Mammographies
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Mammographies: The Cultural Discourses of Breast Cancer Narratives.
Introduction

*Representing Breast Cancer in the Twenty-first Century*

Ovarian surgery was only part of the solution. What about breast cancer? . . . We couldn't turn our backs on what we knew. We still had our family history, even if it was different from the one we thought we knew.

—Amy Boesky, *What We Have*

For these young women, having their portrait taken seems to represent their personal victory over this terrifying disease. . . . Through these simple pictures, they seem to gain acceptance of what has happened to them and the strength to move forward with pride.

—David Jay, The SCAR Project

Narratives that explore women's lived experience of breast cancer and interrogate its cultural discourses provide the focus of my study, which offers a critical analysis of postmillennial autobiographical and photographic representations of this life-threatening illness. In the texts under consideration, memoirists and photo-autobiographers probe the ravages of a still mystifying disease, confront ambivalently its surgical and pharmaceutical treatments, document the physical and psychological processes of recovery, and memorialize the dead. Breast cancer narratives published in the United States and Great Britain since 2000 differ from their twentieth-century counterparts in several noteworthy ways. They address previously neglected topics such as the links between cancer and environmental carcinogens, the ethics and efficacy of genetic testing and prophylactic mastectomy, and the shifting politics of prosthesis and reconstruction. They question the medical establishment for emphasizing detection rather than prevention, and challenge mainstream cancer culture for its corporate complicity, pink iconography, upbeat rhetoric, and privileging of philanthropy over activism. They decenter survivor discourse by paying eulogistic tribute to the often invisible women who die each year of this disease—to their wounded, suffering bodies and the loss that they instantiate. As catalysts and sites of public memory, these
illness narratives engage readers and viewers politically, ethically, and aesthetically.

Since the publication of my 2005 study of late twentieth-century literary representations of breast, uterine, and ovarian cancers, *Fractured Borders: Reading Women's Cancer Literature*, I have been considering a constellation of issues related to breast cancer and postmillennial literary and visual cultures. This book departs from my previous study and from other scholarship on illness narratives in its exclusive focus on breast cancer, its analysis of both memoirs and photographic narratives, its attention to collaborative and hybrid narratives, and its emphasis on ecological, queer, genetic, transnational, and anti-pink discourses. I argue that, taken together, postmillennial breast cancer narratives, which I refer to as *mammographies*, constitute a distinctive testimonial and memorial tradition whose aims and representational strategies should circulate alongside other cultural projects of memory such as the AIDS memorial quilt (the Names Project). The term *mammographies* signifies both the technology of imaging by which most Western women learn that they have contracted breast cancer and the documentary imperative that drives their written and visual mappings of the breast cancer experience. In the United States alone more than 225,000 women are diagnosed with invasive breast cancer annually, and nearly 40,000 die of it.¹ Worldwide breast cancer rates are rising rapidly, and current projections posit that ten years from now 70 percent of all breast cancer cases will be in developing countries.² The scope and parameters of this disease reveal a global crisis. It is therefore unsurprising that not only awareness campaigns and races for the cure abound but also new artistic forms of recounting trauma, celebrating survival, and memorializing the world's dead or dying mothers, daughters, partners, sisters, and friends.

Not everyone who writes breast cancer memoirs has had this disease. Since the 1990 discovery by geneticist Mary-Claire King of a gene linked to hereditary breast cancer, the isolation of that gene—known as BRCA1—in 1994, and the subsequent identification of the BRCA2 gene in 1995, increasing numbers of high-risk but cancer-free women have written what have come to be known as BRCA or “previvor” narratives.³ These autobiographies trace the authors' family histories of breast and ovarian cancer, chronicle their decision whether to undergo genetic testing, and explore the emotional and medical impact of inherited cancers.⁴ Amy Boesky's *What We Have* typifies such narratives in offering a genealogical account of her family's history of ovarian cancer, her mother's
death from metastatic breast cancer, her own and her sisters’ dawning realization of their high-risk status, and her eventual decision to undergo first a prophylactic oophorectomy, then a bilateral elective mastectomy, without having undertaken the genetic evaluation that would determine whether she carried the BRCA1 mutation. As the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter indicates, Boesky and her siblings recognize after their mother’s agonizing demise that they must confront together “what we knew,” even if such knowledge was partial, evolving, and alien. “Women in my family die young,” Boesky explains near the beginning of her memoir; “I used to walk up and down the hallway and look over this ill-fated, all-female family tree” (23). By choosing preventive breast and ovarian surgeries, she attempts to disrupt the dominant genealogical narrative: “It would be unthinkable, after all this suffering, not to try our hardest to keep this from happening again” (313). That struggle is ongoing, however, since Boesky and her sisters are the mothers of teenaged daughters not yet fully aware of the implications of their legacy.

