment a result of a more enlightened environment or of a less stigmatised breast development?

The final problem is the obvious sociolegal issue: to do this project "properly" would have entailed going out into the field and observing one if not several young women getting their first bra. Perhaps a more enlightened anthropologist would have been able to argue himself into that position, but not I. There are limits to the ethnographic exercise, and I must confine myself to personal experience narratives much as cryptozoologists and old hag researchers must.

That being said, there was one definite advantage to being a man and doing this research. With the anticipation that I knew nothing, certain things were explained to me that might have been taken for granted as common sense had I been a woman. Emily, Alyssa, and Maria all told me about various strategies employed by young women for changing in public, each prefaced with an "I don't know if you realise this, but..." Training bras were described to me, as were sports bras. I was told of the dread of "sagginess" or "floppiness" instilled at an early age, the "pencil trick" for determining it, and the technique of wearing



a bra to bed to stave it off. The interviews have become a trove of breast lore, suitable for further research.

The question remains, however, whether there is such a thing as a “custom” or a “ritual” to the first bra. It indicates a radical change or transition that can be social, can be biological, and is often intertwined, with a whole new set of rules coming into play. It is not necessarily occasioned by the breasts specifically, but is part of the tripartite occasion of hair, menstruation, and breasts: if one of the three is happening, the other two get tied into it somehow. Although the passage of the first bra is fundamental (most respondents wear a bra every day and do not consider themselves dressed if they fail to do so), it is a passage seemingly without a rite. Or, as Alyssa expressed it: “Getting your first bra is really going to affect, in a sense, every single day of your life thereafter, so it’s that mark of having been reintegrated into a new portion of society. So I do think you have a distinct rite of passage, there just may not be traditional customs associated with it” (31; 1:14).

The first bra purchase, which implies the first bra wearing or at least the first bra specifically purchased for the young woman, introduces two phases beyond the demarcation of girl as woman: a lifetime of wearing bras and a lifetime of shopping for bras. So I can conclude with a question to be saved for another day: is wearing a bra not a custom in itself?

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