Afterword

What Remains

As a final consideration of the public impact of autothanatographic projects that reckon with breast cancer, let us turn to Lisa Saltzman’s theories of commemorative art in Making Memory Matter, where she offers rich avenues for exploring “the aesthetic dimensions and the ethical capacities of visual objects that pursue the question of memory in the present” (11–12). Saltzman is interested in how and why contemporary Western cultures are “consumed by the concept, if not always the actual work of memory”; her study thus focuses on memorial art that refuses representation’s fetishistic tendencies in favor of its materiality (5). Although she acknowledges the authority traditionally granted to figurative commemorative practices in sculpture and architecture, she rightly notes that Maya Lin’s 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial has influenced cultural memory by enshrining names of dead soldiers on a black wall, “at once wound and scar,” rather than portraying as representative hero an iconic soldier or martyr (8). Other “postindexical” artistic strategies for marking absence and commemorating loss include animated monuments, vaudevillian silhouettes, and architectural memorials by artists such as Krzysztof Wodiczko, whose 1998 video installation Bunker Hill Monument Project transformed a Boston landmark into a testimonial screen enabling public viewers to mourn and remember local victims of urban violence through “prosthetic witness”; Christian Boltanski, whose 1990 public art project Missing House commemorated the irredeemable loss of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who lived at 15/16 Grosse Hamburger Strasse in Berlin prior to their evacuation during the Holocaust; and Kara Walker, whose silhouettes in Gone (1994) parodied racist and sexually exploitative encounters during slavery and thereby forged an “ethics of spectrality” (41, 73, 93–95). At its best, Saltzman contends, such work “intervenes in an amnesiac public sphere and offers up . . . the possibility of representing something of a community’s history” (16). Like Susan Sontag, who claimed in Regarding the Pain of Others that the
“Western memory bank is mostly a visual one,” Saltzman argues that because memory and visual culture are linked in postmillennial culture, it is essential to analyze the aesthetic and ethical implications of that conjunction (Sontag, 1; Saltzman, 5). Understanding cultural practices of memory such as reading aloud names of the dead or placing wreaths at sites of roadside accidents, as well as studying vigils, funerary objects, and shrines such as the Vietnam Wall, is important because they promote remembrance and call viewers to conscience.3

“What is the work of mourning and memory?” Saltzman wonders near the end of Making Memory Matter—a question essential to pose with regard to women and men worldwide who have died from breast cancer, whose deaths have too often been invisible amid the relentless optimism of U.S. cancer culture with its federally mandated Office of Survivorship and its endless pink products for sale. The photographs that I consider in this Afterword serve as insignia of remembrance and aesthetic responses to loss that have circulated through publication in anthologies or blogs and through exhibition in art galleries or museums. Charlee Brodsky’s image of Stephanie Byram’s abandoned running shoes in the photo-documentary Knowing Stephanie, Dina Rabinovitch’s photograph of the fashionable gray hat she wore to temple and displayed on her “Take Off Your Running Shoes” blog shortly before her death, and Annie Leibovitz’s images from A Photographer’s Life of Susan Sontag’s shell collection, abandoned manuscripts, empty apartment, and tiny silhouette poised beneath a massive funerary monument all render traces of lives lost to breast cancer that hover between indexical and iconic representation. These images serve as mute testimonials that invite viewers to engage in communal mourning and remembrance—for Byram, Rabinovitch, and Sontag and, by extension, for others whose lives have ended prematurely due to cancer.

Brodsky’s decision to conclude Knowing Stephanie with an image of stilled running shoes enables readers to confront the loss of a vibrant subject who wished to be remembered for her joie de vivre and activism. As noted in chapter 5, Byram participated in thirty Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure runs during her last eight years and raised nearly $100,000 for breast cancer research. While the sneakers initially appear to have been posed atop a leafy landscape, their untied laces suggest that they were discarded as their owner moved off barefooted toward her next activity (which might well have required hiking boots, since By-
ram walked for five days through three mountain passes to visit Machu Picchu shortly before her death). Beside this final image lies a narrative reminder by Byram that while dying is inevitable, meanwhile there is living: “What is in my future: love, laughter, gardens, family, friends, spirituality, travel . . . more of what I love in life. I surround myself with positivity, gentleness, challenge, and hope . . . I am, until I pass, as we all shall” (99).

