

Bearing Cancer in Graphic Memoir

DINA GEORGIS

Il s'agit ici de cinq nouvelles autobiographiques sur le cancer du sein écrites par des artistes canadiennes et américaines. Les nouvelles diffèrent de style et de méthodes mais elles partagent un même ardent désir chez l'artiste de raconter au jour le jour son expérience de vivre avec le cancer du sein et d'y survivre. Ces nouvelles nous offrent une rencontre esthétique avec la quotidienneté du cancer, mais malheureusement, presque toutes les auteures ne réussissent pas à présenter leur histoire de manière à satisfaire une éthique féministe.

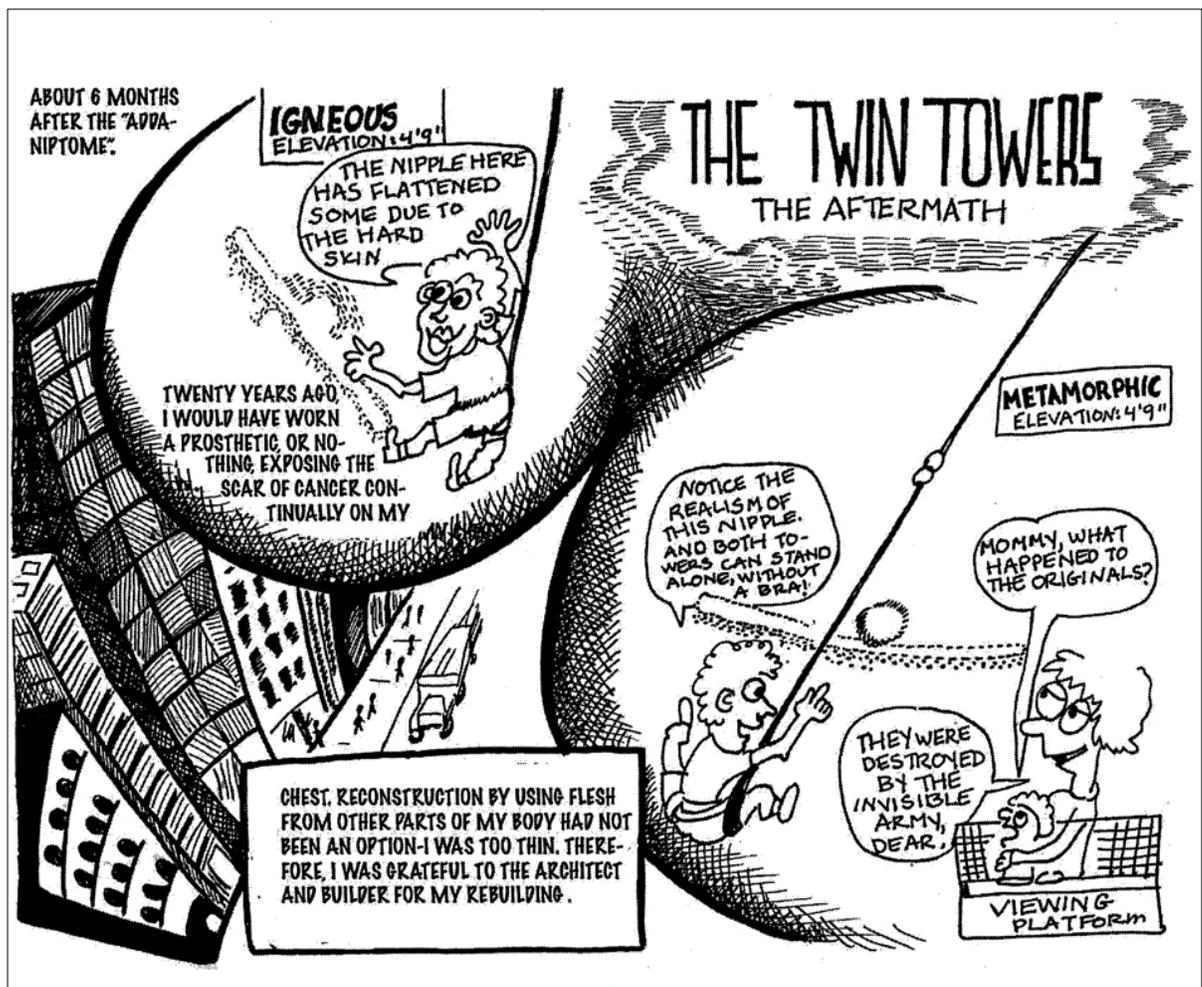
The five graphic memoirs I cover in this review essay, *Bearing Up with Cancer* by Dr Annie Smith, *Where's Mom's Hair* by Debbie Watters, *Mammoir: A Pictorial Odyssey of the Adventures of a Fourth Grade Teacher* by Tucky Fussell, *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person: A Memoir in Comics* by Miriam Engelberg and *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* by Marisa Accella Marchetto, all published in the mid-2000s, are stories about the struggle to live and bear the difficult knowledge of a diagnosis of cancer. Almost all of them tell you directly that documenting and drawing their experience is how they survived the shocking news. For Engelberg, drawing (not meditation or yoga or any of the popular healing methods) became her “spiritual practice” (“Spirituality”). For others, such as

