Mammographies
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Published by University of Michigan Press

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Mammographies: The Cultural Discourses of Breast Cancer Narratives.

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Visual and autobiographical narratives that explore women’s lived experience of breast cancer and its cultural discourses are the subject of this book, which offers a critical analysis of postmillennial representations of a gendered and potentially lethal illness.¹ I call such narratives *mammographies*, a term that signifies both the technology of imaging by which most Western women learn that they have contracted this disease and the documentary imperatives that drive their written and visual mappings of the “breast cancer continuum” (King, xviii).² Photographic narratives that interrogate breast cancer’s material and technologized terrain provide this chapter’s focus, as I consider the representational dynamic between image and text in postmodern life-writing in which self-portraiture and medicalization feature prominently. As Paul Jay notes in “Posing: Autobiography and the Subject of Photography,” visual memory plays as central a role as historical memory in memoirs that feature “both the photograph as a subject in autobiography, and the subject as he or she comes to be defined by a photograph reproduced (or alluded to) in an autobiography” (191).³ The visual terrain that breast cancer photo-narratives map evokes different registers of the term *technologized*: photography as a technology, photographs as a means of documenting the technologies of breast cancer treatment, the photographic representation of technological imaging in/as a diagnostic or medical protocol, and the ways in which ill and medicalized bodies are mediated by technology.⁴ To examine ways in which narrators and reader-viewers of breast cancer photo-narratives construct multiple meanings regarding the somatic and symbolic contours of this disease, I address issues of contingent embodiment, visual/verbal representation, and viewer/reader reception, and I explore these questions: What distinctive contributions to readers’ and viewers’ understandings of women’s material and technologized bodies do breast cancer photo-narratives offer? How might feminist theories of illness, autobiography, and embodiment, and postmodern constructions
of narrative subjectivity, enhance analysis and interpretation of breast cancer's textual and visual representations? What tropes and personae, visual and rhetorical strategies, ethical and aesthetic debates, and opportunities for discursive resistance and/or audience witness do such narratives engage?

As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note in their introduction to *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, “telling is performative; it enacts the ‘self’ that it claims has given rise to an ‘I.’ And that ‘I’ is neither unified nor stable—it is fragmented, provisional, multiple, in process” (9). Nowhere are these postmodern axioms of performativity and contingency more apparent than in breast cancer photo-narratives, which render the complex subjectivities of women struggling to come to terms with a frightening and disruptive medical diagnosis, invasive surgery (usually lumpectomy or mastectomy), subsequent debilitating treatments such as chemotherapy and/or radiation, and shifting, often speculative prognoses that might indicate either remission or metastasis but rarely guarantee freedom from cancer, let alone cure. As Smith and Watson further note, “autobiographical acts of narration, situated in historical time and cultural place, deploy discourses of identity to organize acts of remembering that are directed to multiple addressees or readers. . . . They are performative, situated addresses that invite their readers’ collaboration in producing specific meanings for the ‘life’” (11).

In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson offer a useful theoretical model for analyzing contemporary breast cancer memoirs by identifying five key “constitutive processes of autobiographical subjectivity”: identity, experience, embodiment, agency, and memory (15–16). The identity that the narrator of a breast cancer photo-narrative constructs engages a speaking or a visually rendered “self” at once discursive and provisional, intersectional and unfixed. The lived experience that an autobiographer seeks to describe initiates a process of identity formation that involves interactions with material, cultural, economic, and psychic forces; these interactions, in turn, give rise to various forms of somatic and narrative subjectivity. Embodiment as a critical concept acknowledges bodies as sites of autobiographical knowledge, and narrators as anatomically, genetically, imaginatively, and sociopolitically situated. A struggle to claim some form of agency in the face of breast cancer’s somatic and technologized terrain informs the narrating subject’s methods of self-representation, whether utilizing shifting narrative strategies, negotiating cultural constrictions, or envisioning multiple or contingent forms
of embodiment. Memory serves breast cancer photo-autobiographers as a tool for creating meaning from an unrecoverable past by organizing material experience into narrative and visual testimony that moves, illuminates, or unsettles viewer-readers, who in turn collaborate (actively or implicitly) in acts of witness and spectatorship. Smith and Watson summarize well the autobiographical imperatives that inform postmillennial breast cancer photo-narratives: “As a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices, autobiographical narration offers occasions for negotiating the past, reflecting on identity, and critiquing cultural norms and narratives” (“Introduction,” Interfaces, 8–9).