As Brodsky explains in her preface, until Byram’s death in 2001 the two women decided every facet of this memorial project together, including the selection of exhibition sites and the creation of a documentary film, Stephanie: A Story of Transformation (9). In a conversation with biographer Jennifer Matesa in 2000, Byram explained the solidarity she felt with other breast cancer patients yet her resistance to cultural discourses of survival.

Charlee Brodsky, Stephanie’s Running Shoes. Courtesy of the artist.
I feel a tremendous bond with other men and women who have survived the breast cancer experience. . . . It is a terrifying, lonely, sometimes shameful experience to look and feel so different, to wear the unmistakable beacons of cancer that invite total strangers to ask, “How much longer will you be in treatment?” With many women who have had cancer, . . . we exchange a glance and we suddenly skip all formalities and get to the realities: relishing today, relinquishing control, carefully budgeting our time and energy, and, most importantly, loving and laughing.

Despite this pride . . . , the word “survivor” grates on my nerves. We all live with our various misfortunes, having AIDS or osteoporosis, living without health insurance, being in bad marriages or raising difficult children. We are all survivors. Why should breast cancer be any different? (Brodsky and Byram, 124)

In this testimony Byram acknowledges sister breast cancer patients as a primary audience for her photo-narrative, yet she expands its reach to include reader-viewers who have encountered other forms of suffering. Matesa claims that Byram’s work with Brodsky conveys a message of “simple strength”: “In that way, this project is less about breast cancer, being sick, and dying than it is about life—its impulses, joys, and difficulties, and the human struggle to experience these states fully in the ever-changing window frame of the present moment” (121). A practitioner of Buddhism, Byram advocates stillness, silence, and meditation as therapeutic strategies for herself as a cancer patient and as a narrative approach for reader-viewers who witness Brodsky’s photographs. Near the end of her essay Matesa summarizes well the goals of Knowing Stephanie.

The photo-documentary, then, is not only for breast cancer patients; it is for anyone seeking a willingness to live fully, openly, and with rigorous honesty. Submitting to the lens on a regular basis helped Stephanie achieve a high level of openness about her life and its changes. If, as Brodsky suggests, the photograph enables the viewer to “feel for the complexity and difficulty of life,” and so to be taken “somewhere else,” then certainly this was true for Stephanie herself—the second viewer, after Brodsky, of each of these images. And it can be true, in turn, for each viewer, whether a breast cancer patient or not. (125)
Byram’s sober reflections on living and dying meditatively contrast with Dina Rabinovitch’s breezy tone in a blog posting of October 23, 2007, on “Take Off Your Running Shoes.” This blog, which appeared a week before her death, featured a jaunty gray chapeau with feathers, a hat she deemed perfect for a wheelchair-bound patient on a public outing—because it looked stylish, concealed hair loss, and would not blow off, retrieval being impossible for a woman of limited mobility. “Many things I figured would be different in a wheelchair,” the blog began.

People making a particular effort not to talk over my head; being just the right height to press the Wait button on the traffic lights and so on, but one wheelchair effect I missed out, namely that I wear a hat to synagogue and when I lean my head back to look out from under the brim at people desperately trying to include me in conversations, well, that perfectly fine-fitting hat (previously) now goes sliding right off the back of my head. (www.dinablog.com)