The postmillennial turn to collaborative narratives can be illustrated by the work of fashion photographer David Jay, who teamed up in 2010 with nearly one hundred women under thirty-five to document visually the loss of their breast(s) to cancer. The result has been a critically acclaimed photographic exhibition and book entitled *The SCAR Project: Breast Cancer Is Not a Pink Ribbon* and a related documentary film by Patricia Zagarella, *Baring It All.* Jay began this project when a thirty-two-year-old model he had known since she was seventeen contracted breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy; he offered support by photographing her in a respectful, unflinching manner. Having recognized the power of such images to raise awareness, Jay recruited young subjects online through breast cancer advocacy organizations and received over a thousand inquiries. A subject named Emily, whose pregnant, scarred body and meditative face appear on the book and poster covers, explains, “When I heard about the SCAR Project, I wanted to be involved. The idea of sharing my own scars to show how breast cancer has impacted another young woman was very compelling. . . . It was an opportunity for me to stand tall and strong with my scars and redefine my beauty for myself” (Q & A). A second subject, Sylvia, twenty-five, posed for the SCAR Project because “I’d just been diagnosed with breast cancer, I really don’t know how long I have, so why not do something that will—not keep me here forever—but when I’m gone, there’s a part of me that’s still left” (www.huffingtonpost.com).
As Jay notes in this introduction’s second epigraph, having their vulnerable bodies photographed empowered his subjects, despite the rawness of the images. “I knew in my heart that compromising the visual integrity of the SCAR Project for the sake of easily digested beauty would serve no one,” he explains. “Certainly not the people I hoped would be impacted by the images, the public at large who remain blissfully unaware of the risk or reality of this disease anesthetized by pink ribbons and fluffy, pink teddy bears” (McCreery). Although it may be difficult for some viewers to digest, there is beauty in Jay’s images, as seen in the dig-
nified gaze, luminous face, and muscular one-breasted body of Shanté, who looks pensively at the camera as she bares her mastectomy scar and grasps her belt buckle casually. Projects such as Boesky’s and Jay’s engage readers and viewers as compassionate witnesses through what scholar Einat Avrahami describes as an implicit contract based on a “reality effect” resulting from intimate narrative revelations that foreground “terminal illness and textually or visually displayed selves” (14–15).

A brief overview of the development of breast cancer narratives as literary and photographic subgenres will help to contextualize the work of Boesky and Jay and to situate my own project historically. As I explained in Fractured Borders, memoirs documenting this disease emerged in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of the rise of autopathography, life writing about illness. Among the first breast cancer

The autobiographies to receive critical attention were activist Rose Kushner’s *Breast Cancer: A Personal History and an Investigative Report*, which questioned the ubiquity of the Halsted mastectomy and called for study of environmental causes; journalist Betty Rollin’s *First, You Cry*, which brought breast cancer to the attention of mainstream U.S. media; and poet Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals*, which offered a Black lesbian feminist account of challenging medical hegemony and eschewing reconstructive surgery. Susan Sontag’s 1977 manifesto *Illness as Metaphor* called for a destigmatization of cancer patients and an end to military...
metaphors of waging war on this disease. During the early 1990s breast cancer memoirs such as Jenny Cole’s *Journey (with a Cancer)* and Patricia Duncker’s *Cancer: Through the Eyes of Ten Women* were published in England as consciousness-raising works. Analyzing these texts in *Fractured Borders*, I used feminist theory by Elizabeth Grosz and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson to examine five ways in which women’s ill bodies were represented—as *medicalized, leaky, amputated, prosthetic, and (not) dying*—and to argue that although cultural stigmatization diminishes ill women’s subjectivity, literary depictions of cancer enhance it by providing strategies for resistance, healing, and commemoration. This body of cancer literature grew exponentially throughout the 1990s, as the women’s health movement burgeoned, research funding increased dramatically during the Bill Clinton and Tony Blair administrations, and hundreds of writers explored their illness experiences creatively.

