

International Symposium on Breast Cancer and Feminism

April 9, 2015, Barcelona, Spain. Symposium co-organizers Caterina Riba, [Gerard Coll-Planas](#), and [Ana Porroche-Escudero](#).

International Symposium on Breast Cancer and Feminism

Overview

On April 9th, feminist health professionals, social scientists, humanists, communications experts, activists, and people living with breast cancer met at the venue Francesca Bonnemaison in Barcelona, Spain to examine the social context of breast cancer in the country. The symposium emerged from a co-edited volume on “Breast Cancer and Feminism” – written in Catalan, a minority language in Spain that will be published by [Capsa de Pandora](#) based at the [Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies](#), University of Vic –Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC) in January, 2016.

Symposium co-organizers Caterina Riba, [Gerard Coll-Planas](#), and [Ana Porroche-Escudero](#) had been working on breast cancer for a number of years and knew of critical work being done in the country. But they realized that activists, artists, academics, practitioners, and the public were rarely aware of each other’s work. Differences in disciplinary focus, geographic location, lack of time, funding, or ‘expertise’ were all barriers to information sharing. The book would be a way to share new ways of understanding breast cancer, informing those in healthcare and policy, and engaging the public.

To facilitate public participation, the symposium was free, and held in a popular venue in Barcelona. It was an exceptional opportunity to translate and expand international and critical debates on breast cancer, showcase the powerful work done in Spain, develop new networks and build on existing ones, and engage the public in the discussion. 74 people attended the event, which as described as comforting.

Summary

The symposium kicked off with the lively involvement of feminist endocrinologist Carme Valls-Llobet of the [Centre d'Anàlisi i Programes Sanitaris](#) (Center for Health Evaluation) and founder of the [Spanish Network of Women's Health Workers](#) (Red de Profesionales Mujeres de la Salud, Redcaps in Spanish).

Combining rigorous biological and epidemiological research with a political-economic analysis, Carme explained both new and well-established risks to women's health, including environmental and occupational factors that increase breast cancer risk.

Dismantling myths about the disease primarily as a consequence of genetic and lifestyle factors, she proposed that up to “92 percent of breast cancers are likely to be produced by environmental oestrogens in the air, water and food, unhealthy working conditions and electromagnetic fields.” Her talk generated feelings of shock and anger about the lack of public awareness about the range of factors contributing to the disease, government inaction, and even complicity.

Amidst the gloomy background, she is an optimist and thinks that social change is possible if people lobby for improvements in living and working conditions and create healthier macro-policies. She presented the example of Denmark, which has begun offering compensation to dozens of women who developed breast cancer after working night shifts.

An emotionally-charged panel that followed, (Contra)discourses of breast cancer, showed how lived experiences have the potential to trigger critical consciousness. Caterina Riba (UVic-UCC) examined the radical ways women writers who had been diagnosed with breast cancer transgressed biomedical dictates and gender norms.

Particularly evocative was the way she weaved the work of Catalan artists through the reading of Maria-Mercè Marçal's poetry and [Isabel Franc](#)'s comics, with deep analysis of the sociocultural context of cancer.

Here are some lines translated from Maria-Mercè Marçal's beautiful poem [The Body Reason](#):

The scar
divides
my armpit
into two parts.
Zipper
of flesh,
badly closed
but
unmovable.
Unmovable
like a decree
that in an imperial
language
exiles me
to the frozen
land
of the sick
with no limits
or features.

To die: perhaps only to
lose shape and outline
to undo oneself, to be
swallowed inside
the uterus alive,
god's womb,
mother: to become unborn.