A modified fedora designed by Pamela Savery solved the problem as “the perfectly chic, perfectly on-trend colour for the season, which is also cut close enough to the scalp to disguise newly falling hair and not slip off mid-gossip.” This blog and the accompanying photograph elicited 116 reader comments within a week, initially fashion-oriented affirmations such as “What a totally FABULOUS hat!” and “You give Anna Wintour a run for her money in the style stakes . . . fantastic!” When news that Rabinovitch had died appeared on October 30, however, sartorial responses shifted to expressions of grief. “Such deep sorrow,” wrote blogger Sonia Catan; “I grew to love and admire Dina so deeply, and her beautiful brave family travelling a road no one wants to have to travel. Valle Dina” (www.dinablog.com). “Terrible news,” responded another blogger; “A wonderful woman, generous and alive at what must have been her most exhausted and despairing time. This marvelous hat—her last post—is a good expression of that vitality. Thank you, Dina. Though our loss cannot begin to compare with that of her family we will all—her virtual friends as well as those who knew her—miss her so very much. This comes with love, grief, and admiration” (www.dinablog.com). The authors of these and similar eulogies mourned Rabinovitch’s death and positioned the photograph of her hat as communal memorial iconography.
As discussed in chapter 6, Annie Leibovitz’s *A Photographer’s Life* pays visual and narrative homage to her friend and partner Susan Sontag in indexical photographs of her living and dying breast cancer body. However, Leibovitz also memorializes Sontag in referential yet iconic photographs of her abandoned possessions, empty domestic spaces, and spectral silhouette. A photograph captioned *Susan’s Shell Collection, King Street Sunporch, New York, 1990*, which follows the book’s acknowledgment page, bears mute witness to the collector’s travels to beaches where conch, starfish, and mussels conceal biologically simple life forms in aesthetically complex protective coverings. In this regard the shells function as a synecdoche for the absent body but enduring spirit of the woman who chose and arranged them. Another Leibovitz photograph from 1990, *Notes for The Volcano Lover, Berlin, 1990*, depicts tantalizing fragments of Sontag’s handwritten manuscript covered with floating impenetrable phrases—“prologuette #3,” “protection offered the city by the punctual liquefaction of a lump of its patron saint,” “could Catherine be brought to top of mountain?”—words that pulse from the pages of Leibovitz’s narrative and conjure the dead novelist as *unheimlich*. These enigmatic palimpsests, coupled with the image of an abandoned pencil that holds the papers down, create a visual collage that evokes reader melancholy and memorializes Sontag as a writer. A third photograph placed near the end of Leibovitz’s memoir in photographs—a black-and-white cityscape of rooftops and balconies covered in snow, captioned *Looking Out from My Apartment to Susan’s, London Terrace, New York, February 2005*—serves as a *memento mori* for the grieving photographer and for viewers aware that due to Sontag’s death on December 28, 2004, her apartment was empty when the photo
was taken. In the introduction to *A Photographer’s Life* Leibovitz does not comment on these memorial images, but examined together they reflect the contours of her mourning and offer powerful traces of Sontag as traveler, collector, writer, New Yorker, lover.

Leibovitz does discuss the memorializing capacities of an arguably postindexical photograph captioned *Susan Sontag, Petra, Jordan, 1994,* the first image that viewers encounter in *A Photographer’s Life* and a photograph now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/190040951). Sontag’s slight silhouette assumes a spectral form in juxtaposition to the massive dark caverns through whose opening cleft an ornate white marble façade is visible. The photographer explains that she discovered this image in a shoebox while working on a memorial book to distribute to friends after Sontag’s death.

Photographs take on new meanings after someone dies. When I made the picture, I wanted her figure to give a sense of scale to the scene. But now I think of it as reflecting how much the world beckoned Susan. . . . Petra is an ancient city in southern Jordan that was more or less deserted for over a thousand years. . . . It’s spectacular, with enormous columns and friezes. That’s where Susan is standing. She loved art, architecture, history, travel, surprises. The photograph epitomizes all of that for me. . . . In retrospect, the photograph is also about the smallness of individual life. And since the façade is covered in funerary symbols, and since it was probably used as a tomb or a mausoleum, the picture sounds the themes of death and grief that wind through this book. (np)

Leibovitz’s commentary acknowledges the photograph as a ghostly revenant that inscribes irretrievable loss, confronts relative human insignificance in the daunting sweep of history and time, and mourns its beloved subject’s mortality, her adventurous life cut short by cancer as arbitrarily as the carvings of Petra were abandoned to lie in ruin.