Photography also became a public medium for representing breast cancer during the 1980s. A defiant poster featuring a photograph by Hella Hammid that depicted the tattooed mastectomy scar of American poet Deena Metzger circulated widely, as did radical photographs of breasts *Marked Up for Amputation* by British photographer Jo Spence. Like literary representations, photographic depictions of breast cancer flourished in the early 1990s, and a post-mastectomy self-portrait entitled *Beauty Out of Damage* by the one-breasted fashion model Matuschka provoked controversy on the cover of the August 15, 1993, *New York Times Magazine*. Scholar Jean Dykstra correctly notes that while the self-portraits of Matuschka are known for their “polished, fine arts look” and their “pride in a still beautiful body,” Spence’s photographs offer “in-your-face documentation of her rage and feelings of powerlessness” in the face of this disease (4). Breast cancer photography became more racially diverse during the 1990s as well, when thirty African American women told their cancer stories and posed before the camera lens of Sylvia Dunnivant, who published *Celebrating Life* in 1995 to raise awareness in Black communities. Breast cancer autobiography and photography are thus linked through their publication and reception histories and their narrative strategies of representation. In the twenty-first century increasing numbers of breast cancer memoirs have featured illness photographs and, conversely, photographic narratives have included extensive autobiographical introductions or commentary, making the link between written and visual cancer narratives even stronger.⁷

The shifting contours of breast cancer’s discursive and cultural repre-
sentations are evident when we probe several additional ways in which twenty-first-century narratives differ from their twentieth-century counterparts. One difference is enhanced global awareness. The October 15, 2007, issue of *Time* magazine featured a provocative cover image of a young white woman, torso clothed in a map of the world, intently examining her breast for lumps; its headline reads “Why Breast Cancer Is Spreading Around the World.” Inside, an essay by Kathleen Kingsbury noted that 500,000 new and current breast cancer patients around the globe would die that year and offered testimonials from patients in China, India, Kenya, South Africa, Egypt, and elsewhere. The article pointed out that while breast cancer incidences are rising due to Western “meat-sweet” diets, high rates of obesity, immigration patterns, and possible environmental causes, early detection and treatment advances are not keeping pace transnationally. In Kenya, reported Mary Onyango, breast cancer feels hopeless to most women who contract it: “If you can’t travel overseas for treatment, you just sit and wait for your death” (Kingsbury, 37). Chinese patient Liu Lichun testified that she had never known about mammograms or mastectomies before contracting breast cancer and connecting with the U.S.-based advocacy group Susan G. Komen for the Cure: “I’d never heard of anyone in China with cancer who didn’t die” (Kingsbury, 36). The Lebanese writer Evelyne Accad explains in *The Wounded Breast* that many Arabic-speaking people “refer to cancer as Al-marad illi ma btitssamma: the disease not to be named”; she writes her memoir to work against silence and stigmatization in the Middle East (29). In *Manmade Breast Cancers* (2001) U.S. activist Zillah Eisenstein likewise posits a global imperative by developing “a breast-felt politics” and tracing “a theorized journey from my body to a politics of bodies for a healthful globe” (x, 61).

Furthermore, U.S. and British breast cancer narratives have become increasingly multicultural. They feature significant racial-ethnic, religious, sexual, national, and age diversity, a range of voices and images that I have attempted to capture in *Mammographies*. The writers, photographers, and photographic subjects I examine are African American, White, Latina, Asian American, and Native American; Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and secular; Iranian, Lebanese, Canadian, and Dominican as well as American and British; lesbians as well as heterosexuals; old and middle-aged women as well as young; male, female, and transgendered. Such diversity of focus is important not only for feminist inclusivity but also because of differential risk factors and disease outcomes. Ashkenazi
Jews are disproportionately vulnerable to BRCA mutations, for example, while African Americans, Native Americans, and lesbians with breast cancer are more likely to die of it than Caucasians are, for reasons having to do with genetics, childbirth status, economics, and/or treatment access.\(^8\)

