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The Empowered Woman and Encounters with Breast Cancer, the Year's
Chick Disease: Sick Lit and the Work of Memoir in the Postfeminist Decade

by

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DEDICATION

For Darrell

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines a postfeminist subgenre of women's autobiography referred to as "sick lit." The primary texts, all published between 2004 and 2009 are: *Cancer Vixen* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Breastless in the City: A Young Woman's Story of Love, Loss, and Breast Cancer* by Cathy Bueti, *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* by Geralyn Lucas, *Lopsided: How Having Breast Cancer is Really Distracting* by Meredith Norton, *My One Night Stand with Cancer* by Tania Katan, and *Nordie's at Noon: The Personal Stories of Four Women "Too Young" for Breast Cancer* by Patti Balwanz, Jana Peters, Kim Carlos, and Jennifer Johnson. I show that sick lit is a postfeminist manifestation of a genre of life writing more broadly known as the breast cancer narrative. While the breast cancer narrative was initially clearly a product of second-wave feminism in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, sick lit's contents and paratexts reflect the presence of postfeminism as an oppressive and pervasive ideology, one which now discourages its authors from making explicit "feminist" demands for gender equity despite the fact that they write of encountering oppressive circumstances.

Sick lit is written by women who have been aggressively targeted by a heteronormative consumer culture which conveys the message that consumption is an antidote to breast cancer. These authors frequently use irreverent humour and self deprecation in the form of confession to talk about the struggles they experience as a part of this social order. Thus, sick lit resembles the contemporary women's fiction known as chick lit, as well as the chick flick. While I argue that

sick lit is an aesthetic strategy which some writers use to reclaim their identities after cancer and, even at times, to unsettle the normative social order, ultimately, sick-lit writers—particularly those tied to breast cancer’s cause-related marketing campaigns—are yoked to commodity culture in ways which jeopardizes the legacy they might otherwise earn through life writing. For these reasons, sick lit helps to reveal postfeminism’s harms and potentials at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

When American journalist Betty Rollin was treated for breast cancer in the 1970s, an acquaintance attempted to console her on the grounds that, if nothing else, the illness with which Rollin had been diagnosed was the “year’s chic disease” (147). The conversation which Rollin dryly recalls in her memoir *First, You Cry* takes place during a period in the United States when members of the mainstream public had just begun to talk openly about the previously taboo subject of breast cancer. In Rollin’s day, First Lady Betty Ford’s public disclosure of details related to her diagnosis and mastectomy, as well as activism taking place within the women’s health movement, were two factors which contributed to the fervour which had begun to take place over this disease.¹ Thus, when Rollin wrote autobiographically about her illness in a memoir that was later adapted into a feature film starring the popular television actress Mary Tyler Moore, she experienced firsthand what auto/biography studies critic Leigh Gilmore remarks on in *The Limits of Autobiography*: that “memoir is dominated

¹ In 1973 The Boston Women’s Health Collective released “the first commercial edition” of *Our Bodies Ourselves* (Davis 2). Early editions of *OBOS* helped to instigate needed medical reforms to women’s health with their writers’ often harsh critiques of gender inequity as it existed in the medical system (Davis 2). In 1974, First Lady Betty Ford went public with her breast cancer diagnosis and received thousands of letters of concern, some “ninety-two cubic feet of mail” (Borrelli 292), from American people. After Ford’s diagnosis, The American Cancer Society “reported a 400 percent increase in requests for [cancer] checkups” (Linehan 59).

by [those authors] . . . whose private lives are emblematic of a cultural moment”
(1).

Some four decades after Rollin wrote her memoir, the buzz around breast cancer has only continued to escalate in the United States. However, for some memoirists who write about being diagnosed with the disease in the generation following Rollin, the term “chick” as opposed to “chic” is a better descriptor. Indeed, the primary texts studied in this project are all breast cancer memoirs which resemble or refer directly to the works belonging to the genre of fiction commonly known as chick lit, or its cinematic counterpart the chick flick. These memoirs which I refer to as sick lit are all published in the United States between 2004 and 2009 and are titled as follows: *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Breastless in the City: A Young Woman’s Story of Love, Loss, and Breast Cancer* by Cathy Bueti, *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* by Geralyn Lucas, *Lopsided: How Having Breast Cancer is Really Distracting: A Memoir* by Meredith Norton, *My One Night Stand with Cancer* by Tania Katan, and, finally *Nordie’s at Noon: The Personal Stories of Four Women “Too Young” for Breast Cancer* co-authored by Patti Balwanz, Jana Peters, Kim Carlos, and Jennifer Johnson.

For readers who lack the needed familiarity with chick fiction and/or sick lit to identify initial similarities between them, it can first be noted that works from both categories are similar in terms of their appearance. Chick-lit book covers often feature images of conventionally-attractive women (either caricatures or photographs) superimposed onto cityscapes and sick lit often does the same

(see Fig. 1 and Fig 2). An easily perceived moment of intertextuality between one of this study's primary texts and chick lit occurs between the titles of Cathy Bueti's memoir *Breastless in the City* and the HBO television dramedy *Sex and the City*. The latter, a television series based on Candace Bushnell's novel with the same name, is regarded as one of the texts which "jump-starts" the chick-lit craze (Newsday.com., qtd. in "Who's Laughing," Mazza 24). *Sex and the City* aired between 1998 and 2004 and was a media phenomenon at around the same time that these memoirs were being published. Indeed, every one of the primary texts studied in this dissertation can be said to have an intertextual relationship with this program.²

I am not the only one to notice the crossover between fiction and life-writing genres. Ariel Levy remarks, in a review of *Cancer Vixen* entitled "Sick in the City," that Marchetto's graphic memoir is "less a contribution to the established genre of cancer literature [and more] the inauguration of something

² "Sick lit" or in some instances "sick-lit" is a term used variably throughout mass media. At the time of this writing in 2013, sick lit is a controversial type of young-adult fiction, usually about girls, who experience events such as terminal illness or the desire to commit suicide (Carey). Respectively in 2010, Daniel Kalder and Stephanie Hlywak used the term sick lit in online commentaries to describe memoirs about any kind of illness or disability. Prior, it was Paula Kamen—author of *All in my Head: An Epic Quest to Cure an Unrelenting, Totally Unreasonable, and Only Slightly Enlightening Headache*—who claimed the term for women. In her manifesto which was posted for a time on her personal website, Kamen defined "'Sick lit' . . . [as] women fighting shame and isolation through telling their stories about 'invisible' illness" (qtd. in Hlywak).

marginally novel: Sick-Chick Lit.” Marchetto—who begins her memoir by asking “**WHAT** happens when a shoe-crazy, lipstick-obsessed, wine-swilling, pasta-slurping, fashion-fanatic, single-forever, about-to-get-married big-city girl cartoonist (me, Marisa Acocella) . . . finds . . . **A LUMP IN HER BREAST?!?**” (1)—is a readily recognizable subject according to this commentator. In her review, Levy not only presumes her readers’ familiarity with the quirky and outspoken, consumption-obsessed, metropolitan single woman who populates works of contemporary romantic chick fiction, but she also shows that the woman whom the public associates with these novels and television and film productions can surface in non-fiction genres as well.

The overlap between these genres goes beyond surface similarities since the women who write sick lit also deal with the same concerns as the women who are typically represented in chick fiction. These issues include the acquisition of romance, beauty, the right clothes and shoes, and the right career. Along these lines, chick-lit author Meg Cabot describes chick fiction as being all about young women “navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships” (qtd. in *Chick Lit*, Ferriss and Young 3). These are the very tropes which also surface in sick-lit memoirs. Of course, it makes sense that any breast cancer memoir will talk about more than illness since, at its core, memoir is a type of “life writing that takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and focus[es] on interconnected experiences” (*Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson 274). However, since the anecdotes which get recounted in life writing never fully represent all there is to say about a given situation, it seems important

to consider how and why women's texts from both fiction and non-fiction genres are organized around a particular set of experiences which, in turn, get presented in a "chick" way. For this reason, an examination of chickness as it surfaces in women's life writing, as well as in practices associated with this genre's production and dissemination, is important for what it reveals about female subjectivity at the beginning of the twenty-first century.³

Ultimately, I argue that for this group of female memoirists, sick lit is an aesthetic strategy which enables them to renegotiate the terms of their identities after those identities are unsettled by a life-threatening disease. Life writing as a practice is readily enough acknowledged as a means by which an author can work through many different types of trauma, including serious illness. This process of reclamation is important because, as life-writing critic G. Thomas Couser points out in *Signifying Bodies*, illness narratives are, at their core, "a response—indeed a retort—to the traditional misrepresentation of disability in Western culture generally" (7). By extension, life writing by women is very often an expression of

³ Smith and Watson's definition of "memoir" corresponds with how I use the term. While at times I do use the term "memoir" interchangeably with "life narrative" (usually to achieve variety within a given sentence or paragraph), "life narrative" is a more democratic term which encompasses other forms of life stories including ones which are not written (for example, a life story told orally, or through photography or dramatic performance). Likewise, the term "breast cancer narrative" can refer to autobiographical texts about breast cancer which may exist in forms other than prose or memoir. I often use the term breast cancer narrative and breast cancer memoir interchangeably though the former does denote a broader range of texts than just memoir.

anger against forms of gender discrimination. All of the authors featured in this study use sick lit to acknowledge moments when they experience some loss of self worth because breast cancer makes it more difficult for them to achieve what the dominant heteronormative social order considers markers of female success. The difficulties women experience while trying to accomplish these markers of success are the topics of both chick and sick lits. In other words, sick and chick lits are a response to institutions which hail women with messages that they can and should “have it all” including the acquisition of a romance (usually heterosexual), becoming a mother, being conventionally beautiful, and succeeding at a good career. Since women are consistently told by mainstream media that they need to buy consumer goods to achieve these things, sick lit is, at its core, a response to capitalism. Sick lit is, like its chick lit and chick flick cousins, both a product of, and a response to, the reality that twenty-first century American women are aggressively and relentlessly targeted as consumers.