In The Invading Body: Reading Illness Autobiographies Einat Avrahami argues that contemporary illness narratives “underline the uneasy coexistence of the lived body with the multiply inscribed cultural body” and compel an implicit reader-viewer-writer-photographer contract based on a “reality effect” that she defines as a connection established through narrative revelation of a traumatized self-in-crisis (8, 14). Discussing the “contingent and contiguous relationships between writers’ and artists’ experience of [potentially] terminal illness and their textually or visually displayed selves,” Avrahami suggests that illness photo-narratives comprise “an emerging subgenre of self-documentation whose indexical relationship with the reality of illness parallels the contiguity of [nonvisual] illness narratives with somatic experience” (3, 19). Avrahami builds on work of earlier scholars of autopathography (life writing about illness), notably G. Thomas Couser, who has theorized representations of recovering and vulnerable bodies in illness autobiographies; Arthur Frank, who has theorized the liberatory and delimiting dimensions of illness restitution narratives; and Leigh Gilmore, who has theorized the relationship among narrative subjectivity, the material body, and somatic memory by raising such compelling questions as “What does skin have to do with autobiography?” and “What sort of muse, guide, or judge is memory?” (15). In examining affinities between autobiographical and photographic representations of illness, Avrahami extends the scope of earlier theorists and anticipates this study’s parameters.

As a distinctive subset of illness narratives, postmillennial breast cancer photo-narratives reflect complex issues of subjectivity, embodiment, and medical prognosis. Many writers and photographers represent their cancer experience from a retrospective vantage point; such narratives may follow a linear, restitutive trajectory—from diagnosis to treatment to a tentative, contingent recovery—or they may offer circular, fragmented,
or multimedia structures that include journal entries, emails, poems, photographic collages, or “then versus now” temporal juxtapositions. These narrators recount verbally and visually their surgical/technological/pharmaceutical treatments and their subsequent suffering and/or rehabilitation, and they simultaneously critique hegemonic cultural discourses about the breast cancer body. Some writer-photographers move from autopathography to autothanatography, a focus that juxtaposes the somatic and technologized experience of breast cancer to the patient’s recurrence and decline. In that case reader-viewers may undertake a particularly daunting and ethically fraught task of witness. Although autothanatography might initially seem to be a subgenre of illness narratives, all memoirs and photographs are haunted by mortality. Susanna Egan, a feminist theorist of autothanatography, makes this point in Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography: “The spectre of death hovers over all autobiography, usually unnamed, providing serious impetus to the activity of setting the record straight, clearing old scores, avoiding misinterpretation, taking control of the absolutely uncontrollable—the ‘end of the story’” (196). In On Photography Susan Sontag makes a similar claim: “Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of all people.” For this reason, she concludes, “all photographs are memento mori” (3–4).

A close analysis of Catherine Lord’s The Summer of Her Baldness (2004) and Lynn Kohlman’s Lynn Front to Back (2005) will illuminate the shifting representational terrain of breast cancer photo-narratives. The politics of location and narrative subjectivities of these two autobiographers differ. Lord, a lesbian feminist artist and photographer born on the Caribbean island of Dominica and now residing in the United States, was in her early fifties, living with a long-term partner, and writing a book on Dominica when diagnosed with stage-two breast cancer with lymph node involvement in May 2000. Shortly after her diagnosis she postponed her research and adopted the email-centered nom de plume Her Baldness as a wry voice through whom to inform friends and family of her cancer and treatment protocol: lumpectomy followed by six to nine months of chemotherapy and radiation. Using this wry doppelganger as a way “to make illness a space of language,” Lord subsequently converted her emails and documentary photographs into a queer feminist photo-narrative subtitled A Cancer Improvisation (237). Kohlman, a world-renowned American fashion model whose airbrushed image
appeared on the covers of *Vogue, Elle,* and *Harper’s Bazaar* throughout the 1970s, spent subsequent decades as an advertising designer for Anne Klein and DKNY before being diagnosed in 2002 with stage-three breast cancer, in 2003 with stage-four brain cancer. She was in her fifties, married with a teenage son, and a professional photographer at the time of her cancer diagnoses, which she later described as terrifying: “The first time, in September 2002, it was my right breast, and I was emotionally numb. The second time, in October 2002, it was my left breast, and I was devastated. The third time, in March 2003, it was my brain, and I felt like I was falling into an unimaginable, endless black abyss” (np). Kohlman underwent a double mastectomy followed months later by brain surgery; both procedures necessitated extensive radiation and chemotherapy, after which she determined to break silence about her illnesses by publishing a photo-narrative driven by discourses of somatic defiance and spiritual healing despite her dire prognosis. Kohlman’s discursive position is thus implicitly autothanatographic, whereas Lord’s narrative stance tends toward autopathography and restitution.

Despite these salient differences, Lord and Kohlman employ similar textual strategies to inscribe invasive medicalization and somatic and discursive resistance. As we shall see, they present compelling self-portraiture and high-tech visual imagery of their breast cancer bodies as central to their narratives, and they invite reader-viewers to engage with them as empathic witnesses.