Another way that postmillennial writing differs from earlier narratives lies in its critiques of mainstream cancer culture. Taken as a whole, the visual and verbal narratives that make up this study tend to question hegemonic cultural discourses and work against the consumer-oriented breast cancer culture that emerged in the West during the last two decades of the twentieth century—a sentimental culture characterized by the “pink kitsch” of the cancer marketplace (Barbara Ehrenreich’s term) and the corporate rallying of “Pink Ribbons, Inc.” with its defining “tyranny of cheerfulness” (Samantha King’s phrases).\(^9\) In her influential 2010 study *Pink Ribbon Blues* writer-activist Gayle Sulik critiques the corporate-driven development of “pink ribbon culture,” examines how mainstream media and breast cancer organizations promote pink products through “conscientious consumerism” and sell “survivorship,” and argues for a radical rethinking of this cultural phenomenon. David Jay echoes this critique in his commentary on the SCAR Project’s subtitle: “Many women battling breast cancer dislike the pink ribbon. They resent the commercialization of breast cancer that it represents. One of the SCAR Project subjects said to me, ‘If a man got prostate cancer, do you think someone would give him a pink t-shirt and teddy bear?’ It (unintentionally) diminishes something that is horrific, disfiguring, and deadly. A pink herring” (McCreery). While many breast cancer narrators appreciate the designation of October as National Breast Cancer Awareness Month and honor organizations such as Susan G. Komen for the Cure for its global advocacy, activists such as Ehrenreich, King, Sulik, and Jay challenge the corporate politics and consumerism that such initiatives endorse.

An additional characteristic of postmillennial representations of breast cancer is the rise of new narrative forms, notably graphic narratives and blogs. As Hillary Chute points out in *Graphic Women*, comics constitute an evolving form of “feminist cultural production” that offers “a new aesthetic emerging around self-representation that is both written and drawn” (1). While feminist graphic narratives address themes from sexuality to abuse to childhood memories, an important subset depicts the breast cancer experience, as illustrated by Marisa Acocella Mar-
chetto’s *Cancer Vixen,* Miriam Engelberg’s *Cancer Made Me a Shallow Person,* and Brian Fies’s *Mom’s Cancer,* all of which blend wry humor and intimate confession in whimsically drawn portraits of a self in crisis. Breast cancer blogs also abound in postmillennial culture, among them the *Y-me Forums* (www.forums.y-me.org) and Breast Cancer Action’s *Think Before You Pink* campaign (www.bcaction.org).

Defiant feminist blogs posted by spirited advocates have also gained cultural capital. Noteworthy examples include the late Rachel Moro’s *The Cancer Culture Chronicles* (www.cancerculturenow.blogspot.com), which critiqued pink consumerism as “insane,” provided updates on the blogger’s struggle with metastatic breast cancer, and garnered hundreds of weekly responses until the author’s death in 2012; and Peggy Orenstein’s postings (www.peggyorenstein.com/blog) on the inanities of breast cancer consumerism, which feature such titles as “The Trouble with Those Boobie Bracelets.” Blogs such as *Komenwatch* (www.komenwatch.org) that critique the methodology of Susan G. Komen for the Cure have gained readership, especially in light of the December 2011 controversy over that organization’s decision, ultimately retracted, to withdraw funds from Planned Parenthood that paid for underserved women’s mammograms. In her 2012 essay “Moving Beyond Pink Ribbons” Orenstein claims that only 15 percent of Komen’s budget in 2008 was allocated for research, whereas 55 percent ($200 million) went to “awareness education”—in her mind, a misplaced priority. Gayle Sulik’s blog (www.gaylesulik.com) likewise challenges the corporate ties of Susan G. Komen for the Cure; in February 2012 she asked, “Is Komen ‘Losing the Brand’?” Feminist graphic narratives and blogs focused on breast cancer often bring critical or humorous lenses to a profoundly serious subject.