Although these sick-lit authors write in ways which suggest they are not entirely satisfied with this arrangement, they also voice their experiences during a time when women (at least women who want to tell their stories to mainstream audiences) have been discouraged from articulating any explicit form of protest which might disrupt the status quo. Thus, while the heteronormative consumer culture’s targeting of women is not unique to the twenty-first century, some claim that, during this century’s first decade, this detrimental situation reaches a new intensity because of the ways that women are silenced or encouraged by mass media not to complain—a situation which escalates with what some critics refer

to as the arrival of postfeminism. Along these lines, feminist sociologist and media critic Angela McRobbie has coined the phrase “post feminist decade” which she uses to describe a period she locates in British and American culture between 1997 and 2007 approximately (“Post Feminism + Beyond” 00:30)⁴. According to McRobbie, it is during this time that governments and mass media collude to undertake a particularly “ferocious undermining” of feminism: the result is “a new gender regime . . . which directly acts upon the bodies and capacities of young women” (“Post Feminism + Beyond” 10:00). In McRobbie’s view, younger women especially are targeted by “the world of media imagery [where] the politics of meaning are deeply and inextricably connected to and part of the wider political economy” (“Post Feminism + Beyond” 11:20). Throughout mass culture, women are presented as having been granted full equality and, in this way, feminism and claims for gender reform are presented as “out of date” (“Post-Feminism and Popular Culture” 258). This is why McRobbie says that during the decade of postfeminism, in order to “count as a girl,” young women are called to perform or participate in acts of “ritualistic denunciation” (“Post-

⁴ At points, McRobbie states that the “frame of reference” she uses to define the “post feminist decade” pertains “largely, but not exclusively, to the UK political culture of that period” (“Post Feminism + Beyond” 00:23). At other points, she refers in more general terms to western culture and, to make her argument, she uses examples of popular media featuring chick texts which are also loved and appreciated by audiences in the United States. Examples are *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Thus the points she makes regarding the ways that women are represented in and by chick media have resonance for this study of American memoir.

Feminism and Popular Culture” 258), either of themselves or of other women. In this way, women are discouraged from being too strident or outspoken about the need for gender reform.

Chick-fiction icon Bridget Jones is an example McRobbie cites to show how postfeminism works to silence and undermine women.⁵ According to McRobbie, Bridget represents the (dis)empowered young woman of postfeminism, one who is a product of the “double entanglement” (“Post-feminism and Popular Culture” 256). What this means is that although Bridget is supposedly “a free agent” and thus able to “earn an independent living without shame or danger,” her liberation is the cause of certain “new anxieties” which she experiences (“Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” McRobbie 261). What this quintessential chick heroine seems to desire most is the love of a man, an objective she hopes to achieve, in part, by becoming the correct weight. On some level Bridget and the audience is supposed to realize that such obsessions are foolish; yet, as McRobbie explains, thanks to feminism, the audience—and Bridget—knows that it is her right to “choose” to pursue romance (and thinness) before other life avenues. It is Bridget’s right to “fantasy tradition” in this way (“Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” McRobbie 262). This “language of

⁵ McRobbie is referring to the motion picture version of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* directed by Sharon McGuire (2001) based on Helen Fielding’s novel (1996). The novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* was, initially, published as a weekly column in the UK newspaper *The Independent*. The novel is regarded as the “urtext” of chick lit (*Chick Lit*, Ferriss and Young 4).

personal choice”—of empowerment— which circulates in popular culture is what makes feminism seem unnecessary and outdated (“Post-feminism and Popular Culture,” McRobbie 262). Within such a discursive system, it is difficult to argue that any sort of gender reform is still needed and women who complain about sexism are made to seem churlish or unnatural. In other words, Bridget is “re-regulate[d] . . . by means of the language of personal choice” (“Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” McRobbie 262). Of course, McRobbie’s point is ultimately that the “double entanglement” has consequences outside fictional worlds (“Post-Feminism and Popular Culture, McRobbie 256). Sick lit has political utility for this reason: as a life-writing genre, it shows in a tangible way how postfeminism as a condition of existence impacts some “real” women’s lives, and does so during times of extreme crisis.

As I hope is becoming apparent, postfeminism is used here to describe the condition of chaotic existence under which some twenty-first century women live in the United States. This application of the term postfeminism needs to be clear because, as Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff explain, the word has taken on “a wide range of meanings” and is often used with “a lack of specificity” (3).⁶

⁶ In *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity* Rosaline Gill and Christina Scharff cite scholarship to offer a comprehensive overview of the term. Here they explain that for some, postfeminism is a critical stance or “analytical perspective” which expands or modernizes the feminist movement (3). They further note that postfeminism is a term often used interchangeably or “synonymously with Third Wave feminism” (3); or, it can signal a “*historical shift after the height of Second Wave feminism*” (3). Finally, Gill and Scharff show that postfeminism is understood by some as

Sometimes postfeminism is understood as “*a sensibility*” or as an “*object of critical analysis*” (Gill and Scharff 4), and these definitions fit well with McRobbie’s idea of the “post-feminist decade” which is a time when a particular anti-feminist ideology thrives. Thus, in this dissertation, postfeminism is an ideology which is particularly intense during a specific period of time and in specific locations (North America and the United Kingdom). When studied, sick lit can show just how aggressively certain women are being hailed to consume, to uphold the heteronormative social order, and to disavow feminism. This genre of women’s autobiography can be examined to better understand the ways some women are impacted by the muting of feminist discourses which might otherwise enable them to make explicit claims that gender reform is still required.

However, while sick lit can reveal something about how women live during a time when feminism is negatively presented and subsequently perceived by many people, what complicates matters from an analytical perspective is that sick-lit works share no single polemical objective. This brings my introduction back to why it is important to look at the different ways that sick-lit memoirists perform aspects of chickness as they narrate the stories of their breast cancers. Some of the women in this study clearly (re)acquire agency by positioning themselves as chicks within their work; say, for instance, as someone who buys

a “*backlash against feminism*” (3). These critics caution that no single definition “tell(s) the whole story” (3). Their overview is useful for the way it acknowledges that different definitions of postfeminism, or post-feminism as it is to some, exist simultaneously in contemporary western culture in both popular and academic realms.

designer shoes in order to feel pretty and powerful while she copes with cancer. At other times, the sick-lit writer is annoyed by consumerism and its impact on her life as she attempts to cope with her disease. Whichever the case, as I discuss in chapter three, one of the benefits some writers achieve when they work in this genre is a sense of belonging to a particular sort of community, a factor which may ultimately help them to cope with their diagnoses.

Background to this Study

When I first began to do the research which led to my selection of primary texts, I suspected that I would have many examples of breast cancer narratives from which to choose. I was not wrong in this regard. Narratives about this disease appear everywhere in North American mass culture—they were prolific at the time I began my research in 2008, and they are still surfacing frequently throughout the mass media in 2013. As I began to survey the genre in detail, however, a subset of these memoirs stood out because they were being marketed using what can only be described as chick-lit paratexts. By this statement I mean that their covers were designed to resemble the colourful chick-lit book cover which feature the caricatured silhouette or color photograph of a fashionable woman or female body part (often a torso or legs), the martini glass, or some product of the fashion or beauty industries (often the stiletto).