Performing Butch Baldness:
Catherine Lord’s Photo-narrative

Catherine Lord’s photographic memoir, *The Summer of Her Baldness,* addresses an email listserv known as “FOCLSRB” (Friends of Catherine Lord’s Right Breast), chronicles her treatment for invasive breast cancer from May 2000 to February 2001, and introduces reader-viewers to Her Baldness, the persona Lord adopts while documenting her illness via writing and photographs. As reviewer Delease Wear notes, “The most intriguing aspect of this improvisation is Her Baldness, a quick-tempered, passionate presence who ‘talks big’ and ‘talks a lot,’” yet this seductive and sometimes annoying amanuensis “is more than Lord’s witty experiment in narration. She is also an enactment of the fluidity of identity, here the ‘conflicted relationship’ between the before-she-got-breast-
cancer—Catherine Lord and the postdiagnosis, bald, bolder, uncensored Catherine Lord” (Wear, 378). The centrality of the trope of self-division to Lord’s narrative is evident from Wear’s analysis; Lord further exploits that trope by framing the dated chapters of her image text with a prologue and an epilogue, written retrospectively, that blur the distinction between writer and persona. Threaded among the sections of her verbal narrative, usually by way of introducing chapters, are self-portraits of her bald pate and photographs of the mammography machines, breast scans, and hospital warning signs that document her lived experience of medicalization.

Lord’s narrative is informed by feminist, queer, and postmodern theories of gender, sexuality, illness, and embodiment. Early on she admits uncomfortably that she dreads going bald more than facing lumpectomy or chemotherapy; subsequent emails thus present her responses to alopecia, from embarrassment to grief to theorization. Lord positions hair presence and absence as a queer feminist issue and a culturally inflected symbol of gender identity. “Looking Backward,” the narrative’s prologue, orients reader-viewers by explaining that Her Baldness (subsequently HB) first appeared on “the day my hair lost the last battle,” this persona having decided to “launch herself into the void like Yves Klein (who, after all, faked the photograph) or Thelma and Louise (who couldn’t be allowed to live in America) or the postqueer hacker cyber assassin I wish I were (although that woman is younger, hasn’t caught cancer yet, and has more energy than I do) . . .” (5). Here Lord combines strategic self-deprecation with wry references to renegade figures from popular visual culture; her allusion to the “postqueer” cyberhacker reveals as well an affinity for postmodern feminist underground humor. Lord’s subsequent assessment of HB reveals both self-judgment and grudging gratitude. On the one hand HB “had her petty moments”: she could be manipulative, whiny, and vindictive; she was often misguided and still more often frightened; and she not only had “caught cancer but she had contracted the two most common symptoms of cancer: Unwanted Aloneness and Loss of Control. Instead of being angry at her cancer, or the idea of cancer, or evolution . . . or advanced capitalism, she got mad at people she knew,” excising them from her listserv when their responses failed to please her (3). In short, Lord insists retrospectively, HB was a wimp, an autocrat, and a poseur.

On the other hand, as an avenging doppelganger HB provides Lord with a fiercely resistant voice and the zany nerve of a striptease artist.
Her Baldness . . . made up this list so that she could be strong and proud and brave and full of energy and motion in the middle of the desolation that is cyberspace, even if she hated how she looked and it took pretty much all she had sometimes to get down the stairs to the computer in her studio and stay there. . . . She plucked an audience out of thin air. Having done so, she played it shamelessly. She sang for her supper. She danced for her dinner. She stripped for sympathy. She posted her fear. (3–4)

The rhetorical strategy of parallelism invests this passage with an incantatory rhythm, while the catalog of HB’s rebellious performative gestures and reliance on a loyal if voyeuristic audience provides both psychological confession and jolting humor. Lord thus juxtaposes ironic self-deprecation and liberating self-assertion to ascribe to HB a transgressive agency and an authoritative voice that both verbalizes and deflects Lord’s fears of cancer, medicalization, and mortality.

Lord’s queer positionality offers her a lens through which to depict her cancer experience as discursive, postmodern, and transgendered. Early in her narrative she politicizes breast cancer by comparing her email revelations to coming-out: “It’s like coming out of the closet. You don’t do it just once, and once you’ve done it you can never stop. . . . Cancer is a disease I can’t just have, or be . . . but an identity I must state, or choose not to state, at every encounter” (18). To seize discursive and imaginative control over her disease, she uses language as a means of reconceptualizing her gender identity: “Remember, speculate, invent, get it down, make language fly, whirl in my own baldness. My world, my language, my mind. A new gender” (18). Hairlessness transforms her from femme to butch, she later notes, but accepting baldness is nonetheless difficult. Although Lord is initially proud of the “outrageously mannish invert butchly LESBIAN haircut” that her hair loss from chemo necessitates, she quickly recognizes its stigmatizing aspects: “Metastatic art world gossip. I am being recategorized from invincible castrating lesbian bitch to has-been on her last legs. She used to be so tough. That’s what they’ll say. She must have gone downhill” (32). Nonetheless, Lord determines to deflect the stare of others—that objectifying gaze that, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has shown, is used to mark bodily differences as deviant (Staring, 1–5). Instead of confronting the starers verbally, Lord resolves simply to “Be bald. Take it as a badge of honor,” since she recognizes that despite her illness she still can write, laugh, and take disparagement in stride: “The
performance performs the performer. If you don’t let bald in, neither can other people. . . . Collect the stares and use them later” (33, 40). Yet the fact remains that hair loss unsettles Her Baldness. As “a signifier that has detached itself from its time,” Lord notes, “my hair [is] dead, a museum of female insecurity and lesbian codes” (35).