Fussell, creating a visual world is how she and others negotiated their fears and how they endured the awful barbarity of treatments: the hair loss, the vomiting, the weight loss, the weight gain, the fatigue, the poking and prodding of mammograms and ultrasounds, biopsies, needles, on-going invasive testing, and losing a breast. All these graphic novels capture the daily-ness of living with cancer. Their description, even when told with a sense of humour, makes the horror palpable. Indeed, every time I picked up one of these books and started reading, within minutes I would feel psychosomatic induced pangs in my breasts. What's worse, of course, is that this particular cancer attacks a body part that for many women actually and figuratively stands for love, nurturance, pleasure, and sexuality. In other words, the breasts have a direct relationship to our gendered subjectivities and our sexual identities, even if we have an ambivalent relationship to them (as might be the case with some butch identified women or transgendered people). And then when all the treatment is done and over with, there is the interminability of not knowing if it's really over, of whether the cancer will come back. Having cancer is forever. A brush with death means living with the burden of having survived it. The future is forever un-

certain because it has lost its sense of determinacy. So how do you process all this? What comes after you've become undone?

Losing your future is losing a structuring narrative order designed to promise happiness. Often, those imagined futures, as Lee Edelman points out, are hopeful and their mandate is in the affirmative: in the Child, an emblem of the good and the figure that makes the world better. We live and sometimes die to save that future. In Edelman's lexicon, queer, as the thing that stands for the atypical and aberrant is associated with death and the breakdown of our symbolic edifices and faith in the social. No one, queer identified or otherwise, is immune from the symbolic or from systems of meaning that charge us into the future. Cancer, arguably, takes you to “queer” places. It threatens your belief in a knowable future. It is a future that bears no predictable “children.” But for these women, it bore another life and other beliefs. Almost all of the artists tell us that they hoped their books would comfort other women who are struggling with breast cancer. Indeed, Kristeva in *This Incredible Need to Believe* links belief with speaking. Belief, first in our primary other and then to all others, is what makes speaking (drawing) possible and is ultimately the key to signification.

Speaking and expressing our stories is “all we are” (King 2003: 2). Story is



from Tuckey Fussell's *Mammoth: A Pictorial Odyssey of the Adventures of a Fourth Grade Teacher*. Reprinted with permission.

the way we narrate the past, seek and transmit knowledge, and imagine our future. Story is the principle of how we make human experience intelligible to ourselves and give it meaning. Often, our stories defend us from difficult knowledge. The “best” stories, in my view, are the one’s that work out the events that change us in unpredictable ways and resist re-entrenching or reproducing what came before the difficult event. They are stories that lead us to think about the emotional stakes of difficult experiences in their socio-political and historical contexts. Not all stories do this, even if they are affective resources that give us insight to how people construct their survival. Unfortunately, for me, while these graphic memoirs made me more aware and educated about the physical trials of breast cancer, I was generally unmoved, or moved

but disappointed, by most of these memoirs. Perhaps this is so because I was looking to be drawn into the unimaginable place of what it means to live with cancer. I wanted them to capture aesthetically the effects of such a radical event on a person’s life. Perhaps that is too much to ask. It takes psychic time to have access to the traumas that change us, and all these women were recording their experiences by taking pictures and/or drawing their everyday events. These memoirs seem to be products of their not yet digested accounts of surviving cancer. Though perfectly understandable, the memoirs’ aesthetic value gets undermined by the urgency of needing to make sense of a horrible experience.

Annie Smith, for instance, survives by drawing bears. Her memoir *Bearing up With Cancer* is drawn in kin-

ergarten colours. In fact, she draws bears all the time: for the medical staff that cares for her, on boards of operation schedules, and as a personal signature. She even pastes a bear on her body (with a chocolate bar) before her own surgery to surprise her surgeons. Though her bear is a cute and cuddly representation of a sensitive vulnerable Annie that cannot otherwise be exposed to people—“no one sees the tears” (124) she tells us—it is also her defense. Because of the bear, we do not see Annie. Annie “bears up with cancer” not by going to support groups, which she mocks, but by turning to nature. But she does not offer us that world either. We just hear about it as disassociated information. The style of her graphic memoir is similarly detached. It is not drawn in comic strips with voice bubbles. Her bear, in fact, has no voice. The story

is narrated in prose, severed from the drawings, at a distance from her. Annie takes comfort by the fact that she has “truly lived each minute of the last nineteen years” (126), she remarks at the end of the memoir. Annie most certainly stays positive and cheerful and offers a “hopeful” message. But it seems obligatory, and to be otherwise is dangerous. She herself remarks: “I wonder if being brave makes a difference” (124).