The tendency on the part of publishers to use chick iconography to market a range of women's texts and genres has been remarked upon before. As one writer for The Guardian Books Blog points out in 2008, “[since] chick lit books

sell like cupcakes, publishers are now adding chick lit-style covers to any book written by a woman” (Shipley), including women’s memoir.⁷ While it is true that a lot of women’s texts were—and to some extent still are—being marketed with chick paratexts, what I found inside sick lit also resembled or was similar to what is found within some chick fiction. Sick-lit memoirists are, like their chick-lit counterparts, youngish, style-conscious women who are concerned about making a place for themselves in contemporary American society through, as I have previously stated, succeeding at romance, beauty, and career. These women are, again like their chick-lit counterparts, usually, though not exclusively, white, affluent, and heterosexual. Additionally, these memoirists share with the typical chick protagonist a tendency to deploy a witty brand of self deprecation as they tell their stories. The similarities across the two genres, I believe, point to ways that the social milieu in which sick and chick lit is written (the postfeminist decade) produces texts which are products of a particular crisis which is the absence of a strong feminist presence in the mainstream. This observation, in turn, leads me to understand the breast cancer narrative as a genre of life writing which reflects deeply the assault which McRobbie believes takes place on feminism. This observation is especially valid when postfeminism is understood to be ideological in the sense that it is underpinned by discourses which try to silence or stop women from making explicit claims for gender reform.

⁷ See, for example, the cover of Rhoda Janzen’s *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress: A Memoir of Going Home* (2010). This text bears the image of a little black dress and stilettos (see Fig. 3).

Chickness as a presence on and within breast cancer memoirs shows to a remarkable degree how mainstream institutions are at work to “re-regulate” women, particularly through moves which seek to refigure discourses of activism or protest into ones about consumption. Along such lines, some social critics are deeply concerned about the ways that breast cancer and the activism associated with it has become corporatized. Barbara Ehrenreich, in her well-known article “Welcome to Cancerland,” writes scathingly about how corporations set out to create compliant female consumers by promoting products and activities which “infantilize” women (46). This process of causing a woman’s life-threatening disease to be associated with the consumption of products which belittle women—Ehrenreich is particularly unhappy about breast-cancer teddy bears—happens as fundraising institutions, government, and retailers join forces to make the pink ribbon into what has become a highly recognizable symbol of breast cancer. The result is an endless list of pink products for people to buy to support research being done to treat women with this disease. Thus, Samantha King, following in the footsteps of Ehrenreich, points to the “informal alliance of large corporations (particularly pharmaceutical companies, mammography equipment manufacturers, and cosmetics producers), major cancer charities, the state, and the media” (xx). As King bluntly notes, such parties “have much to lose in terms of money and prestige if the tide were to turn away from the search for better therapies [and a cure for breast cancer were to be found]” (xix). In other words, such institutions profit because breast cancer exists and, in King’s view, this

reality raises questions about whether or not enough research is really being done to stop (as opposed to detect and treat) the disease.

Chick-lit book covers are often pink or at least pastel-coloured and they tend to be overly feminized. This is a factor which converges all too neatly with the work done by large-scale fundraisers who have made the pink ribbon a ubiquitous symbol of consumption on behalf of breast cancer. A particularly extreme example of how sick lit can be implicated in such institutional aims is *Nordie's at Noon: The Personal Stories of Four Women "too young" for Breast Cancer* which I discuss in my conclusion. This memoir which includes a title reference to an exclusive department store has pink ribbons on its cover and pink-ribbon fundraisers are promoted in the book as well (see Fig. 4). I must, at this juncture, emphasize that I am not suggesting that any work of sick lit is straightforwardly for or against capitalism or the pink ribbon and what it represents. This dissertation is not about discourses of resistance in that way. Sick-lit authors (even one of the women who wrote *Nordie's*) often express some ambivalence toward consumer culture. At the same time, as women with a life-threatening health condition, they depend on it for survival. The manner in which the women who write sick lit are simultaneously empowered and disempowered through creating a genre which reflects their complex relationships with consumer culture is what brings me to the study of these works. Sick lit can be studied for the tacit examples it provides of the ways popular media and consumer culture's refashioning of feminism impinges on and influences the lives of women with

breast cancer, and how a certain group of women use life writing to engage with this problem.

Methodology

Sick lit's intertextual relationship with chick lit raises many questions in this study. What, for instance, can we learn from Marisa Acocella Marchetto's representation of the self as someone who battles breast cancer by wearing the latest designer shoes to her chemotherapy appointments? What does it mean when sick-lit writers like Cathy Bueti and Geralyn Lucas explicitly link their memoirs to chick lit when talking about their work? How might the self-deprecating—but also irreverent—chick discourse found in Tania Katan's *My One Night Stand with Cancer* and Meredith Norton's *Lopsided: How Having Breast Cancer can be Really Distracting* be interpreted? Finally, a question raised by sick lit is whether or not as a genre it is only suited to women who “survive” their cancer. While many of the writers discussed in this study appear to have survived breast cancer for a number of years, at least three have not. How might the women who write sick lit be remembered? Is the memoirist who writes sick lit and her legacy rendered vulnerable in some way through her associations with chickiness?

To explore some potential answers to such questions, this project draws primarily from the work of feminist media studies and auto/biography studies criticisms. When used in combination, these critical approaches allow for some further consideration of the cultural pressures some American women with breast cancer face in the early part of the twenty-first century, and to assess the role life writing plays in helping its authors and readers to deal with them. Feminist media

critics have done important work to define postfeminism and to analyze contemporary representations of women as they are taking place in a range of media produced during its time, including chick lit and the chick flick. Feminist auto/biography studies critics have likewise set out some foundational approaches to the study of women's life narratives, much of which get written and published just as the postfeminist decade begins. By bringing these two bodies of scholarship together and adding a third—a smattering of book history criticism which takes into account the practices which give rise to the materialization of texts—it becomes possible to critically assess chick lit and to evaluate it, both for its complicity in perpetuating the mainstream fantasy that consumption is an antidote to breast cancer, and for its capacity to intervene in that same problem.

Within this introduction, I have already cited the work of several feminist media critics including Angela McRobbie, as well as Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff. As I note nearer to the beginning of this introduction, these critics supply a much needed definition for postfeminism, one which understands it as a time period during which the “*entanglement* of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” circulate throughout mass culture (Gill and Scharff 4). In addition to these critics, I have also referenced work done by Mallory Young and Suzanne Ferriss who have collaborated to compile and edit two book collections which examine chick lit and the chick flick respectively. In the first of these compilations, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, the critics point out that chick fiction warrants “serious consideration [for the way it] brings into focus many of the issues facing contemporary women and contemporary culture—issues of identity, of race and

class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image” (2-3). Such critical work is important to my study as I discuss ways that chick themes manifest themselves in sick lit.

Elsewhere, Anthea Taylor approaches women’s popular texts with the goal of understanding how “women themselves [rework] and [contest] limited representations” of womanhood which circulate in mass media (4). Taylor discusses how single women conceive of themselves in relation to representations of unmarried women in mass culture and “presumes that popular media forms help provide the narratives through which [many women] come to constitute [themselves]/ are constituted as subjects” (6). Her work is valuable in the context of this dissertation for the way it shows how the representation of womanhood found in chick lit and the chick flick—like McRobbie, she bases some of her claims on the figure of Bridget Jones—actually surfaces in a number of media formats, including life narration as it occurs in blogs and on reality television programs. Along similar lines, Diane Negra discusses the “synergy” which she witnesses taking place across various media such as “film, television, print culture, and journalism” (9) including chick fiction. However, none of these critics focus on memoir as a site of this convergence, though chick-lit scholar Stephanie Harzewski comes close when she points out that many chick-lit authors base their novels on personal experience, and thus points out “it would not be entirely inappropriate to label chick lit . . . as ‘postfeminist memoir’” (*Chick Lit* 159). The point is that sick and chick-lit authors obviously both work and live within a media environment where much crossover is taking place. It stands to

reason that some women life narrators construct self-representations which reflect this constitution of the self as it is shaped by, around, and in opposition to representations of gender in popular media and, by extension, consumer culture as it is popularly presented in chick fiction.

As feminist media studies critics do not tend to deal with life-writing or its criticism, the theorization of sick lit requires critical perspectives from those who do. Scholars of autobiography studies, or as some prefer “auto/biography studies” which, as Julie Rak explains, is a term that incorporates a “slash [to highlight] the instability of autobiography as a genre, and [to] express a continuum rather than an area of absolute difference between biography and autobiography” (*Auto/Biography* 16), contribute essential perspectives to this project.

Auto/biography studies criticism—a field of inquiry which recognizes that self representation occurs across a range of media—is vital to any conversation about breast cancer and the cultural issues associated with this disease, particularly given the extent to which the historical record about breast cancer is informed by women’s autobiographical discourses and practices.