Despite these concerns, hair loss ultimately provides Lord with a touchstone for theorizing gender, culture, power.

Hair is something the strong strip from the weak, be they animals or wayward women or boot camp recruits. My skull felt thinner, as if it could crack wide open in a social setting, and the mirror in a middle-aged woman’s bathroom is not a private place. It is irrevocably and inexorably a social setting. (36)

Once the narrator verbalizes her hair loss anxiety to her “queer family” via email, she employs HB to reimagine baldness as strength—at once a location from which to interrogate public-private binaries, an aesthetic preference to affirm, and a defiant political stance against the thralldom of hegemonic femininity. Ultimately the narrator refuses to wear a wig but instead embraces her shiny pate as a sign of narrative subjectivity and somatic and cultural resistance: “Baldness becomes me, in a literal sort of way, a hell of a lot better than a pink ribbon” (44).

The photographs that Lord uses to introduce each section of her narrative appear without caption and range from self-portraiture to documentation of her medicalized status. The book’s initial photographic representation of the writer’s hair loss—a color close-up shot on the frontispiece of a glowing scalp, bald except for occasional brown follicles—jolts viewers who expect a conventional portrait featuring the subject’s face and gaze. Further indexical self-representation is withheld until the narrative’s conclusion, when viewers confront a contact sheet that contains the original image and additional shots of the narrator’s nearly bald scalp as her hair slowly diminishes. Intriguingly, the progression of hair loss and somatic revelation in this photographic sequence is nonlinear and visually unpredictable; the sixth frame, for example, arguably reveals more hair than does the fifth. Thus Lord subtly disrupts any facile desire on the part of viewers for a restitutive narrative from baldness to hair restoration.

The photographs that precede each chapter of The Summer of Her Baldness inscribe hospital treatment rooms and corridors as alienating
technologized landscapes, occasionally mediated by a vase of flowers or a nurse’s desk covered with computers, calendars, and framed family photographs. One photograph depicts the daunting entrance of a magnetic resonance imaging device; another presents an imposing rectangular chrome machine with multiple doors, elaborate tubes extending through various portals, and an indecipherable and almost comical sign handwritten in cursive and instructing absent medical personnel to “Remove Tubing Fri. PM (Or Thursday)” (9, 151). Other photographs capture similarly prescriptive signage, this time directed to patients: “If you are currently receiving chemotherapy, please double flush the toilet”; “NOTICE: IF YOU ARE PREGNANT, OR THINK YOU MAY BE PREGNANT, PLEASE INFORM THE TECHNOLOGIST PRIOR TO YOUR EXAMINATION” (95, 215). These signs remind viewers that biomedicine and the medical gaze are “disciplinary regimes” invested in surveillance and that patients are rarely accorded self-determination (Foucault, 1).
Lord represents the cancer patient’s body as technologized terrain most dramatically in a black-and-white photographic juxtaposition of two mammography scans of her cancerous right breast. These slides contain impenetrable diagnostic scripting—“Lord Rt Med Breast 0/8 x 17 FFD = 145,” and so forth—as well as the temporal marker 9-12-00 (205). The inability to decipher either the medical notations or the eerie gray shadings of the scans creates in many viewers an anxiety parallel to that of the patient. Furthermore, the scans’ positioning in this photograph subtly parodies conventional media representations of women’s sexualized breasts, since what would ordinarily be the nipple area is highlighted by a white diagonal line that lashes the black background and a narrow strip of what might pass as cleavage is evident between the two sides of the image. The need for surgical removal of the diseased portions of this technologically imaged breast is implicit in the photograph, which disrupts the breast’s cultural sexualization by depicting it as the subject of medical intervention.

In addition to electronic commentaries and framing photographs, Lord’s hybrid narrative incorporates email responses of friends in a wry dialectic that resembles a cross between a Greek chorus and a queer theory seminar. In response to Lord’s email expressing her decision not to...
“wig out” but to wear hats to conceal her hairlessness, a reader writes wittily, “Don’t forget the new relationship is not only with your hats, but more importantly with your pate. HAVE A DATE WITH YOUR PATE!!” (38). In response to a highly theoretical email from Lord about cancer and medicalization, a friend identified as “WHYRAIN” replies, “JESUS Catherine, I always knew you were capable of the most Wittgensteinian ruminations, but baldness has apparently sent you into the philosophical ether” (42). As one friend teases Lord for overtheorizing her disease, another matches her excess. In response to a message entitled “Her Baldness Meets Beth and Gets High on Gender,” Lord’s listserv recipient “SEC” offers her or his own queer reading: “The gay men are all shaving their heads to mystify their balding/aging effects, so you were probably passing as a gay man, who was trying to pass as a young man. Just think, as you try to look more and more indecisive and ‘girlish’—BUTCH BOTTOM!” (117, 123). With incisive wit and a rhetoric of gender bending, the members of Lord’s email circle often one-up the primary narrator.