Like Smith’s memoir, Debbie Watters’ *Where’s Mom’s Hair* ends positively. Watters also does not use comic strips. Her memoir is a photo diary of her chemo family hair-cutting party, narrated in the voice of her children. Hair cutting for fund-raising has become popularized and institutionalized in neo-global cultures as Samantha King argues; nonetheless, the black and white photos offer affective glimpses of the pain and confusion when witnessing a trauma. Asking us to look at the faces in the picture, the child narrators tell us: “You just don’t know how you are going to feel when someone is losing their hair because of cancer” (10).

The other three memoirs, Fussell’s *Mammoth*, Engelberg’s *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* and Marchetto’s *Cancer Vixen* are all comic books but their respective styles are radically different. Fussell’s black and white drawn memoir does not always use panels and when she does they are not tidy. Often, her pages are single paneled. Words and images fill the page in no particular order and they overlap. Part fantasy, Fussell elaborates an alternate world, presumably illustrating the enigmas of her underworld or the fear that has no other expression. Conversely, Engelberg’s drawings are minimalist and “shallow.” Her figures are stick-like with no shading at all. Shallowness is a theme in her memoir. Cancer made her stop caring about being perfect. And in complete contradiction, Marchetto’s memoir is in full colour and glossy, just like her. It looks like an Archie comic book. I find it visually the most pleasing. I must admit.

Though I appreciated Fussell’s artistic style the most in theory, I found it visually overwhelming and dizzying. She conjures Hindu deities (she was living in Pakistan when she found out she had breast cancer), pop stars appear everywhere, and a lab mouse follows her around and offers on-going commentary. Organized in chapters of teaching units, what’s inside is a wild stream of conscious-

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ness. The bodies she draws are caricatures in squiggly shapes. Her own body often shifts in shape to reflect her various affects and dispositions. There are many things to like about this memoir: her attempts to represent the chaos of her life, her irreverence to the medical and conventional world, and her critique of the causes of cancer. Despite all that, the memoir did not move me. None of her narrative threads interested me—maybe because I could not see what held them all together. Perhaps that is the point. It is also conceivable that the racist undertone of this memoir simply poisoned me from appreciating this text all together. In addition to Tucky’s orientalist references of deities and such, which were tolerable, she jokes about inadequate doctors in Pakistan, makes jabs about inclusion, thinks it’s funny to compare cancer cells inside the breast to immigrants within borders, and puts her body

troubles in perspective after radiation by reminding herself that she is not a Pakistani woman in a Burka about to get hot water thrown in her face for not having a large enough dowry. What’s worse, her favourite student in her class is an alienated and dejected Haitian girl who “touches” her heart. Again, we are witness to the paradigmatic “white woman saves herself by saving a brown girl.” As a psychic defense against the reality that you may not have a future, advocating for the future of the brown child sustains you in a belief, I suppose,

Of all the texts reviewed, Fussell’s graphic memoir was actually the most “feminist.” Sadly, it participated in predictable ways to mainstream (and not so mainstream) feminism that produces freedom for women in the west as a *fait accompli* and does this by turning away from itself and gazing upon the plight of other women in the global south. Indeed, this sort of looking at the constitutive outside to define us is also evident in Engelberg’s and Marchetto’s graphic memoirs. In these two memoirs, the racism is not as pervasive (probably because race is not on their radar) but communicates American culture post 9/11 that has turned the event to allegorize a myriad of affects and conditions. For instance, feeling out of control for having to wait four days to hear the results of a biopsy, Mariam of *Cancer Made a Shallower Person* feels she needs to pick the “right mental attitude.” Sarcastically, she goes on to say, “Did you know my mind controls the universe? After this, I’ll get to work on the Mid-East” (“Biopsy”). But Mariam, unlike Tucky, is not drawn to outsiders and in fact, we learn, loathes being an outsider. When diagnosed with cancer, she fantasizes about things she arguably would like to control but cannot: what people are thinking and not saying about her, such as how she looks, how sorry they feel for her, and how they are avoiding looking at her breasts. Cancer exacerbated Mariam’s outsider feelings even more. In post 9/11 culture, the “monstrous”

outsider body most abhorred and feared is of course the Arab/Muslim body. I wonder if her references to the Middle East are angst-driven projective identifications.

Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen* makes similar references but they are not as subtle as Engelberg's. After a running an idea to a cartoon editor, which got rejected because her "women are too thin, too pretty [and] they're not real" (25), her first success after that was a comic strip that ran the day after the New York twin tower attacks, entitled "9/11/01 All Dialogue 100% Authentic." On one side of the vertical page, she draws the streets around where the towers stood and then numbers various locations like a legend on a map that correspond to moments in the day wherein people are reacting to what just happened in their city. The rest of the page illustrates the talking heads that make various comments such as, on the one hand, "All of our hearts are broken" and "This is a nightmare. Two of my friends haven't come home yet," and on the other hand, "We are from Israel. You want to know what war looks like? This is what war looks like" and "I hope they do what Reagan did and bomb the heck out of them. But this time get the guy." While I am sure this is an "authentic" characterization of people's attitudes and sentiments, it unreflectively foreshadows the discourse that has produced, explains Judith Butler, the lives of only some as precarious and therefore grievable, while the lives of "others" are simply foreclosed. In a memoir that asks us, if you will, to regard Marisa's life as grievable life, her terrorist and al-Qaeda jokes are hard to bear, especially in the face of her neo-liberal attitudes and lipstick life-style. Many of us recall that not long after the attacks George Bush called the American people to return to the American way of life, to "Get Down to Disney World." It would seem that Marisa does just that. She returns to her elite American life, which the terrorists tried to take away.

Having said that, I did appreciate Marchetto's honest characterization of her life as a competitive image-obsessed, yet insecure, careerist who is fighting cancer to hold on to her fashionable life in New York: in a lot of ways, she is *Archie's Betty*. Though, sadly, it would take having cancer before she would realize that her portrayal of all of womankind as catty gold diggers was a projection of her own fantasies, Marchetto drew us into her emotional life and, in the end, offered a self-reflective critique of her life in a simulacra driven world of American culture. But we had to endure in technicolour glossy page and after glossy page the gory details of feminine anxieties, BFF sessions in upscale New York restaurants, shoe fetishes, Kabala teachings, and, generally, unreflective whiteness and celebrative, but "gay-positive," heterosexuality. Nonetheless, her chronicle of living with breast cancer, inadvertently offered a critique of post-feminist culture that in Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's words, "confuse self-interest with individuality and elevates consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternately be understood in terms of social ills and discontents" (2). Citing Angela McRobbie, they point out that the new female subject indeed must withhold her critique and be silent and that this silence is the condition of her freedom. So when Marisa finally offers a critique of her complicity in misogynist plastic culture, it is heartening. Cancer cracked her known world. Her affective attachments to the symbolic edifices were undermined. Though I would hardly call this shift "queer," as defined by Edelman, it throws a knot into the prescribed hopes and dreams of a New York stylish career, husband and bearing bouncing perfect children, which cancer made no longer possible.

As a story chronicling survival of breast cancer, *Cancer Vixen* filled an important criterion: it offered a story that put into question the fairy tale life she was living. Marchetto's memoir

in the end did not celebrate naïve empowerment culture defined by youthful beauty, power-suit success, and commercial sexuality. Though it is not a story that profoundly redefines feminine freedom, it registers its affective attachment and emotional un-doing of it. What made her memoir more interesting than the others is that it was a story that gave us a little more insight into what was at stake in excess of the breast cancer. Her breast cancer experience had a human and social-political context. Notwithstanding some of its hard to stomach ignorance, *Cancer Vixen* communicated not just surviving cancer but how a difficult experience like cancer interacts, affects, sheds light on already existing mortal fears and troubles and our human failures and limitations.

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**FARIDEH DE
BOSSET**

Rosie's Eyes

Rosie had become a pair
of eyes
screaming I am Rosie,
the same girl I was 20
years ago.

The promising star,
now thicker and shorter
make-up and jewellery
covering most of her.

Her dimmer eyes
Washed out of dreams
the faint reminder
what could have been.

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M. E. CSAMER

Skin Deep

Age loosens the skin, Joe,
as if it would unravel from the bones
like an old sweater, tired of being worn.

This is part of the long letting go
but you, you're just beginning, have skin
folded for the future, the string-bean
long drink of water you may well become
if your doctor knows his babies.

Skin holds the net of nerves,
lets us feel each other's
stunning touch. Your hands
on my face set those nerves alight
like the netted Christmas strings
along Tyrell Avenue, shining out
from under your inaugural snow.

Skin is a gift of the first order.
We moan its distension after one
too many trips to Tim's
or haul and tie it up again
when gravity's unceasing sway
pulls us too close to the earth.

I like the loosening, Joe, it gives me
more space to grow old in; young,
we move light as air but living weighs us down,
first revelry's rich banquets, but then we thicken
with loss, the dead carving their names in us
that we might carry them on.

Skin is the book of life: everything is written on it
scar of the first skinned knee, pucker where bones
break through, bubble of fire damage, the slice in
your Mommy's belly where they pulled you free.

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