Women’s life writing specifically is the subject of Sidonie Smith’s and Julia Watson’s anthology of critical essays entitled *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. The collection, published in 1998, aims to identify “prospects for theorizing women’s autobiography” (37). Several of the selections including Rita Felski’s “On Confession,” Jeanne Perreault’s “Autography/Transformation/Asymmetry” and Julia Watson’s “Unspeakable Differences” analyze Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* and thus begin to explore the breast cancer

narrative. Broadly speaking, such critical works consider how Lorde uses life writing to react to and recover from sexism, heterosexism, and racialization after she is diagnosed with breast cancer.

Feminist auto/biography studies critics also often seek out and analyze autobiographical discourse in fiction written by women in response to traumas such as sexual abuse, genocide, or serious illness. Two particularly useful examples of such criticism are Suzette Henke's *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (1998) and Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001). In the first, Henke conflates fiction and nonfiction within her study of women's autobiography. In her psychoanalytic study informed by trauma studies scholarship, Henke argues that women can create life writing to cope with traumatic events, including serious illness—a process she refers to as “scriptotherapy” (xii). Importantly, Henke's use of the term *life writing* is intentionally broad to encompass “memoirs, diaries, letters, and journals, as well as . . . other personally inflected fictional texts” (xiii). As part of a group of critics who focus on Audre Lorde, Henke shows that Lorde's semi-fictional *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* “was [its author's] experiment in scriptotherapy designed to work through traumatic experiences preceding the shock of breast cancer and surgical mastectomy” (xxi).

Leigh Gilmore also examines the relationship between fiction and nonfiction by asking how the former “and autobiography reach into each other, and whether they may, for some subjects, even require each other” (45). One of Gilmore's examples is Dorothy Allison's novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*. In her

analysis, Gilmore notes that Allison's description of the sexual abuse which she suffered at the hand of a relative and which she describes "[elsewhere] in her nonfiction closely resembles [the experience] she [also] narrates in her novel" (5). Gilmore views this conflation of fact and falsehood in fiction and nonfiction genres as evidence that sexism and gender disparity exist to give rise to narrative patterns which surface across a range of texts. Along these lines, she wonders if there are particular sorts of traumas that are too transgressive to describe in texts that explicitly announce themselves as nonfiction. To this end, she provocatively seems to suggest that hybridized forms of women's life narration signal "efforts to undermine women's self-representation [and] are consistent with the construction of other barriers [imposed by mainstream society]" (Gilmore 21). In other words, Gilmore explores how women writers have refigured the conventions associated with particular genres to expand the limits of what it is they are allowed to say out loud. This concept is also relevant to this study where I suggest sick lit is a type of life writing which blends the conventions from both fiction and non-fiction genres. Further, this blending is a manifestation of constraints women face.

In addition to drawing from trauma studies, some auto/biography studies critics also work with disability theory. G. Thomas Couser has written extensively on a range of narratives about illness and disability, including ones about breast cancer. In critical work which appears prior to the postfeminist decade, Couser compares breast cancer narratives from the seventies, eighties, and early nineties to slave narratives and, by doing so, shows that this subgenre of life writing is, from its origins, deeply "political" (*RB* 37). One of the ways that

Couser thinks about the political is to consider how the writers of various illness narratives “engage with the developing discourses of the conditions represented” (RB15): in other words, he asks what social factors cause certain illness memoirs to materialize in particular ways. Elsewhere, Susannah Mintz’s *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities* draws from feminist body theory and disabilities studies to examine the work of life writers who “display corporeal difference to demonstrate the damaging effects not of disease or impairment but, rather, of the cultural mythologies that interpret those conditions in reductive or disparaging ways” (1). Both Couser and Mintz work with the idea that disability is a social construct. In other words, these critics examine how persons who embody certain physical or mental characteristics encounter barriers due to the broader culture’s narrow definition of normativity. Breast cancer moves from being an illness to become a disability when women experience the rules of conduct which surround it—say the social pressure to have reconstructive surgery—in ways which cause them to experience hardships which might not be present if the mainstream held less rigid views on what constitutes normative womanhood.

In addition to drawing from trauma and disability studies, auto/biography studies is also sometimes informed by book history criticism. This latter field of study is vitally important since one of the central arguments I make is that sick lit’s material construction is part of what distinguishes it as a genre uniquely suited to exposing the perils of postfeminism. Those familiar with book history will certainly recall Gerard Genette’s “formulae, *paratext* = *peritext* + *epitext*”

(5). Peritexts are elements which, spatially, are directly attached to the physical book such as “the title or the preface,” while epitexts are a work’s “distanced elements” which help to shape its reception, such as author autobiographies or interviews, or book reviews (Genette 5). Online sources such as author websites and cyber-book markets are also sources of epitext. For the purposes of this study, paratext is the term most often used when discussing any of these elements. Each sick-lit text studied here is inextricably bound to its paratext—a point of vital importance throughout this dissertation. One feature which distinguishes sick lit is its paratexts which reflect capitalism’s ever intensifying attack on women with breast cancer and feminism.

Importantly, there is some precedence for a study of this sort in auto/biography studies, though not in the area of illness or disability narratives. Gillian Whitlock’s work with contemporary life writing from the Islamic Middle East takes this sort of approach. Part of what Whitlock does is to examine paratexts to locate evidence of western culture’s anxieties regarding the other. Whitlock claims that studies of contemporaneous life narratives and their paratexts are “the urgent work of criticism now” (13), and elaborates that “By introducing these thresholds into interpretation, we can track the textual cultures of autobiography, [which] are a vital component of any enquiry into the cross-cultural routes of contemporary life narrative” (14). While sick lit takes me on a different journey than the one taken by Whitlock, what she says is important in this context, particularly since sick lit’s paratexts reflect the dominant capitalist culture’s work to construct a particular subject of breast cancer.

Last, more recent work by Julie Rak examines the ways that contemporary popular memoir published in the twenty-first century is manufactured, promoted, and consumed. One of the things Rak discusses is memoir's relationship to citizenship: in her words, "[the] ability to transmit what citizenship and belonging can mean for an individual is one of the sources of memoir's power" (*Boom* 156). Sick-lit memoirists aim to become productive citizens as they write and publish their works. A young woman who writes sick lit joins the conversation taking place in American mass culture over breast cancer, but does so in a particular way by positioning herself as a woman of style, wit, and fun. As I will show in chapter two and elsewhere, the woman who gives this type of autobiographical performance through life writing inscribes herself as a good citizen because she can present her work as a charitable act—something she does in the service of other women like her. Illness and disease disrupt identity and one's sense of being productive, and I believe these women write sick lit to regain a sense of belonging within their communities. This opportunity is open to the sick-lit author because she can represent herself in ways which correspond with the ideal set forth by mass culture institutions during the postfeminist decade.

In summary, this study draws from these fields of study to examine the role that sick lit plays in contemporary culture and to consider the insights that it provides into attitudes toward women and women's health during the postfeminist decade. By doing so, sick lit emerges as a genre of women's life writing that both shapes and is shaped by hegemonic forces during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Overview of Chapters

My first chapter “Situating Sick Lit: Feminist Forerunners and the Commoditization of Breast Cancer Activism in American Popular Culture” begins to set out a context for an analysis of sick lit with a discussion of ways that women have used feminist rhetoric to articulate and disseminate life stories about their encounters with breast cancer. By showing how these narratives have evolved in the United States since the 1970s, I demonstrate that the feminist or activist voice which initially gives the genre its power gradually becomes muted. In this way, I use life writing as a source which can expose the capitalist culture’s appropriation of feminism as it is taking place over time. To do this work, I distinguish between narratives which are published by feminist presses and ones which are published by mainstream publishers. Such an approach entails the exploration of individual works’ paratexts and publishing histories. Finally, to show how the breast cancer narrative is affected by the commoditization of feminism in the mainstream, and how this paves the way for the arrival of sick lit, I conclude the chapter with a look at Marisa Acocella Marchetto’s *Cancer Vixen*. Here I begin to show how sick lit is a manifestation of an attack on feminism in American mass culture.

In chapter two, “Feminism’s Echoes in Contemporary Postfeminist Media: Hailing the Sick Chick with Breast Cancer,” I discuss the emergence of what Ferriss and Young refer to as “chick culture,” a subset of popular culture which emerges during the postfeminist decade to reflect the chaos brought about by an

increasingly disparate media which presents feminism as redundant. Since each of the sick-lit texts I discuss later has an intertextual relationship with the iconic chick flick *Sex and the City*, I begin with an analysis of that program, to show the emergence of a pattern or trope found in popular texts whereby women with breast cancer are presented as redeemed through their work with cancer fundraising institutions. In such narratives, breast cancer is also often represented as a crisis which prompts women to return to conservative roles. By analyzing several popular texts from chick culture, I show that this pattern is repeated frequently to demonstrate that women with breast cancer are being hailed aggressively as consumers. However, I end by suggesting that a woman represented as having chick characteristics can, on occasion, replicate this narrative pattern in ways that help her to belong. As part of this latter outcome, I begin to show how women with certain chick attributes can be found in popular media which is not presented as fiction. Thus I work to define the sick-lit narrator's relationship with chick culture as one of possibility despite its reliance on capitalism.

