

Book Reviews

FRACTURED BORDERS READING WOMEN'S CANCER LITERATURE

Mary K. Deshazer
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan
Press, 2005

REVIEWED BY EVA C.
KARPINSKI

Fractured Borders is the first comprehensive critical analysis of different forms of "autopathography," that is, life writing about breast, uterine, and ovarian cancer, three "gender-specific" cancers that account for over 40 percent of all women's cancers. Deshazer covers primarily work produced between 1990 and 2003, situating it against the background of earlier literature, beginning with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Rose Kushner's *Breast Cancer: A Personal History and an Investigative Report* (1975).

Her interpretation is based on close readings supported by scholarly perspectives ranging from postmodern theories of the body to performance theory, feminist literary criticism, French feminisms, and disability studies. These counterhegemonic readings successfully challenge the sentimental, simplistic, or heterosexist approaches to representing women's experience of cancer, showing "how cancer affects women's subjectivities, relationships and politics of location."

The first theoretical chapter incorporates such landmark studies as Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, Audre Lordé's *The Cancer Journals*, Jackie Stacey's *Teratologies*, and Zillah Eisenstein's *Manmade Breast Cancer*, as well as literary works such as Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver," Gini Alhadeff's *Diary of a Djinn*, and poems by Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. Deshazer constructs an argu-

ment that contemporary women writers represent the ill body through five interrelated tropes of medicalization, leakiness, amputation, prosthesis, and (non) dying. These tropes span a vast array of issues facing anybody living with cancer, corresponding to the various needs: to interrogate standard medical treatments to which women's bodies are subjected; to reconceptualize the abject leaking body as a transgressive, fluid form of embodiment and a source of ethical knowledge; to convert a site of lack or loss into a creative locus of artistic and erotic celebration; to move from the logic of absence and substitution toward "an empowering identity as both gendered and hybrid, feminist and 'posthuman'" and finally, to use the experience of cancer and living with uncertainty as transformational life events that can confer narrative authority and agency even in the face of death.

The remaining chapters are organized around five genres of cancer literature written predominantly in the United States, Canada, and England: drama, poetry, popular fiction, experimental fiction, and autobiography.

In the chapter devoted to feminist performance narratives, she examines the intersections of body politics and medical biopolitics in four plays from the 1990s: Margaret Edson's *Wit*, Susan Miller's *My Left Breast*, Lisa Loomer's *The Waiting Room*, and Maxine Bailey and Sharon M. Lewis's *Sistabs* (the last one being the only Canadian text analyzed by Deshazer). Noting how the playwrights tap the ironies of cancer being diagnosed in stages, she reads theatrical representations of cancerous breasts, ovaries, and wombs as culturally marked and infused with social meanings. She explores the potential that such plays have for generating audience ambivalence but also empathy and activism rather than voyeurism.

In the section on breast cancer poetry, mostly by African-American and Jewish-American writers, she analyzes poetic sequences such as Audre Lordé's *A Burst of Light* (1988) and *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* (1993), Lucille Clifton's *The Terrible Stories* (1996), Alicia Ostriker's *The Mastectomy Poems* (1996), and Hilda Raz's *Divine Honors* (1997). Looking for new metaphors of resistance and transformation, Deshazer registers a shift in attitudes to the postcancer body, especially the prosthetic body, from a politicized, ideological critique and rejection to a more nuanced negotiation of personal agency and body image.

In the next chapter, she develops a thesis that today's popular cancer fiction rewrites a tradition of women's domestic and romance literature in terms of an idealized relationship between a dying cancer patient and her female supporters. Such fiction exposes the feminization of the emotional work of caring performed by dutiful daughters and best friends. Her analysis is backed up by Barbara Ehrenreich's critique of the "pink kitsch" and feminist theories of sentimental romance fiction. Deshazer concludes that sentimental cancer fiction written by Patricia Gaffney, Elizabeth Berg, or Anna Quindlen is linked to feminine rather than feminist ideology, promoting what she calls "feminism lite" rather than a critical or materialist feminism.

The three experimental cancer novels—Carole Maso's *Ava*, Susan Minot's *Evening*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*—allow Deshazer to investigate the proximity of desire and death. They inscribe fluid subjectivities and powerful erotic memory in order to confront literary and medical representations of dying women.