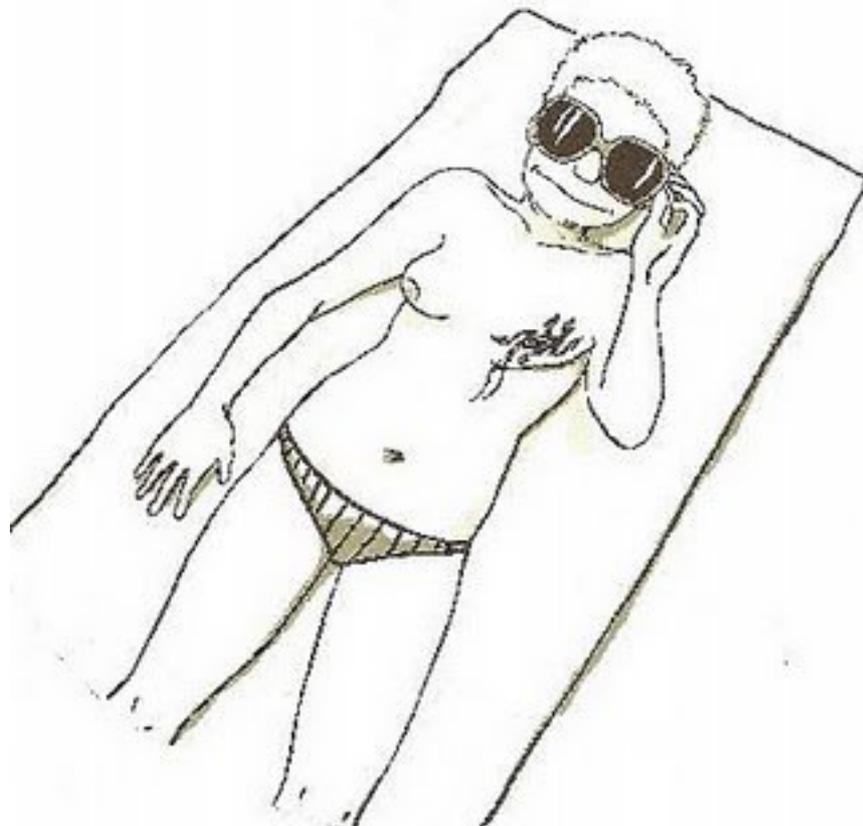
(Translated by Montserrat Abelló and Noèlia Díaz-Vicedo)

Here are some of Isabel Franc's comics:



English Translation:

1. You have a deadly illness.
2. You will lose a year of your life.
3. Put a wig on.



A los 15 días de iniciar el tratamiento, la casa se llenó de pelos.



Menos mal que tenía el apoyo de las amigas.



English Translation:

1. Fifteen days after starting treatment, the house was covered in hair.

2. Luckily, she had the support of her friends:

One friend says, "I am annoyed, I couldn't get an appointment to be waxed."

The other replies: "It's not such a big deal, where there is hair, there is happiness."

3. OH, dear! I didn't realize. I'm not sure what to say!

In this scenario, the friends didn't know the woman was being treated for cancer and thought all the hair in the house was from the cat. When one of them was worried about having hairy armpits and being unable get an appointment to have them waxed, the other friend belittled her, saying: "No worries, not a big deal, hairy bodies are beautiful." At that point the woman with cancer removed her wig to show her balding head.

Heura Marçal ([Maria-Mercè Marçal Foundation](#)) then read the powerful diary of her mother Maria-Mercè Marçal, a respected Catalan poet who died of breast cancer. It felt as if those in attendance held their breath to listen to Heura's calm and intense reading with their whole bodies. From her diary entry:

1st of August 1996

Today is the third day that I live with the death clinging, latching on to my right side. Three or four months –perhaps five, now, living with the terror of the first tests which, apparently, assuaged me– I started a poem- only one verse: “I incubate a minuscule egg of death, close to the chest, under the armpit.”

(...)

The limit, to accept the limit, the dissolution of myself in everything or in the void, light and shadow.... From here, I measure life, from what it is supposed to be the end. That is what it seemed to happen tonight.

[Beatriz Figueroa's](#) first person narrative about the dramatic socio-economic challenges she faces post-treatment nearly brought tears to our eyes. She explained that even though the medical system does not recognise the side effects of treatment as a disability, these physical difficulties prevent some women like her from returning to their previous paid work. These consequences of treatment leave women out of work and with a meagre pension after decades of making contributions to social security. She is leading a national [e-campaign](#) to collect one million signatures requesting improvements to the Social Security Act to ensure that patients' economic rights are guaranteed. The proposed law was drafted with the support of colleague Dr. Jaime Cabezas, Professor of Employment Law at the University of Vigo, Spain.

After a 30-minute break in which attendees could mingle and network, the second panel, Ideologies, representations and experiences, began with Gerard Coll-Planas (University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia). Gerard argued that lived experiences, seemingly unique and private, cannot be understood in isolation from a wider context. Sharing carefully selected examples, he challenged that taboos about breast cancer are diminishing. Patriarchal ideologies about the breast and women's roles as mothers and wives deeply mark everyday experience, and taboos about death are central to understanding the growing salience of the “think positive to beat cancer” mantra, both of which silences experiences and perspectives that don't conform.

[Ana Porroche-Escudero](#) (Lancaster University and Breast Cancer Consortium) presented her research uncovering how [awareness campaigns use fearmongering](#)

tactics to persuade women to comply with biomedical recommendations. Tactics include using misleading information and also exaggerating data on incidence, mortality, survival, and treatment efficacy. Campaigns promote stereotypical moral and gendered responsibilities to encourage women's compliance. Fear creates unnecessary social psychosis and distorts decision-making processes while undermining the empowerment intent of the campaigns. Ana advocates for a model of education that develops critical consciousness instead.

