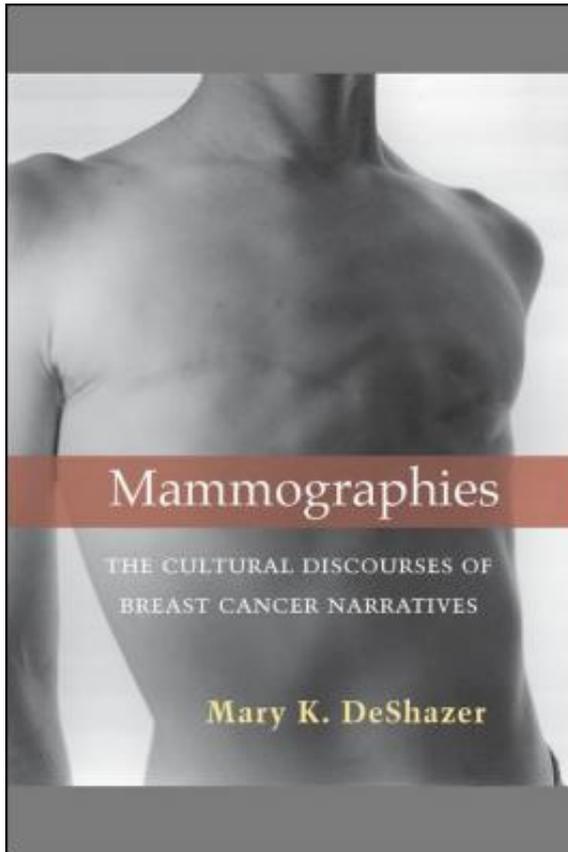


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Mary DeShazer's Mammographies

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By Cinzia Greco



[Mammographies](#)

[The Cultural Discourses of Breast Cancer Narratives](#)

by [Mary K. DeShazer](#)

University of Michigan Press, 2013. 258 pages

Breast cancer is one of the leading causes of death among women and an increasing number of women nowadays live with the disease. How do breast cancer patients represent their experiences, and what potential for representation is afforded by the encounter between illness and art? Mary DeShazer's *Mammographies* provides an interesting answer to these questions. Indeed, the author aims to offer an insight into the cultural discourses of breast cancer narratives, and in particular she focuses on the postmillennial narratives produced in the United States and the United

Kingdom.

To characterize the narratives presented in the book, DeShazer uses the term “mammographies,” which indicates both the technology of imaging by which many women are diagnosed with breast cancer, as well as “the documentary imperative that drives their written and visual mappings of the breast cancer experience” (p. 2). As the author points out in the introduction, illness memoirs and photographic representations have a long history, having their first large diffusion in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Breast cancer in particular has been portrayed in public discourses and mainstream culture in a glamorous and optimistic way, linking it to a (hetero)feminine image. The postmillennial narratives presented by the author tend to challenge these representations. The selection of the works that the author has made has itself the merit of showing a variety of experiences and of raising questions usually eluded by the mainstream breast cancer culture.

Chapters 1 and 5 focus mostly on photographic narratives. These chapters explore how photographic works on breast cancer make visible to the reader the results of the medicalization of the body. In particular, chapter 1 is focused on how the sick female body can be used to resist normative beauty. The author puts into dialogue two different works, *The Summer of Her Baldness* by Catherine Lord and *Lynn Front to Back* by Lynn Kohlman. The first work is the photo narrative that Lord wrote using the alter ego Her Baldness. In this work the physical changes produced by the disease are central in the narrative. Baldness turns from a sign of illness into a sign of rebellion and resistance against the stereotyped representations of the female body. The second project is the photo narrative of the ex-model, Lynn Kohlman, who, after having been diagnosed with breast cancer, decided to document her experience through photography. In this case, we can see the physical changes induced by the disease on a body that was once an example of normative beauty. DeShazer’s choice to juxtapose these two different works shows us how the illness inscribes the body, and how the ill body can become a locus of “somatic resistance” in the postmillennial breast cancer photo narratives.

Most of *Mammographies* focuses on written narratives on breast cancer. In chapter 2 the author analyzes the work of three women whose experiences with breast cancer are strongly intertwined with their academic work: Zillah Eisenstein, Evelyne Accad, and S. Lochlann Jain. Their work opens a discussion of the hyper-feminized presentation of breast cancer and introduces important social and political considerations, such as the worldwide increase of breast cancer and the link with environmental carcinogens. Chapter 3 focuses on an aspect of breast cancer that has become more and more important in the postmillennial

years, namely breast cancer linked to the genetic mutations BRCA 1 and 2 discovered in the 90s. In particular, narratives selected here describe how difficult it can be for BRCA patients to face the risk, the uncertainty of the condition, and the difficulties of undergoing a preventive mastectomy. Critically, the author underlines how, from a feminist point of view, it is important to recognize the limits of these autobiographies, in which genes are described as a destiny against which to fight using “cutting-edge biotechnologies available to many wealthy women of the world, but certainly not to all” (p. 91).

Chapters 4, 6 and 7 address two difficult and seemingly opposing topics: laughter and death. Can humor be a part of the discussion of breast cancer? And what is the rhetorical strategy in calling it a deadly disease? In chapter 4, significantly entitled “Rebellious Humor in Breast Cancer Narratives: Deflating the Culture of Optimism”, DeShazer analyzes two personal narratives and a graphic narrative. The works presented here use irony to question the optimistic vision of the illness propagated by breast cancer organizations, websites, and medical brochures. Here laughter becomes important not in its thaumaturgic connotations, but rather because of its transgressive power. Irony becomes an instrument through which these works challenge the veil of certainties set around breast cancer. The ridicule to which the mainstream representations of breast cancer are put is a way of asking for the inclusion of other breast cancer issues in public discourse. It is not by chance that among the authors presented in this chapter one is an activist in the grassroots association Breast Cancer Action.

Set in opposition to rebellious laughter are the tears associated to death and mourning. Death is an aspect banished from mainstream representations of breast cancer, which are hegemonized by the bright image of the survivor, and Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the theme from very different perspectives. Chapter 6 is focused on Susan Sontag, and in particular on the way in which her son David Rieff and her partner Annie Leibovitz paid homage to Sontag after her death. Leibovitz’s photographic work has been criticized for showing private photos of Sontag, and DeShazer shows how this fact brings to the fore the problem of the ethics of commemoration. No contestation, on the other hand, followed the publication of the book by David Rieff, despite the fact that this book also described moments of the last part of Sontag’s life that were deeply intimate. This juxtaposition of narratives shows the ethical problems that commemorations bring with them, yet DeShazer concludes that, “both narratives [...] evoke a transformational mode of spectatorship characterized not by voyeurism but by compassionate witness” (p. 174).

This brief presentation of the book shows the variety and richness of the narrations analyzed in *Mammographies*. Mary DeShazer applies a

semiotic analysis with a feminist perspective to different media – texts, images, blogs, graphic works – achieving two important results. On one hand DeShazer's work presents some of the most significant narratives (textual and visual) of breast cancer – narratives that aim to extend the range of topics and approaches usually present in discourses about breast cancer. On the other, DeShazer's detailed analysis offers important elements to understanding both these narratives and the cultural context in which they were produced. The specific analyses presented in the book are constantly compared to previous narratives, anchoring the discussion in the past and allowing the reader to identify continuities and innovations in the way in which cancer is framed in cultural discourse.

Mammographies is an important text for readers interested in illness narratives and textual and literary analysis.

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