A final distinctive feature of twenty-first-century breast cancer narratives is their emphasis on memorialization of nonsurvivors alongside the honoring of people living with this disease. Critiques of the word *survivor* and of mainstream cancer organizations’ emphasis on survivorship often arise in contemporary breast cancer narratives. This trend began with Ehrenreich’s 2001 essay “Welcome to Cancerland,” where she argued powerfully that “the mindless triumphalism of ‘survivorhood’ denigrates the dead and the dying. Did we who live ‘fight’ harder than those who have died? Can we claim to be ‘braver,’ better, people than the dead?” (53). The postmillennial turn to breast cancer autothanatography, life writing about dying, provides a vital cultural counternarrative, as
women living with metastatic disease recount their embodied struggles and their fierce resolve to embrace life for as long as they can. As Laura E. Tanner notes in Lost Bodies, “Thinking about the body in the context of mortality shakes up our assumptions of the body’s transparency” (6). Despite the textual and ethical challenges of “introducing the lost body into the literary image, the photographic frame, the public space,” narrative representations of suffering and grief affirm critically ill bodies otherwise “lost to cultural view” (2.5). The increasing publication of end-of-life narratives that contain introductions or conclusions penned by friends and family constitutes an evolving memorial tradition that empowers reader-viewers as empathic witnesses and provides communal spaces for mourning and remembering.

_Mammographies_ engages all of the postmillennial features of breast cancer narratives noted above, along with many others. My scholarly approach—best characterized as literary critical, feminist, and interdisciplinary—including detailed interpretation of the narrative strategies, thematic contours, and visual imagery in the texts under consideration. I deploy a range of theoretical perspectives including gender studies, photographic history and theory, medical humanities, disability studies, queer theory, and trauma studies. More specifically, I investigate a diverse range of memoirs and photographic narratives and consider what they signify culturally and how they invite audiences to respond. Activist memoirs that theorize the disease from feminist, queer, transnational, and/or environmentalist perspectives call for political action and for a scholarly and cultural emphasis on causes and prevention as well as on awareness and cure. Genealogical memoirs that explore genetic testing and prophylactic mastectomy engage the culturally vexed topic of inherited breast cancer and depict the writers’ struggles to make agonizing decisions regarding contingent embodiment, contested knowledge, and familial responsibility. Subversive memoirs that use rebellious humor to represent the breast cancer experience as wryly comic rather than (or as well as) tragic reflect the perspectives of women “living in prognosis” (S. Lochlann Jain’s phrase) or approaching death defiantly.

With regard to breast cancer photography, this project explores new trends since the late 1990s, most notably the movement away from individual self-portraiture to collaborative photographic narratives. In terms of shifting visual imagery, I analyze not only photographs of women’s scarred, post-operative breasts but also of their lymphedema, the arm swelling that can accompany mastectomy when lymph nodes are re-
moved, and of the hair loss that strikes most recipients of chemotherapy and often leads to preemptive and sometimes communal head-shaving. I interrogate as well raw and controversial photographs of women hospitalized, dying, and dead from breast cancer and explore their ethical and commemorative dimensions. And I move from indexical to iconic representation to explore memorial photographs of what remains: the abandoned running shoes, the unfinished book manuscripts, the shell and stone collections of women dead from cancer: ghostly traces of lives cut short.

In chapter 1, “Postmillennial Breast Cancer Photo-narratives: Technologized Terrain,” I use theoretical insights by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson to consider how tropes of experience, identity, embodiment, agency, and memory circulate in contemporary breast cancer photographic narratives, and I assess what the phrase technologized terrain signifies discursively and theoretically. I then analyze the queer theorizing, postmodern rhetoric of indeterminacy, and narrative performance of hair loss that characterize Catherine Lord’s 2004 photo-narrative The Summer of Her Baldness. I go on to explore photographer Lynn Kohlman’s commentary and technologically marked self-portraits in Lynn Front to Back (2005), the photo-narrative she published during her struggle with breast and brain cancer. In closing I discuss the ethical capacities of postmillennial breast cancer narratives and use critical arguments by philosophers Sara Ahmed and Kelly Oliver to gesture toward issues of witness and memorialization that I develop in subsequent sections of this study.