Like many postmillennial breast cancer narratives, The Summer of Her Baldness includes reflection on the U.S. cultural silencing of possible environmental factors in the current breast cancer epidemic. In Lord’s wry inventory of her breast cancer’s likely causes she lists “chlorides, pollutants . . . chewing the fat of dead animals” along with her “melancholic disposition,” her status as a lesbian who has never given birth, and her family history of two grandmothers who contracted this disease (26). Her implicit environmental critique focuses on carcinogenic treatment protocols: she reminds readers of the historic relationship of the chemotherapy agent Cytoxin to mustard gas in World War I, repeatedly likens her chemo cocktail to weed killer, and calls radiation a “carcinogenic beam” (48, 72, 117). What Lord’s physicians refer to as her chemo “recipe” (the “perversely feminized metaphor oncologists prefer,” she notes sardonically) is surely toxic: “Adriamycin and Cytoxan: they fit right in on the pesticide shelf” (48). Humor masks anxiety, of course. Even as Lord acknowledges the necessity of chemotherapy, she worries retrospectively about its harmful effects on Her Baldness, who “spent six months absorbing into her body substances invented by the military to make genocide more efficient” and thus can surely never be considered cured (171).

In her epilogue, a farewell letter to Her Baldness (now called H as a sign of her disappearing prominent status) written a year after the completion of her cancer treatment, Lord theorizes illness from a postmodern perspective, rejects once more the dichotomy of public versus
private space, and interrogates the stigma and self-blame that accompany a breast cancer diagnosis. “I need to talk,” writes Lord to her former amanuensis. “This is not to say that I miss you, because I can’t decide whether I like you, but I am well aware that I owe you” (233). H invokes Lord’s ambivalence not only because she evokes unwanted memories of traumatic cancer treatments but also because she exposes Lord’s narcissistic response to illness: “Not only do you remind me of a time of fear and physical discomfort but you embarrass me. You spoke too loudly. . . . You pontificated. You patronized. You were bossy. You were prone to rage. You were maudlin. Sometimes you cried at the keyboard. You were greedy. You snarled” (235–36). Lord’s linguistic excess serves as a tool for grappling with self-division, as she transfers to her imaginary doppelganger her fear, rage, and grief at her illness. Yet her whimsical representation of H suggests that this narrative persona understood early on what the cancer patient and writer analyzed only retrospectively—that illness as a social space infringes upon identity and recasts public-private boundaries.

Illness is not something that happens to you but something you are—not someone’s mother, for example, but the colon resection in room 235 that needs to be turned in the middle of the night. Illness is a transaction that involves other people, a lot of them. . . . Being ill can make you sicker than cancer. Illness is lonely, all the more so because it affords you no solitude. The so-called private pain of illness is in fact an observed, calibrated, measured, unremittingly public space. (236)

In this passage Lord theorizes illness as a vexed identity marker and medicalization as invasive technologized terrain. These insights were possible only through the invention of H as doppelganger, she concludes—a figure that served not only as her creator’s alter ego but also as “a narrative device, a means to tell a story, a tool” (237).

Lord’s breast cancer photo-narrative—feminist, queer, postmodern—openly identifies the performative strategies on which the writer-photographer relies. It also playfully interrogates gender, as seen in HB’s musings on “whether the man of the house caught cancer or the femme between the sheets” (5). Multiple audiences bear witness to Lord’s testimony through what philosopher Kelly Oliver terms “response-ability,” an
empathic form of listening that can hear an illness narrator into speech: intimate friends of Lord encourage her via email responses; her partner collaborates through dialogue included in the narrative; and readers of the published narrative who have never met its creator respond as part of the implicit contract Lord offers via her text’s “reality effect” (Oliver, 15; Avrahami, 8). Ultimately *The Summer of Her Baldness* uses queer theory, strategic narcissism, and a postmodern rhetoric of indeterminacy to unmask the vulnerabilities of breast cancer patients and the self-reflexivity of postmillennial cancer narratives.

Marking Cancer’s Contingent Embodiment: Lynn Kohlman’s Photo-narrative

After enduring a lumpectomy when her breast cancer was initially believed to be localized, a double mastectomy when her surgeon discovered cancer in her second breast, a delicate brain surgery for glioblastoma that resulted in staples being implanted and left visible in her scalp, and a recurrence of brain cancer two weeks later that necessitated massive radiation and years of grueling chemotherapy, Lynn Kohlman determined until her death in 2008 to “present herself as the beautiful public body of cancer,” as one obituary put it (Horwell). Her written and visual assessment of the cancer experience in *Lynn Front to Back* presents it as both catastrophic and transformational: “Within a matter of seven months, I went from being healthy and whole to missing two breasts and having 37 titanium staples in my head. I needed to find my own inner source of strength and power. Maybe other people don’t have to go through cataclysmic transformations for this kind of awakening to take place, but for me, that’s what happened” (np). Such temporal markers as the phrase “within . . . seven months” appear often in this photo-narrative, unsurprisingly given the unusual speed with which Kohlman received diagnoses of two life-threatening cancers, but time constitutes just one of several textual markers. Other markers are spatial, as seen in the titular phrase “front to back.” Still others are technological, for the experimental medical procedures that Kohlman endures produce a radically contingent body repeatedly marked up for surgery or radiation and visually marked (and remarked upon) thereafter.