The final chapter provides a useful typology of cancer memoirs, modeled on sociologist Maren Klawiter's three

paradigms of cancer activism in the San Francisco Bay area during the 1990s. The first group comprises women's personal narratives about their treatment journey, foregrounding individual agency, dignity, and survival. Ideologically linked to "Race for the Cure," established by the Komen Foundation, they connect breast cancer to displays of normative femininity, inspire hope and trust in science and medicine, and promote biomedical research and early detection. The second group consists of multicultural narratives focused on identity politics and community rather than faith in the medical and scientific establishment. They correspond to the type of activism exemplified by "Women and Cancer Walk." Overtly feminist, they critique systemic problems, mobilize anger, and promote social services and treatment activism. The last category includes environmental narratives that show a causal connection between cancer and an exposure to pesticides, toxins, and radiation. These narratives are akin to "Toxic Tours of the Cancer Industry," in their political crusades against chemical, pharmaceutical, nuclear, and other corporate polluters, against environmental racism and lack of regulation and cancer prevention. To what Dr. Susan Love summarizes as a "slash, burn, and poison" approach, they juxtapose "research, activism, and writing" as a "trio of weapons."

Deshazer finds examples for each type of memoir in Katherine Russell Rich's *The Red Devil*, Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum's *Cancer in Two Voices*, and Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment*, among others. She also sheds new light on Rachel Carson's story by examining her unpublished cancer letters. She ends her assessment by stating that authors of environmental narratives like Steingraber or Terry Tempest Williams attempt to redefine cancer as a human rights issue.

Overall, *Fractured Borders* is a great place to become acquainted with

women's cancer literature. Solidly researched and engagingly written, the book also performs a function of witnessing and testimony, not only for Deshazer's friend to whom it is dedicated, but for all those women whose fascinating texts she helps to bring to light.

Eva C. Karpinski teaches courses on narrative, cultural studies, translation studies, and feminist theory and methodology in the School of Women's Studies at York University.

BRIGHT-SIDED: HOW POSITIVE THINKING IS UNDERMINING AMERICA

Ehrenreich, Barbara
New York: Henry Holt & Co.,
2009

REVIEWED BY BRENDA BLONDEAU

If positive thinking is all that is required for each of us to achieve happiness and good health then why are so many people unhappy and/or in poor health? Are individuals lax in their efforts, or are there other reasons why we experience health concerns, precarious employment, unsuccessful relationships, spiritual difficulties, economic insecurities and political turmoil? In her latest book, *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* (2009), Barbara Ehrenreich addresses each of these issues, successfully challenging the widespread notion that if we would simply subscribe to the "cult of positivity" we could satisfy all of our wants and needs, and we could all lead healthy, happy and productive lives. Ehrenreich provides a timeline to explain the religious and political roots of the ideology of positivity in a colonial and capitalist American history. She draws upon personal and academic expertise as a researcher, as a woman who was diagnosed with,

and treated for, breast cancer, and as a cellular immunologist as she addresses the problems inherent in this ideology. She exposes and demystifies many of the "pseudo-scientific" claims—the logical and scientific fallacies—advanced by the gurus of positive thinking, while showing how a whole industry has developed to guide the newfound disciples. She highlights the improbability of individuals effecting change on any broad scale as she ponders the political impact of a doctrine that focuses on individual agency/responsibility while ignoring the external factors which impact their lives and the importance of group activism which could result in positive, lasting change for many people. And, while she writes of situations specific to the United States, the notion that there is a certain power in positive thinking is also widespread in Canada; thus, Ehrenreich's book becomes an important document in both countries.

Ehrenreich's discussion of her experiences as she was diagnosed with, and treated for, breast cancer provides evidence of the inherent contradictions and of the damaging impact of relying only on positive-thinking when dealing with breast cancer. She notes the linguistic restrictions, as we can refer to 'survivors' but not 'victims', and as we have no label for those women who do not survive. This extends to the notion that positive thinking will either eliminate any risk of having cancer, or it will greatly aid in its cure. So, once diagnosed, the often—although not always—unspoken understanding is that cancer is somehow a sign of personal failure to act or think in a particular manner. She acknowledges her aversion to the feminization and infantilization of the "pink ribbon culture" (21); she discusses the blogs which provide much-needed information couched within many of the intimate, infinite details of the lives of women 'survivors'; she provides quotes from women who describe their cancer as a "gift" or a "rite-of-passage" because