Why might these images matter to audiences who did not know the dead women yet find themselves drawn to such elegiac representations? As Susanna Egan notes in *Mirror Talk*, photographs incorporated into autothanatography “open possibilities for grounding a viewer’s experience in a life before and beyond the text” and raise awareness of “the subjectivity-in-representation of that life” (19). Such photographs facili-
tate collaborative construction of multiple subjectivities and anticipated mortalities, including those of photographer and viewer. Egan further argues that elegiac photographs and their accompanying written text “depend on the quondam presence of the subject and enact that presence by means of distinct but related codes,” including an emotional confrontation with “instability in the living moment” (20).

Marianne Hirsch’s discussion of the capacity of commemorative photographs to enter public spaces and “expand the postmemorial circle” further illuminates any effort to comprehend the elegiac authority of autothanatographic breast cancer photography. Drawing on Roland Barthes’s theory in *Camera Lucida* regarding the *punctum*, that visual sensation evoked in viewers as a sudden jolt or wound, Hirsch in *Family Frames* affirms Barthes’s contention that “by giving me the absolute past of the pose . . . the photograph tells me death in the future” (Barthes, 96, cited in Hirsch, 5). While she agrees with Barthes that photographs “possess an evidential force” that testifies to death’s temporality, Hirsch notes his failure to acknowledge that “the structure of looking is reciprocal” and that photographer and viewer “collaborate on the reproduction of ideology”: “Between the viewer and the recorded object, the viewer encounters, and/or projects, a screen made up of dominant mythologies and preconceptions that shapes the representation. Eye and screen are the very elements of ideology: our expectations circumscribe and determine what we show and what we see” (7). As instruments of ideology the camera, the photographer’s gaze, the viewer’s look, and the photographic text or exhibition have the potential to question, contest, or resist dominant interpretive ideologies, especially when the photographs under consideration encode trauma in narrative contexts.

When we consider “the moral dimensions of the instruments shaping our personal and cultural memory” (14), Hirsch continues, photography’s capacity to evoke mourning becomes an essential topic to theorize: “Photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, since they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting” (22). By *postmemory* Hirsh means not *beyond* memory but rather an intersubjective form of remembering that occurs through the “imaginative investment and creation” of witnesses once removed (22). When the closed circle of private photographs marking trauma and/or loss extends to include public viewers, power and grief circulate in new and multiple ways. Public displays of traumatic photographs thus consti-
tute potential “spaces of connection between memory and postmemory,” since viewers can mourn the untimely dead by confronting their visual traces (Hirsch, 247). Hirsch’s theories can be applied to the photographic images of items left behind by Byram, Rabinovitch, and Sontag, images that arouse in many viewers an emotional solidarity that facilitates grieving and remembrance. Ulrich Baer makes a similar point in *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* in claiming that viewers’ imaginations can “invest the act of commemoration with ethical significance” through an “active, critical, and fundamentally creative stance” (155). If viewers witness traumatic or memorial images in private spaces, then grief and remembrance may remain individual, but if they/we witness such images in public exhibitions or venues, then mourning and remembering become communal.\(^5\)

To conclude *Mammographies* I would like to call for a national memorial archive where literary works, unpublished manuscripts, photographs and photo-narratives, family scrapbooks, journals and diaries, DVDs and documentary films that chronicle the breast cancer experiences of women and men, whether famous or unknown, can be permanently housed.\(^6\) Such an archive would provide space for public recognition, memorialization, and grieving for the dead alongside celebration of those “living in prognosis” (Jain, “Living in Prognosis,” 77–78). I can also envision a public breast cancer project parallel to the AIDS memorial quilt (the Names Project), with its democratic gestures of shared grief and its capacity to raise consciousness about the HIV-AIDS pandemic.\(^7\) AIDS does not recur, but breast cancer frequently does, often multiple times and in more virulent forms than that which originally manifested. This reality brings a sense of urgency to my call, as does the fact that worldwide breast cancer rates are rising rapidly; current projections posit that by 2020, 70 percent of all new cases will occur in developing countries (Kingsbury, 36). A U.S. breast cancer archive, along with a memorial quilt or a similar commemorative art project, would serve as a model for other locations and engage generations to come in public sites of remembrance and in collaborative acts of witness.