*Lynn Front to Back* features commercial photographs and self-
portraits of the model turned photographer turned cancer patient; Kohlman’s written account of the highlights of her personal and professional life and her lived experience of cancer; photographs she took of famous friends in the fashion world—Perry Ellis, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan—alongside portraits of her husband, Mark Obenhaus, and their son Sam; and testimonials by friends, family members, and associates that read eerily like eulogies for a woman then still living. Kohlman’s tone is resolute, confident, and self-fashioning. “I never believed in my beauty as a model, but here I am, 57 years old, with a double mastectomy, hair fried from radiation, never feeling more beautiful! It’s another shift, front to back” (np). In her determination to redefine beauty in the face of catastrophic illness and bodily trauma, she follows in the footsteps of Matuschka, the U.S. model whose post-mastectomy photographic self-portrait *Beauty Out of Damage* caused controversy when it appeared in 1994 on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* as a defiant step toward destigmatizing breast cancer (Ferraro, 24–27). Kohlman ups the representational ante on Matuschka, however, by publishing an extensive photo-narrative, not just isolated shocking photographs, and by baring repeatedly before the camera’s eye both her sutured chest and her surgically stapled skull.

One compelling representational strategy in *Lynn Front to Back* is the text’s initial juxtaposition, immediately following the title page and Donna Karan’s foreword, of two striking “then vs. now” photographic portraits of Kohlman. Although neither photograph is titled or dated, the representation of Kohlman’s airbrushed face and nude torso by Barry Lategan that appears on the left page clearly captures the youthful, sexualized model of the 1970s; her wide eyes gaze seductively at the camera, her pixie haircut parted on the left is fetching, her breasts are full and firm. The photograph of Kohlman on the right page, taken by Obenhaus thirty years later, paints a radically different portrait of material embodiment, one that foregrounds the ravages of brain and breast cancer. Her eyes, now melancholy, no longer face the camera’s lens but gaze instead into the distance; her thin forearms are bound by hospital tape, an IV needle or portable catheter protruding from the bandage on the left. For me, what Roland Barthes terms the *punctum* of a photograph—the element that pricks, jolts, disturbs a viewer emotionally—is in this instance Kohlman’s haircut, a kind of Mohawk necessitated by the semi-circular metal staples that crown her half-shaved head at precisely the line that the left part traced in the 1975 photograph. The postmillennial photograph’s *studium*—the meaning derived from its implied cultural
context—occurs via the temporal juxtaposition of hegemonically feminine breasts from 1975 and scarred, absent, gender-neutral ones from 2005, markers that signify surgical or technologized invasion (Barthes, 27–28). Kohlman’s scarred chest jars viewers not just in its breastlessness but also in its bold display of protruding ribs and its stark—is it possible to feel this?—beauty. Kohlman uses that noun frequently both in her photo-narrative and in interviews following her surgeries to describe the wounded body she embraces and displays, “determined not to hide behind my scars”: “I have finally realized, my breasts gone . . . I am beautiful” (np). Viewers may likewise relish the reconfigured iconography of beauty that Kohlman’s ravaged chest and sutured head assert, although the autothanatographic implications of such ravages may create an ethically fraught response to this visual representation of a woman unlikely to live much longer. As a model and a fashion ad designer, Karan notes, Kohlman brought to her work an “androgynous street edge” (Karan, np). The earlier embrace of a transgendered aesthetic accounts perhaps for Kohlman’s relative ease in redefining beauty through her wounded embodiment, as illustrated by the assessment she shares with Karan that titanium staples made her look “elegant and edgy” and by the verve with which Kohlman responds to the punk rocker who asks her admiringly which famous hairdresser created her amazing haircut, “Dr. Holland at Sloane-Kettering” (np).

As S. Lochlann Jain notes in her critical commentary on Kohlman’s cancer photographs, this subject’s embodied and technologized markers defy the facile pinkness of contemporary breast cancer culture: “These scars display the trace of illness, the memorial of death” (“Cancer Butch,” 522). Kohlman’s scars and staples remind viewers that many markers displayed on the bodies of cancer patients occur from invasive treatments and technologies, not from the disease itself. Although Jain expresses discomfort with the ways in which “Kohlman’s images bring the mastectomy into an aesthetic of the beautiful death,” she admires the photographer’s decision to present her scars as “public, tough, and masculine”; their beauty, Jain contends, “lies not in the way they mark mortality but, rather, in their hyperdesigned quality, in the way they draw attention to the markings that technology leaves on the body” (522–24). While Jain’s analysis sheds valuable light on the breast cancer body as technologized terrain, her claim that photographic images of Kohlman’s scars contribute to “an aesthetic of the beautiful death” does not acknowledge sufficiently the subject’s narrative testimony of her struggle to stay alive and
the trauma she experienced from the breast and brain cancers whose surgical treatment caused her scars.