In the third chapter entitled "Sick Lit and its Material Practices: Author Agency in the Context of Postfeminism and the Chick Culture Craze," I move to an analysis of sick-lit works themselves. In what is partially a tracking of paratexts associated with two sick-lit memoirs, I work to provide insight into life writing practices undertaken by women and their publishers who work to create this subgenre of autobiography, and I look at what these writers accomplish for themselves by doing so. Ultimately, my examination of sick-lit paratexts suggests

that the women who write it are, despite the socially-imposed obligation to confess, able to use life writing—practices which include processes undertaken to publish and disseminate their work—to (re)gain meaningful identities as they confront their illnesses. A look at these texts can demonstrate how the practices associated with creating sick lit can serve as a platform by which the author can participate in conversations taking place about the corporatization of breast cancer and to position the self in relation to them. In such situations, sick lit is intimately tied to the duties of citizenship and is thus a way for young women in particular to *belong*.

Chapter Four “Irreverent Chicks with Cancer Critique the Breast Cancer Normate” is a discussion of the ways that the sick-lit author can conflate conventions associated with chick fiction and illness memoirs to articulate a social critique of the corporatization of breast cancer. Sick chicks can, on occasion, accomplish a subterfuge: what I mean is that the memoirist can make use of the signifiers and rhetorical styles used to market chickness to say forbidden things. This narrator uses mainstream culture’s fondness for the chick to expand generic parameters which might otherwise constrain her as she narrates her experience of breast cancer. In continuation, then, this chapter will examine the sick-lit author’s capacity to surmount the conditions of production under which she works as she creates and publishes a life narrative which challenges social norms in ways which can be quite powerful.

Finally, in my conclusion “Sick Lit + Beyond,” I discuss some of the risks which I feel the writers who create sick lit assume. Here my focus is primarily on

sick lit's capacity to sustain and serve their authors over time. Although the sick-lit writer accomplishes productive things, she produces works which reflect the chaos of her time (postfeminism). Here I also provide some concluding comments about all the memoirs discussed so far while working with Angela McRobbie's idea of the "new sexual contract" (*Aftermath* 9) which hails young women during the postfeminist decade and beyond. Ultimately, I argue that the sick-lit author who accepts the terms of this contract—something she may well be obliged to do if she wants to find a platform from which to tell her story—is a vulnerable subject of autobiography. An important part of this portion of the discussion deals with what writing sick lit may mean to women who do not survive their breast cancer.

To fully understand some of the postfeminist decade's impact on women, McRobbie recommends that critics attend to the "the complex intersections and flows of media and political discourses which spread, sometimes intersecting in unpredictable ways far and wide across the social fabric" ("Post Feminism + Beyond" 18:00). Sick lit is a genre of life writing which reveals a great deal in this regard. As a type of autobiography, sick lit is covered by generic codes and expectations pertaining to truth telling. It belongs to popular culture where it circulates and is received as factual and thus it reveals some insight into the ways its writers and their audiences perceive the world around them. This is important because, as I start to discuss in the next chapter, sick lit is a genre with explicit ties to feminism and, as such, it reveals certain truths about the ways its writers

perceive this movement and the world around them during the time period that is postfeminist.

Chapter One

Situating Sick Lit: Feminist Forerunners and the Commoditization of Breast

Cancer Activism in American Popular Culture

In the late 1990s, G. Thomas Couser proclaimed the breast cancer narrative to be “a distinctive, significant, and quite coherent new subgenre of American autobiography” (*RB* 76). He based this assertion on the fact that he had discovered that “at least two dozen book-length narratives [by women with this disease had] been published since the mid-1970s” (*RB* 42). At that point, Couser also commented that it was the “feminist concern for a woman’s disease” (*RB* 76) which helped this genre to emerge. In 2001, Leigh Gilmore made a similar observation about women who use life writing as an outlet for trauma when she remarked that “identity-based movements [including feminism] have shaped recent developments in autobiography” (16). Couser’s work, in particular, begins to show that, at its core, the breast cancer narrative is a life-writing genre influenced by feminism. Indeed, critics of autobiography have been able to locate, in a number of such works, some women’s significant critiques of the mainstream social order including ones about heteronormativity, normative beauty standards, corporate abuses of the environment which cause cancer, and the medicalization of the female body by the health system.

Although the breast cancer narrative begins as a genre of life writing composed by women who want to expose and protest social ills, it is important to recall that the purpose of my project is to examine a cluster of breast cancer narratives written and published in the United States at a point when, as Tasha

Dubriwny notes, “representations of women’s health have been disarticulated from feminism” (*Vulnerable* 13). Dubriwny sees feminists as credited with initiating many reforms to women’s health but claims that this positive image of feminism changes over time. “Disarticulation,” is also a term used by Angela McRobbie who defines this process of severing feminism from the mainstream as “a force which devalues, or negates and makes [feminism] unthinkable . . . on the assumption widely promoted that there is no longer any need for such actions” (*Aftermath* 26). Here McRobbie is talking about how the “institutional gains made by feminism” which take place in the 1970s are, in effect, “undone” by those who oppose the movement (*Aftermath* 24). What comments such as hers and Dubriwny’s also suggest is that, for a time anyways, feminism as an ideology did have a foothold in mainstream culture. An examination of several breast cancer narratives written at various points during and after the 1970s supports this idea.

Since this disarticulation of feminism from breast cancer activism plays itself out in American mass culture, this chapter does the necessary work of showing how the evolution of the breast cancer narrative runs parallel to the evolution of the women’s movement as both are portrayed in mainstream media culture. From this discussion, it is possible to understand how sick lit is its own type of breast cancer narrative which has its roots in feminism. I begin by discussing examples of breast cancer narratives dating from the early 1970s and published by mainstream presses to show how these reflect what has been referred to as a *popular feminism*. In her study of *Ms.* magazine and the media’s intersection with feminism between 1972 and 1989, Amy Erdman Farrell defines

feminism “in its broadest sense [as] the commitment to improving women’s lives and to ending gender domination” (5). She expands by noting that this broad definition is a “popular” one: thus “popular feminism” is the term she uses to denote an understanding of the movement which, during the time she writes about, is “widespread, common to many, and emerges from the realm of popular culture” (5). Her term is useful for the way it shows how the different factions of feminism—for instance, liberal, social, or radical, etc.—start to become blurred together, something which does happen as the movement gets represented in mass media where it can be used broadly to denote any sort of activist activity undertaken by women. However, given its tie to mass media, popular feminism does tend to reify heteronormative ideologies and is thus less likely to reflect radical feminism’s gynocentric approach. Popular feminism emerges from those decades when the movement and some women who identified themselves as its representatives are visible in mainstream media. Through this discussion, I show that sick lit, and for that matter chick lit and the pink ribbon, are all outcomes of consumer culture’s reshaping of feminism into an ideology which can be marketed to the mainstream. Thus this chapter—and the next one which then shows how chickness as a category of female identity becomes a media phenomenon—is a foundation for those later chapters which deal with sick lit as a type of autobiography written by women who deal with the commoditization of feminism in a variety of ways.

The Popular (Heteronormative) Feminist Approach to Breast Cancer in the 1970s

The emergence of the breast cancer narrative as a recognizable genre of life writing in the 1970s coincides with the appearance of high-profile female role models who received media coverage when diagnosed with the disease. Actress Shirley Temple Black, diagnosed with breast cancer in 1972, was among the first of several famous women to go public with her diagnosis. However, as medical historian Barron Lerner explains, “[while] Black’s breast cancer generated considerable interest, it was dwarfed by [the publicity surrounding] Betty Ford [when she] developed the disease in 1974” (Lerner 172). According to Lerner, First Lady Betty Ford played an important role in helping to remove some of the stigma and shame which had come to be associated with the illness. Significantly, the general public also saw Ford as “an outspoken feminist” (Lerner 172). The reasons why are made clear in Ford’s memoir *The Times of My Life* published in 1978 and co-written by Chris Chase. In the memoir, Ford remarks she “did a lot of stumping for ERA (Equal Rights Amendment)” (204). Additionally, she felt abortion should be legalized and she held liberal views toward birth control and premarital sex. Ford’s willingness to speak forthrightly about her breast cancer—a disease that many women had been embarrassed to discuss—is in keeping with her image as an advocate of the women’s movement.