The final speaker, [Julia Ojuel](#), a general practitioner, member of Redcaps and co-founder of Cancer Butch ([Marimachos Cancerosas](#) in Spanish) with a Ph.D. in statistics, presented a different interpretation of commonly used breast cancer 'numbers.' She warned that much information about survival, prevalence, and mortality to promote breast cancer screening is taken for granted by many health professionals and organisations. There is a widespread tendency to assume that scientific facts both 'speak for themselves' and 'are bias free'. This means that there is little questioning of the methodological frameworks and reporting systems that influences the ways in the data can be exaggerated, ignored or distorted in favour of screening. This problem – she argues- is compounded by the fact that front-line health professionals may be left to interpret conflicting information by themselves amid lack of time and social and patients' pressures on screening. Drawing on her personal experience, she also confessed that for some healthcare professionals to position themselves on screening is extremely difficult: they may be faced by feelings of guilt if they encourage screening because they contribute to the medicalisation of risk that leads to overdiagnosis and overtreatment, or conversely for non-encouraging screening if women keep dying of the disease. Julia argues that engaging with scientific controversy and uncertainty is a healthy way forward to challenging the political and economic interests of the breast cancer industry that distorts evidence.

The symposium concluded with a [short video](#) produced by Cristina Vela who recently completed a degree in communication studies at UVic-UCC. Vela brought together the photographic work of national and international artists who focus on portraying the complex realities of breast cancer in the Spanish context. Radical, yet beautiful, images of mastectomized women and men questioned pervasive assumptions about cancer, powerlessness, ugliness, and sexuality. It also showcased how women and feminist organising can make the social suffering of cancer more visible.

Symposium Take-Aways

- It is crucial to reclaim women's rights and to develop a collective awareness that these rights are closely tied to health as well as socio-economic and environmental rights (Ana Porroche-Escudero).
- Stop blaming women for their cancer. The focus on detection and behaviour so common in political and biomedical approaches to cancer detracts from the structural causes of cancer (e.g. environmental, occupational, socio-economic) and essentially puts of prevention, detection, and cure on women themselves (Carne Valls).
- There are everyday actions that may help to decrease one's exposure to carcinogenic agents (avoiding products containing parabens, for example, or supporting local food cooperatives that provide foods free of hormones genetically modified organisms, and pesticides). However, as general practitioner Julia Ojuel put it, "real or primary prevention is not a personal problem or a medical problem, it is a political problem."
- There is a need to recall, refine, and make visible how taboos related to death, femininity, and asymmetrical power relationships between health professionals, scientists, and women are re/produced by current framings of breast cancer ([Teresa Cabruja](#), University of Girona).
- There is much talk about survivorship – but many women die of breast cancer. The rhetoric of survivorship almost blames those who do not survive. Yet death is a natural part of life, one that may be peacefully accepted ([Montse Cervera](#), member of Redcaps and Platform for the right to abortion).
- Feminist organizers must forge new alliances and encourage laypersons who had breast cancer to share their knowledge, commitment, creativity, and capacity for action ([Montse Cervera](#)).
- The symposium, stimulating due to the large number of participants living with cancer, was essential for creating networks and sharing experiences of resistance. Women affected by cancer must be able to participate in the construction of their identities and denounce standards imposed on them, such as stereotypical femininity, that do not take into account their subjectivity and vulnerabilities (Victoria Fernández Sánchez, University of Granada)
- Encouraging positive thinking can help some women with breast cancer to cope with the aftermath of the disease, but can also perpetuate pervasive gender norms that essentially blame them for disease and death (Gerard Coll-Planas & Ana Porroche-Escudero).

- Quality of life post-treatment is as important as survival. Issues such as patients' economic and social rights need to be on the research and policy agenda (Beatriz Figueroa).
- Personal narratives, textual analysis, art, and literature are powerful tools for embodied learning as well as researching and raising critical consciousness about the complexities of breast cancer. Chair [Lina Casadó](#) of Universitat Rovira I Virgili said this about the symposium: “[It] was a dynamic weaving of short presentations with an interactive debate with the public. Something that I found particularly ‘emotive’ was the use of art, poetry, diary analysis, theory, and image to articulate the diversity of experiences. This...variation made me realise the complexities of breast cancer and reflect on the need to incorporate [this] variation to truly understand it.”
- Leaving space for discussion and debate is of the utmost importance to facilitate engagement, critical thinking and building networks (Caterina Riba).

Acknowledgements

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Video Recording

The event was recorded, and the videos have been uploaded to the website of Gerard's centre: <http://mon.uvic.cat/ceig/>.