Kohlman’s technologized body provides the subject matter of another photograph by Obenhaus, *Radiation*, which depicts a figure that appears posthuman, scalp wrapped mysteriously in a net resembling protective fencing gear, marked up for brain radiotherapy and entering a massive
treatment unit. This spectral photograph presents the cancer patient/subject, labeled Lynn Kohlman, prone, shrouded, and vulnerable. Its accompanying text, chosen by Kohlman, features an excerpt from Paolo Coelho's *Warrior of the Light* that emphasizes human suffering and resistance: “I carry with me the marks and the scars of battles— / they are the witnesses of what I suffered / and the rewards of what I conquered” (Kohlman, np). As noted below, such warrior discourse has a distinguished if vexed history in feminist cancer narratives; here Kohlman documents her resolve to endure invasive treatments in the hope of prolonging her life.

By her own admission Kohlman wished when young to become an artist rather than a model; she never felt comfortable as a glamorous photographic subject, yet she relished her location on the other side of the camera's lens. Her experience as a photographer gave her the courage to combat cancer, as she explains in the textual commentary that accompanies a photograph of the Rolling Stone's Keith Richards, his wild hair wrapped in a bandanna that covers a tan and wrinkled forehead, his smiling eyes gazing boldly at the camera.

Photography. My timid nature dissipates, as I peer through my lens, making direct eye contact with my subject. . . . This intense sensation cuts to my core, and I feel joy, elation, and lightness; like flying. This experience is so explosive that, when faced with cancer, I knew that accessing this place within me would give me the strength to fight for my life. (np)

The fact that Kohlman sought courage as photographer rather than as photographic subject suggests the need for analytic focus not only on photographs taken of her by others but also on her cancer self-portraiture. *Self-Portrait with Expanders* appears initially to represent merely the photographer turned cancer patient capturing her post-surgical image through the lens and a mirror. Her textual commentary, however, conveys Kohlman's indignation regarding the *studium* of this photograph, the prevalence of a male-dominant gaze and the fetishizing of large breasts in U.S. culture. Her flattened, post-mastectomy right breast appears to be growing in this photograph, while her left is slightly smaller but also puffy. Kohlman notes that although she agreed initially with her physician's recommended strategy of breast reconstruction, she encountered two problems: extreme pain during the process of reconstruction, and
the surgeon’s refusal to accept her decision to reduce her breasts rather than augment them. “Nobody had warned me how painful expanders could be,” she explains; “it was like medieval torture every week, it was as if the screws were being turned tighter and tighter” (np). Furthermore, her breast surgeon was willing to implant only large breast expanders; when Kohlman objected that all along she had requested size 32B, she was informed that “the teardrop shape, smaller implants are not avail-
able in this country” (np). Outraged, she reports having challenged her surgeon to no avail, although she ultimately has the expanders removed and thereby resists hegemonic femininity and breast fetishization at the hands of her medical practitioner.

Kohlman acknowledges many other traumatic moments during her cancer struggles, most notably on a yoga retreat with Donna Karan and instructor Rodney Yee when she had “what I can only describe as an out-of-body experience. It was as if something was running up my spine, and I had this terrible taste in my mouth. Meanwhile, I was watching myself from someplace on the ceiling, looking down, feeling like I would never return to my body. I woke up screaming, shaking uncontrollably” (np). When the same sensations occurred the following day with Yee and Karan as witnesses, Yee proclaimed that Kohlman was experiencing kundalini rising. Kohlman demurred, aware that only yogis with many years of practice could reach such heights and that her seizures likely signified brain cancer, a diagnosis confirmed days later by her neurologist. To describe the resolve with which she confronts this new disease, Kohlman employs a rhetorical strategy used by previous cancer theorists from Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* to Audre Lorde in *The Cancer Journals*: a warrior discourse that the beleaguered patient adopts to gird her loins for battle against an encroaching enemy. Sontag, of course, famously critiques militant cancer metaphors; Lorde, in contrast, embraces warrior imagery, identifying it with the legendary Greek Amazons and with the one-breasted women warriors of Dahomey, her African homeland, from whom she drew courage to combat her illness (Sontag, 66–67; Lorde, 13–16). In her use of warrior imagery Kohlman departs from both the Western militaristic cancer discourse that Sontag challenges and the Amazonian imagery that Lorde adopts, choosing instead to imagine a samurai identity through which to combat her cancers: “I had been slammed to the ground and thrown down an abyss. Now I envisioned picking myself up and emerging a samurai warrior, sword in hand, ready for battle” (np). She explains this imagistic choice in pragmatic terms that often turn spiritual: “I already have western science covering me, and so, as in a battle, I needed to come in from the east. Whether I am on chemotherapy or not, I am on a concentrated regime of meditation and yoga to focus my breath and grab my soul; acupuncture and craniosacral therapy to normalize the flow of my energy as it courses through my body” (np). In choosing this holistic path she joins many contemporary cancer memoirists in detailing the meditative practices to which they turn in hopes of healing.