Dubriwny makes the point, however, that as a first lady and political figure, Ford remains bound to a patriarchal institution and can really only “open a *limited* discursive space” (“Constructing” 121). Indeed, Ford’s work on behalf of women’s rights garnered the criticism of those who felt feminism undermined

traditional values. Within Ford's memoir, it is possible to see how Ford articulates her response to such accusations in ways which take into account what McRobbie refers to as a conservative public's resistance to any sort of "undermining of gender inequities in the heterosexual family unit" (*Aftermath*, McRobbie 31). This may be why, in her memoir, Ford problematically claims that, while there is "no way [she will] stop fighting for women's rights," she is also "[out of] step with the lesbian faction of the women's movement" (205). Although Ford maintains that all factions of the women's movement "are entitled to free speech," and she is critical of Anita Bryant (Ford 205), the life narrative Ford writes helps to "maintain traditional gender hierarchies through a focus on heterosexual desire" (*Vulnerable*, Dubriwny 25). This privileging of the heterosexual nuclear family is also apparent when Ford states in her memoir that she is not her husband's intellectual equal by claiming that she "couldn't have done what he's done," and her claim that "mothers" and housewives have "*rights*" even as they fulfill roles in the home (203).

The "extensive media coverage" surrounding Ford's breast cancer diagnosis (Borrelli 291) constitutes a conspicuous moment when popular feminism and breast cancer as a social cause intersect. In *The Times of My Life*, Ford writes that it was "[while] lying in hospital, thinking of all those women going for cancer checkups because of [her, that she came] to recognize more clearly the power of the woman in the White House" (194). It is in the following paragraph of her memoir that Ford commits to working more "effectively" for the Equal Rights Amendment, and here, also, where she remarks that Betty Friedan

had sent her good wishes as she recovered from her mastectomy (194). Ford further remarks with some pride that Friedan had credited her in the media with being “good for the women’s movement” (194). This moment of identification with a popular feminist role model is significant. According to Farrell, it was during the late 1960s and 1970s that “the media created its own ‘star system’ of feminists, with women like Gloria Steinem, Kate Millet, and Betty Friedan as the recipients of the [its] attention” (23). Debra Baker Beck has also cited research which shows that in 1969 or thereabouts, mass media can be credited with “actually expanding the women’s movement by publicizing its issues, heroines, and activities” (144). The women named by Farrell were willing to be public figures on behalf of the movement (though they by no means represented the perspectives of all feminists). Ford also contributes to the development of a popular feminist ideology because she is seen as someone affiliated with the some of the movement’s figureheads.

This discussion of Betty Ford and of feminism as it is presented in mass media and popular memoir starts to show how a particular sort of conservative feminist role model with breast cancer is starting to become established in the American mainstream. The tension being played out in Ford’s memoir around identity politics predicts the split between different feminist groups which happens within the women’s movement, and also helps to explain the differences in feminist expression across the spectrum of breast cancer narratives. At least one critic of these narratives has noticed that there are differences in the ways a feminist perspective is articulated in breast cancer memoirs. Mary K. DeShazer,

in her monograph *Fractured Borders: Reading Women's Cancer Literature* (2005) has organized a significant number of women's breast cancer narratives into three categories based on the authors' politics: *personal narratives*, *multicultural narratives*, and *environmental narratives* (219-220). The first category, personal narratives, is the largest one. This is also the category which DeShazer deems the least political or critical of mainstream institutions such as the healthcare system (219). According to DeShazer, "[Personal] narratives foreground women's medicalized bodies in the context of heterosexual relationships and present themes associated with hegemonic femininity: appearance, body image, and consumer culture" (223). As DeShazer further explains, such works are not "overtly activist" (223). Works which DeShazer places in this category, and which I discuss in this chapter, are Betty Rollin's *First, You Cry* and Joyce Wadler's *My Breast* (220). Conversely, "multicultural" narratives of cancer are categorized as such because their authors address issues such as racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism. Such narratives are, in DeShazer's view, "overtly feminist" (221) because they correspond with movements which tend to "place more confidence in cancer activism than in the medical and scientific establishment" (DeShazer 221). Some of examples of this type which I also discuss are Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum's *Cancer in Two Voices*, and Rose Kushner's *Breast Cancer* (DeShazer 221). Finally, "environmental" cancer narratives "[scrutinize] possible ties between environmental toxicity and rising incidences of cancer" and are thus also associated with grassroots activism (DeShazer 221), though not

feminism necessarily. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which I do not discuss, is defined as the "prototype for the environmental [cancer] narrative" (DeShazer 222), even though Carson does not explicitly discuss her own cancer in her narrative.

Although the works in each of these categories are differently political, this statement should not be taken to mean that personal narratives of breast cancer never make social critiques. Nor would it be accurate, based on this classification system, to assume that even all multicultural narratives articulate some uniform commitment to a set of homogeneous feminist principles. Still, by noting that there are differences in the ways these writers engage express their politics, what does become apparent is that the genre gives rise to very different types of feminist expression. Narratives which are underpinned by a popular feminist perspective are often tied to mainstream publishing, and it is narratives of this type which have often been widely disseminated via their ties to popular media culture. These are also the narratives which tend to reflect the idealized image of breast cancer survivorship which I discuss in chapter three.

Popular Feminism in Breast Cancer Narratives from the 1970s

Betty Rollin, author of *First, You Cry* (1976) which I mention in the opening paragraph of this dissertation, and which DeShazer includes in her list of personal narratives of cancer (DeShazer 220), uses explicit references to popular

feminists and feminism as a way to speak through a socially-imposed silence.⁸ Near the beginning of her memoir, Rollin writes that a lengthy wait in a doctor's office causes her "feminist bile" to rise (21). What irritates Rollin is the medical institution's presumption that she, and the fifteen other women in the reception area, all have nothing else to do but wait on the doctor. This discourtesy is sexism in Rollin's view, since the medical institution does not "do this to men" (21). As she faces a breast exam in her doctor's office, she explains that cancer exists for her as an unspoken possibility in much the same way "rape" exists as "a buried terror, far, far under the ground" (Rollin 13). Just prior, Rollin had likened having a mammogram to experiencing a sexual assault, remarking that "Before the picture-taking even begins, one has to tolerate the . . . unnerving business of being 'palpated' (medically felt up)" (12). Much of Rollin's memoir deals with the ways in which mainstream America in the 1970s imposes silence on women, and how this silencing exacerbates her trauma. For instance, Rollin states that "cancer" tends to be word that is unspeakable, both within and outside of the medical environment: it is as "silent as the *g* in *sign* [,] but, like the *g* in *sign*, it is there" (13). Thus, when Rollin compares breast cancer to sexual assault, she makes the point that two kinds of women's trauma are stigmatized and worsened because conversations about them are problematically prohibited. When Rollin likens a visit to the doctor to a crime against women, she constructs a metaphor which has meaning because feminism has been intervening in these causes.

⁸ Any direct quotes from Rollin's *First, You Cry* used in this dissertation are taken from the 1976 edition published by J.B. Lippincott unless otherwise indicated.

Sexual assault, as Susan Brownmiller makes clear, was “an emerging issue for feminists” in the seventies (184). Elsewhere in *First, You Cry*, Rollin’s remark that Betty Ford’s breast cancer diagnosis creates the sort of “fear” which can mobilized “into the kind of action that can save [women’s] lives” (7), when read against her metaphor, resonates with women’s health activism also underway at the time. Thus, it is feminism which gives Rollin a language with which to break the silence that culture imposes on her when she is diagnosed with breast cancer.

Rollin is clearly willing to identify with feminism, a factor which, given the popularity of her memoir, suggests that the movement has, at this time, earned some widespread endorsement. However, the manner in which she identifies with the movement also shows that she understands feminism as it has been (mis)represented in mass media, something which happens when the media “trivializes” some members of the women’s movement by casting them as “bra burners” (Farrell 23). Consequently, Rollin wonders if she can be a feminist since she is worried about how her mastectomy has impacted her “looks” (109). As she works through this issue, Rollin reassures herself and her readers that most “ardent, authentic, card-carrying feminists” also care about maintaining conventional beauty norms (109). Here Rollin compares herself to two of popular feminism’s role models. First, she notes that “in the late sixties . . . Gloria Steinem stepped into a pair of blue jeans and . . . never stepped out” (110). “Of course,” Rollin muses, “Steinem looks good in blue jeans, a fact of which she must be at least minimally aware” (110). As she continues to follow this line of reasoning, Rollin states that “One of the things [she’s] always liked about Betty Friedan is

that from the beginning of the women's movement, [Friedan]—shamelessly—has never stopped going to the beauty parlour” (110). These examples suggest the influence of media in presenting the feminized feminist as a type of ideal, as well as its tendency to represent women according to a narrow range of gender stereotypes. For example, Peter Carroll remarks on how “*The New York Times* coverage of a feminist protest march highlighted Betty Friedan’s rallying speech with a witty sidebar about her delay at the hairdresser” (36). Carroll adds to this comment that Friedan felt that being seen as “pretty” was “good politics” (qtd. in Carroll 36). Women such as Friedan and Steinem may have hoped to subvert dominant gender stereotypes through working with (as opposed to apart from) the popular media; however, capitalist institutions more interested in profits than in social change were constantly at work to make feminism marketable by appropriating its causes and diluting its rhetoric so it might appeal to the greatest number of people.