The next three chapters investigate the cultural discourses that inform contemporary memoirs written by women confronting breast cancer. In chapter 2, “Audre Lorde’s Successors: Breast Cancer Narratives as Feminist Theory,” I probe the narrative strategies of theorists who employ feminist and ecological consciousness in hybrid texts that serve simultaneously as illness memoirs and environmental polemics. These writers extend the pioneering scholarship of Lorde, who in The Cancer Journals (1980) and A Burst of Light (1988) presented the perspective of a “Black lesbian feminist warrior poet” and made visible the gendered, racial, and capitalist politics of this disease. I argue that Zillah Eisenstein’s Manmade Breast Cancers (2001), Evelyne Accad’s The Wounded Breast: Intimate Journeys Through Cancer (2001), and three essays published between 2007 and 2010 by S. Lochlann Jain—“Cancer Butch,” “Living in Prognosis,” and “Be Prepared”—extend Lorde’s feminist critique by interrogating the Western medical establishment’s corporate ties and
narrow range of cancer treatment protocols. These narratives further assert links between environmental carcinogens and the worldwide rise in breast cancer, challenge U.S. cancer culture for its emphasis on survivorship and hyperfemininity, and decry racist and heterosexist assumptions regarding global women’s cancer risks, experiences, and prognoses.

Chapter 3, “Narratives of Prophylactic Mastectomy: Mapping the Breast Cancer Gene,” examines memoirs from England and the United States that chronicle inherited breast cancer and women’s decisions to undergo preventive mastectomies in hopes of avoiding the fate of grandmothers, mothers, and/or sisters who died of the disease. Since researchers identified the BRCA1 gene in 1994 and BRCA2 in 1995, writers with a genetic predisposition toward breast cancer have begun to publish genealogical narratives. Among them are Janet Reibstein’s Staying Alive: A Family Memoir (2002), Elizabeth Bryan’s Singing the Life: A Family in the Shadow of Cancer (2007), and Jessica Queller’s Pretty Is What Changes: Impossible Choices, the Breast Cancer Gene, and How I Defied My Destiny (2008). I argue that these prophylactic mastectomy narratives feature pedagogical, memorializing, and autobiographical imperatives, and I assess their cultural and aesthetic impact as well as their shortcomings, notably the writers’ tendency toward a “single causality” approach to breast cancer, their lack of environmental consideration, and their (perhaps inevitable) use of competing discourses of biological determinism and self-determination.

Chapter 4, “Rebellious Humor in Breast Cancer Narratives: Deflating the Culture of Optimism,” focuses on narratives that employ incongruity, wit, and anti-pink humor as subversive antidotes to the terror and despair that often accompany breast cancer diagnoses and treatments. “Humor is not resigned, it is rebellious,” claimed Freud, and memoirists who scoff at breast cancer culture and evoke their readers’ empathic laughter agree. Meredith Norton’s Lopsided: How Having Breast Cancer Can Be Really Distracting (2008), Miriam Engelberg’s Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person (2006), and S. L. Wisenberg’s The Adventures of Cancer Bitch (2009) use ironic self-deprecation, tropes of self-division, and strategic self-assertion to defy breast cancer and the cancer marketplace as well as to confront their fears of debilitation and premature death. I argue that, paradoxically, the comic self-scrutiny and transgressive humor of these memoirs undermine the tyrannical cheerfulness that Samantha King rightly identifies as widespread in twenty-first-century breast cancer culture. In addition, I use Jo Anna Isaak’s theories of stra-
tactic narcissism and Hillary Chute’s insights into feminist graphic narratives to analyze the aesthetic impact and cultural critique that underlie the narrative form that each humorist chooses, from Norton’s hilarious pseudoconfessional mode to Engelberg’s sequential “memoir in comics” to Wisenberg’s combative, blog-centered text.

The next two chapters concentrate on shifting postmillennial trends in photographic representations of breast cancer. In chapter 5, “New Directions in Breast Cancer Photography: Documenting Women’s Postoperative Bodies,” I trace briefly the late twentieth-century history of cancer self-portraiture, then explore the turn toward collaborative photonarratives. Disconcerting images of women’s breasts after lumpectomy or mastectomy, defiant or depleted bodies, and bald heads following chemotherapy drive the five collections under consideration: Art Myers’s Winged Victory: Altered Images Transcending Breast Cancer (1996), Amelia Davis’s The First Look (2000), Jila Nikpay’s Heroines: Transformation in the Face of Breast Cancer (2006), Amy S. Blackburn and Cynthia Byram’s Caring for Cynthia (2008), and Charlee Brodsky and Stephanie Byram’s Knowing Stephanie (2003). Issues of visual rhetoric and representation with which I grapple include concealment versus revelation of post-surgical bodies, cultural fetishizing of healthy breasts and stigmatizing of “debreasted” embodiment, the cultural and emotional stakes of representing mastectomy scars (whether bare or tattooed), photographic challenges to hegemonic definitions of beauty and femininity, and visual strategies of eulogizing. I share scholar Lisa Cartwright’s view that mainstream media feature as breast cancer’s iconic “survivors” women who are young, white, thin, and glamorous. In analyzing what breast cancer does and means in contemporary Western cultures I thus consider not only how women’s post-surgical bodies are documented but also whose bodies are represented, and why. Building on Ehrenreich’s critique of breast cancer culture, I discuss ambivalent photo-narrative discourses of transcendence and triumphalism as well as liberating feminist discourses of self-disclosure and collaboration.