Kohlman’s emphasis on the cancer patient’s embodied agency foregrounds a perspective shared by Zillah Eisenstein in *Manmade Breast Cancers*.
My breast cancer body does not say enough about how other body demands have choreographed my life. Although breast cancer has often suffocated me . . . my body has had other selves. I am never simply my cancer because I have other bodies and I am something besides my body struggles. (42)

This manifesto reminds reader-viewers that Catherine Lord and Lynn Kohlman also have other bodies besides the ones represented in their photo-narratives, have had additional bodily demands in the course of their lives, are something besides their embodied struggles. Like Eisenstein, they invite audiences to invest them with full humanity.

Witnessing Breast Cancer Bodies and Testimonies

Feminist postmodern theory has long demonstrated that gendered bodies are never fixed but ever in process—multiple, contingent, and fluid. Since the body is both material and discursive, any feminist understanding of its corporeality must be mediated by its spoken contexts. As Judith Butler notes,

As an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation . . . a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation. (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 272)

She thus contends that “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (272). How women’s bodies have been constructed, objectified, politicized, and re-formed therefore becomes a central question for contemporary feminism and its visual and verbal representations of breast cancer. Indeed, the constructions of gender, technologized embodiment, and somatic resistance found in women’s postmillennial breast cancer photo-narratives draw important links between “the everyday body as it is lived, and the regime of disciplinary and regulatory practices that shape its form and behavior” (Shildrick and Price, 8).

Because of the power and urgency that accrue to visual and verbal
accounts of breast cancer, writers/photographers such as Lord and Kohlman infuse their photo-narratives with sociopolitical, ethical, and testimonial dimensions and engage readers and viewers as postmodern witnesses. Traditionally humans have borne witness when giving or hearing legal testimony, advancing spiritual claims, or revealing traumatic experiences, whether public traumas such as slavery, the Holocaust, and acts of genocide or private traumas such as rape, incest, or life-threatening illness. The concept of witness thus has juridical, religious, psychological, and medical histories as well as narrative status. As Oliver explains in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, “the process of witnessing, which relies on address and response—always in tension with eyewitness testimony—complicates the notion of historical truth and moves us beyond any easy dichotomy between history and psychoanalysis” (2). Moreover, witnessing constitutes “the basis for all subjectivity,” since becoming either a human or a narrative/discursive subject is a dialogic process that requires connectivity, a circulation of energies that constitutes a “fundamental ethical obligation” (715). As acts of visual or verbal subjectivity and witness that call in turn for reciprocal, or secondary, witnessing, contemporary breast cancer photo-narratives invite viewers and readers to embrace an imaginary identification with suffering and resistant others.

In Lord’s *The Summer of Her Baldness* and in Kohlman’s *Lynn Front to Back* this imaginary identification on the part of reader-viewers occurs through what philosopher Sara Ahmed terms the “emotionality of texts,” which is “one way of describing how texts are ‘moving’ or how they generate effects” (12). Textual emotionality occurs, she argues, through compelling narrative use of figures of speech, especially metaphor, which renders likeness, and metonymy, in which the part represents the whole. Lord’s photo-narrative highlights Her Baldness not only as the narrator’s grim double but also as a metaphor for the ravages of breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, whereas Kohlman’s photo-narrative employs metonymy in its implicit titular equation of reading *Lynn Front to Back* and knowing its subject intimately. Emotional texts, Ahmed concludes, are both “sticky, or saturated with affect” and imaginatively grounding for readers: “What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place” (11).

Avrahami notes in *The Invading Body* that reading or viewing an illness photo-narrative involves a collaborative process whereby cultural discourses intersect with a narrator’s recollected representations of her corporeal experience to produce a contract between the autobiographi-
cal subject, discursive and provisional, and the reader-witness, who re-
responds with some degree of “moral and rhetorical complicity” (20). The
Summer of Her Baldness and Lynn Front to Back illustrate this ethical im-
perative well. Reading and viewing autobiographical/visual representa-
tions of breast cancer involve audiences, in Griselda Pollock’s theoretical
formulation, in “the process of moving from trauma to cultural memory”
via artistic works that serve as talismans—as sites of somatic representa-
tion and remembrance that enable audiences to “lodge the pain of others
in our memories” (“Dying, Seeing, Feeling,” 234). As we encounter the
postmillennial photo-narratives of Lord and Kohlman, reader-viewers
thus serve as putative agents of witness and commemoration. In the
chapters to come we shall consider further how theories and practices of
testimony, spectatorship, and memory inform breast cancer narratives
that focus on feminist activism, prophylactic mastectomy, transgressive
humor, post-operative visual representation, autothanatography, and
ethical remembrance.