Rose Kushner’s *Breast Cancer: A Personal History and Investigative Report* (1975) takes a similar approach to feminism, even despite Kushner’s criticism of media’s misrepresentation of women. In *Breast Cancer*, Kushner intersperses the narrative of her own illness experience with an overview of contemporary scientific knowledge about breast cancer as well as an at times strident critique of “male-dominated media” and “the malevolent influence of a male-dominated medical profession, specifically in surgery, reinforced by decades of discrimination against women” (316). In her chapter entitled “Male Chauvinism, Sex, and Breast Cancer,” she argues that mainstream culture’s

fixation with women's breasts is created by media and more specifically by "Men, [those] entrepreneurs of machismo like Hugh Hefner" (301). In particular, however, Kushner is remembered for her critique of the medical pathway used to treat breast cancer at the time. During "the 'one-step' procedure," surgeons extracted tissue from a woman's breast lump and, if cancer was confirmed, proceeded immediately with a mastectomy without reviving the anesthetized patient beforehand for further consultation (Lerner 28). Kushner claimed her investigation proved that the one-step procedure was "unnecessary and inadvisable" because it denied women the opportunity to consider other valid options for treatment (Lerner 176).⁹ She also did not want to undergo the highly invasive and debilitating Halsted radical mastectomy, which involves the "mandatory removal of the pectoralis muscles," when her research indicated that physicians outside the United States saw the procedure as outdated (Lerner 176).

Kushner's *Breast Cancer* is classified as a multicultural cancer narrative (DeShazer 221) for the way it addresses shortfalls in the medical institution's approach to breast cancer. One of the productive things Kushner does is attempt to unsettle the mythology created around Betty Ford's breast cancer experience. Kushner criticizes Gerald Ford for allowing his wife to be subjected to what

⁹ While Kushner did object to these medical pathways, many women preferred to have the mastectomy performed at the physician's discretion. Betty Isaac, author of *Breast For Life*, was outraged when her physician did not do the one-step and she was forced to endure two surgeries. Rollin also makes the choice to undergo one surgery as opposed to two, leaving the mastectomy decision up to the discretion of her physician.

Kushner felt was subpar medical treatment. In *Breast Cancer*, Kushner claims that she contacted the President's "speech writer" after First Lady Betty Ford's diagnosis in an attempt to persuade the Fords to consider other alternatives besides a Halsted radical mastectomy (Kushner 311). According to Kushner, the presidential staff member is said to have responded that "The President has made his decision [about the course of treatment that Betty Ford would receive]" (Kushner 311). The response angered Kushner who claimed that "even the President of the United States is not free from a lifetime of conditioning in our masculine society" (312). According to Kushner, Betty Ford did not have an opportunity to consider all of the viable medical options to treat her cancer because of her husband's indifference to women's health needs. Yet Kushner's stance on the Ford example does not mean that she successfully thinks outside the patriarchy she seems so intent on critiquing. When arguing that the health profession needs more female physicians to be involved in the surgical treatment of breast cancer, she notes that the costs of an education in medicine are prohibitive to women but sees no alternative. Indeed, Kushner concedes that "Women's liberation and the feminist movement notwithstanding . . . if all three [of my children] wanted to go to medical school, I am afraid the boys—who will be the initial, if not the major, breadwinners of their families—would have higher priorities than my daughter" (305). Kushner goes on to express relief over the fact that her daughter Lesley "wants to be an artist" (305) thereby reifying the ideologies which underpin the social order she claims to critique.

By arguing that both Rollin and Kushner are at times ambivalent about feminism, I am not suggesting either explicitly set out to undermine the movement. Smith and Watson write, that “by exploring the body and embodiment as sites of knowledge and knowledge production, life writers . . . negotiate cultural norms determining the proper uses of bodies” (*Reading Autobiography* 54). Additionally, life narrators “engage, contest, and revise laws and norms determining the relationship of bodies to specific sites, behaviors, and destinies, exposing . . . the working of compulsory heterosexuality . . . [and] they reproduce, mix, or interrogate cultural discourses defining and distinguishing the cultural norms of embodiment” (*Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson 54). Both Kushner and Rollin do these things as they write about their cancer. Though neither provides an entirely satisfying feminist critique, they use the movement to fulfill what is acknowledged as one of the illness autobiography’s key purposes: As Ann Jurecic rightly states, the illness narrative “provides a structure for meaning in the face of evidence of one’s own insignificance” (26). Feminism is a movement which allows Kushner and Rollin to declare their own significance. In this regard, it seems noteworthy that Rollin, in addition to writing about breast cancer, is also writing about what it means to live as a woman who is exploring her sexuality outside of marriage. Rollin’s troubled marriage finally ends as she is recovering from breast cancer because her husband cannot be monogamous (*First, You Cry* 177). Rollin herself begins an affair with a man whom she believes will be more supportive of her during her recovery: while this relationship also ends— Rollin is appalled when her new partner presses her to

have a child despite the fact that becoming pregnant would increase the likelihood of a cancer recurrence (192)—she does not reconcile with her husband either, at least not in the traditional sense. Feminism is a way for her to situate herself outside the institutions of marriage and motherhood, particularly since the memoir concludes with Rollin temporarily living with her mother, contentedly childless, and unapologetically focussed on her career while exploring aspects of her sexuality.¹⁰

The sexism which Rollin experiences in her personal relationships is felt by Rose Kushner as she deals with the medical establishment. When Kushner sought medical care for her breast cancer, eighteen surgeons refused to operate on her tumour because she refused to authorize them to perform the Halsted radical mastectomy (Lerner 177). Dr. Thomas L. Dao eventually agreed to perform the requested modified radical mastectomy which Kushner's research into the matter caused her to prefer (Lerner 177). Although Dao is to be credited for listening to Kushner's wishes, the material construction of Kushner's life narrative starkly reminds the reader of the physician's capacity to speak over the patient in ways that are frustratingly patrimonial. When Dao writes the foreword to Kushner's narrative, he undermines Kushner's views on the health system stating that "Mrs. Kushner and I do not agree on every detail of her argument—she is harder on

¹⁰ Toward the end of *First, You Cry*, Rollin explains that she and her former husband have been on some "very nice dates (including sleepovers)" but that she and Arthur are "being rather cautious about anything more permanent" (200). Rollin concludes that it is good that she and Arthur "both explored [their] fantasies" (200).

general surgeons that I would be, and what she says about the ‘economic incentive’ in the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer is not what I would say” (*Breast Cancer* xii). The mention of the foreword to Kushner’s text takes us to the next part of the chapter which begins to examine the hegemonic mainstream’s perceptible efforts to rein in and eventually commoditize female dissent—a social phenomenon which can be observed through a look at the publishing history of certain breast cancer narratives, and then at the manner in which “feminism” begins to disappear from mainstream breast cancer narratives.

The Role of Publishing

Rollin’s and Kushner’s hesitancy to fully self-identify as feminists, though both were obviously drawn to the movement, suggests that during the 1970s, feminism occupies a tenuous position in mass culture. As Kushner makes especially clear, the movement is vulnerable within the existing economic structure. This becomes apparent as, in the next sections of this chapter, additional breast cancer narratives are explored for the way they become disarticulated from feminism through the gradual muting and ongoing commoditization of women’s protest. What can be observed regarding both Kushner’s and Rollin’s narratives are their connections to large scale, mainstream publishing companies. In other words, these women attempt to disseminate their views through affiliations with organizations hopelessly tied to a capitalist patriarchy. This is particularly true of Rollin’s work, originally published by J. B. Lippincott in 1976. HarperCollins, formerly Harper & Row, acquired J.B.

Lippincott in 1978 (Benbow-Pfalzgraf and Meyer 186), and since then *First, You Cry* has been reissued twice, once in 1993 by Harper paperbacks, and a second time in 2000 as a Harper Perennial trade paperback. Despite the memoir's lukewarm reception by twenty-first century readers who provide customer reviews on Amazon.com, the longevity of this memoir and its capacity to resurface speaks to the authority an author can achieve through her affiliation with what is ultimately the "third-largest publisher in the United States" (*Boom*, Rak 127).¹¹ Kushner's affiliation with Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich (HBJ) also ties her to a large corporation which, over time, has been involved in many capitalist-oriented business ventures in addition to publishing. HBJ Inc., was, in 1975, "a publishing and insurance firm" with enough resources to "acquire SeaWorld in 1976" and to grow it into "the world's largest marine theme park . . . in San Antonio . . . [worth] \$170 million" (Covell 74). In 1970, HBJ also acquired The Psychological Corporation founded by psychologist James McKeen Cattell in 1921, which marketed psychological tests ("About Us"). Although *Breast Cancer* is no longer in print, this information shows that Kushner was indeed affiliated with a large and powerful press, one with connections to the medical system: while this meant her work could be widely disseminated, it also meant she was

¹¹ At the time of this writing in 2013, there are eight customer reviews of the reissued *First, You Cry* posted on Amazon.com. Several readers who gave the memoir a positive review profess to have read and enjoyed the book when it was first published (Gaftman, dollarmouse, Peters). Another commentator in a less favorable review comments on Rollin's superficiality (Connie) and still another describes the memoir as "dated and trivial" (A Customer).

reliant on a corporation deeply connected to several traditionally patriarchal and consumer-oriented institutions.