In chapter 6, “Cancer Narratives and an Ethics of Commemoration: Susan Sontag, Annie Leibovitz, and David Rieff,” I consider how different forms of photographic and biographical memorialization pay tribute to women who die from cancer, inviting reader-viewers to respond with empathy rather than voyeurism. My argument pivots on the controversial photographs by Leibovitz in A Photographer’s Life (2006) of Sontag during her decades-long struggle with cancer—from mastectomy to che-
motherapy to bone marrow transplant to decline and death—and on the memoir of his mother’s final year by Sontag’s son, David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2008). Drawing on analyses of trauma and visual representation by art historians Bracha L. Ettinger and Griselda Pollock, I argue that both Leibovitz’s nonsequential photographic narrative and Rieff’s biographical narrative offer grim, disturbing, yet eloquent and ultimately ethical commemorations of Sontag’s painful death from cancer and that by extension they help reader-viewers bear witness to and mourn the cancer deaths of others.

Chapter 7, “Bodies, Witness, Mourning: Reading Breast Cancer Autothanatography,” uses Susanna Egan’s theories from *Mirror Talk* and Sidonie Smith’s theories from “Identity’s Body” to scrutinize this chapter’s focal conceptual framework: life writing about dying. As case studies I contrast the narrative strategies of two journalistic autothanatographies, one premillennial and the other postmillennial: Ruth Picardie’s *Before I Say Goodbye: Recollections and Observations from One Woman’s Final Year* (1997) and Dina Rabinovitch’s *Take Off Your Party Dress: When Life’s Too Busy for Breast Cancer* (2007). Both women were British journalists who wrote widely acclaimed feature columns (and in Rabinovitch’s case, a popular blog) about their experience of living with and dying of breast cancer, Picardie in 1997 in *Observer Life* and Rabinovitch from 2004 to 2007 in the *Guardian*. Although each memoirist employs maternal, medicalized, and sartorial discourses to parse her cancer story publicly, Picardie’s twentieth-century narrative offers no cultural critique, while Rabinovitch’s twenty-first-century narrative uses a rhetoric of outrage to question medical experimentation, the economics of breast cancer, and the ubiquitous pinkwashing of the cancer marketplace. As autothanatographers, both Picardie and Rabinovitch display maternal anguish and instantiate self-memorialization, and like Leibovitz and Rieff, they engage readers as empathic witnesses. To conclude this chapter I apply concepts of communal grief and grievability articulated by Judith Butler to the project of breast cancer autothanatography.

Finally, in “Afterword: What Remains,” I examine unsettling photographic traces of the lives of three writers in this study cut short by untimely deaths from cancer. I consider the indexical and iconographic significance of Stephanie Byram’s running shoes, worn in several cancer marathons and captured photographically by Charlee Brodsky; Dina Rabinovitch’s jaunty chapeau, depicted in the final posting of her blog, “Take Off Your Running Shoes” and described as the perfect hat for a
woman wheelchair-bound and balding at forty-four; and Susan Sontag’s incomplete manuscripts, shell collection, and empty Manhattan apartment window as captured in memorial photographs by Annie Leibovitz. I explore what reader-viewers might make of these photographs—emotionally, ethically, and aesthetically—and engage scholar Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “enlarging the postmemorial circle” as a site of grief and remembrance.

*Mammographies* extends feminist knowledge of breast cancer by examining a wide array of postmillennial visual and verbal narratives and situating them culturally, discursively, and sociohistorically. My hope is that professors and students of literature, medical humanities, gender studies, and the visual arts, along with medical practitioners and health care professionals, will find this study useful. I write especially to honor breast cancer patients, former patients, and activists, as well as the friends and families of women and men who did not survive this disease.