It is hardly surprising, then, that women who publish with alternative presses tend to provide starker articulations of feminist polemics. This is to be expected, of course, since as James P. Danky explains, publications which stem from “dissident” presses are the ones which most “challenge the status quo of print and the society that supported it” (269). One of the best-known examples of a feminist text which does just this is Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals (TCJ)* (1980). Born in 1934, Audre Lorde grew up in Harlem, New York and, over the course of her life, came to self identify somewhat famously as a “Black lesbian feminist poet warrior mother” (Hall vii). Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1978 for which she underwent a mastectomy, but died in 1992 after the cancer metastasized to her liver. In *TCJ* and in her subsequent essay collection *A Burst of Light (BOL)*, Lorde shows how culture’s narrow views on gender, race, class status, and sexuality intersect and impede her in her efforts to obtain emotionally-supportive and technically-competent healthcare. One of *TCJ*’s particularly well-known anecdotes occurs when Lorde describes the post-mastectomy hospital visit she receives from a representative from the American Cancer Society’s support initiative known as the Reach to Recovery (R2R) program.¹² The visit is described by Lorde a series of communicative debacles brought about by the R2R

¹² In critical conversations, the organization is referred to in two ways. Samantha King refers to this program as Reach For Recovery (R4R) while Gail Sulik refers to Reach To Recovery (R2R).

worker's inability to acknowledge diversity. First, the R2R representative thoughtlessly assumes that Lorde is heterosexual (*TCJ* 42); next, she presents Lorde with a "blush pink" prosthetic breast, a product clearly created for white women (43). As *TCJ* makes clear, this blatant privileging of whiteness and heterosexuality is a flaw in the health system which treated her.¹³

This focus on identity politics in Lorde's work allows her to be included in group of feminist writers and activists credited with devising "languages and images [which] account for multiplicity and difference. . . that give voice to a politics of hybridity and coalition" (Heywood and Drake 9). Critics who embrace Lorde's work appreciate not only her eloquence, but her intersectional approach to feminism which demonstrates that gender is but one of many identity markers over which a person can find herself marginalized by the dominant culture. One does not have to read very far into *TCJ* to ascertain that Lorde's politics are powerfully stated. However Lorde's uncompromising stance has something to do with her location: as life-writing critic Jeanne Perreault notes, the reader must keep in mind that *TCJ* is written by "an unapologetic radical feminist" and that portions of the text were initially written for "a conventional though liberal context (an MLA convention)" ("Pain" 11). Elsewhere Elizabeth Alexander emphasizes how, in 1980, Lorde helped to found Kitchen Table Women of Colour Press (2:26). As Alexander shows, there existed "a very keen political understanding in the black feminist movement and in lesbian feminism that unless

¹³ Direct quotes from *The Cancer Journals* are from the 2006 Special edition published by Aunt Lute unless otherwise indicated.

[these authors] could control the means of publication” their voices would not be represented by the mainstream (Alexander 2:26 – 2:56). As Kitchen Table was only founded in 1980, *TCJ* was published by Spinsters Ink, also a feminist press which disseminates literature by and for a lesbian audience. *Cancer in Two Voices* by Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum is another critically acclaimed example of a multicultural breast cancer narrative published by Spinsters Ink in 1991. The memoir is co-written by the terminally-ill Rosenblum and her partner Sandra Butler. Despite her frequent attempts to receive medical care, Rosenblum’s tumour was tragically misdiagnosed by many doctors until it was too late to achieve a cure. As DeShazer notes, *Cancer in Two Voices* “emphasizes the power of feminist community” (233). Thus Butler affirms that, “no woman [with cancer] should be blamed, underserved, invisible, alone. . . . Women have built movements before. We can do it again” (*Cancer in Two Voices* 54). The authors seek a feminist community and to expose the medical institution’s tendency to undervalue women, diversity, and women’s health issues: by doing so, they hoped to inspire and motivate other women diagnosed with this disease.

As remarkable as *The Cancer Journals* and *Cancer in Two Voices* are, a drawback is that such works do not typically achieve the widespread circulation of breast cancer narratives which get published by mainstream presses. Not surprisingly, the financial constraints which small publishing houses face can be extreme: as Jaime M. Grant explains with respect to Kitchen Table Women of Colour Press, “there was never any start up capital . . . [,] no significant grants by major foundations [and] no corporate donations of equipment” (1024). Grant

continues: “paid staff have never numbered more than three . . . and staff worked without a copier, with a hand-me-down computer, without a laser printer (1025). Likewise, Spinsters Ink has found it difficult to sustain growth in a competitive book market: in 1986 it merged with Aunt Lute and it was during this time that Aunt Lute/Spinsters Ink reissued Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals*. However, Aunt Lute and Spinsters Ink parted ways in 1990 when the former “became a separate nonprofit under . . . the Aunt Lute Foundation” (“About Aunt Lute”).¹⁴ Spinsters Ink ceased to operate for a time when, in 2004, it closed “after publishing no new books for two years”: it was later “revived” by Bella Books, “a Florida-based publisher of lesbian books” (“Spinsters Ink,” Kirch 10). As one writer for *Publishers Weekly* points out, while Spinsters Ink has remained faithful to its mandate to publish polemical works of respectable literary quality, it currently publishes only “12 feminist books annually” while, elsewhere, feminist presses have begun to expand and revise their models of distribution to become more competitive (“Women’s Presses,” Kirch 5).

This statement does not mean that these narratives do not have a significant circulation. An important way that books published by feminist presses circulate is through educational institutions. Jamie Grant notes that Kitchen Table Women of Colour Press “had come to me in the classroom and caused a radical

¹⁴ Despite revisions to its business model, Aunt Lute Books continues to bill itself as a “non profit multicultural women’s press” seeking to represent the “perspectives of women” who are “traditionally underrepresented in mainstream and small press publishing” (“About Aunt Lute”).

shift in my theoretical perspectives as an organizer/researcher” (1025). Indeed, in this context, feminist narratives have a broader reception; however, narratives by dissident presses do not circulate as widely in mainstream culture as ones published by mainstream presses and their overall movement in culture is certainly slower than a narrative such as Rollin’s which gets made into a popular film. Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* is perhaps an exception since it tends, now, in many conversations about breast cancer to be a visible text. Of course, this narrative’s visibility may also owe something to the fact that Aunt Lute is among those feminist presses which have “maintained their viability by redefining what it means to be a feminist press or expanding their operations [by, for example,] . . . focusing on publishing books that do well in backlist” (“Women’s Presses,” Kirch 5). Indeed, Aunt Lute reissued *The Cancer Journals* in a glossy Special Edition in 2006, as well as in an anniversary edition in 1997 (see Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).

The catch is, of course, that women who are marginalized on the basis of identity markers such as sexuality, ethnicity, or class do not have the same access to mainstream presses in the event they do want to use them. Women writers from these groups are by no means silenced, though certainly they are impeded, by capitalist culture’s privileging of white, heterosexual, and socio-economically advantaged women. With mainstream publishers’ dissemination of breast cancer memoirs by women who occupy this subject position, these institutions are, already in the 1970s and 1980s, playing a significant role in helping to reify a relatively narrow feminist approach to breast cancer activism, the one most readily marketable to a conservative mainstream hesitant to rethink its gender and

social arrangements, but also needing to do just this after having been prodded to action by an active women's movement. The ways in which Rollin and Kushner seem simultaneously drawn to and repelled by feminism reflect this tension. This observation suggests that these authors have, to some extent, internalized an understanding of feminism as either impractical or as a threat to femininity, a view which is certainly perpetuated by the media's limited representation of feminism and feminist role models throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Eventually, breast cancer activism, formerly a feminist cause, gets appropriated by mainstream media culture which commercializes this type of protest in a particularly aggressive way in the 1990s. This shift can be perceived in breast cancer narratives from that time period.

Phasing out Feminism and Approaching the Postfeminist Decade

The late 1980s and early 1990s are often referred to as feminism's third-wave, or "a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while [also acknowledging] and [making] use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures" (Heywood and Drake 3). Audre Lorde's work shows how some feminists could experience the mainstream media both as a site of possibility and as a site of gender objectification. In *A Burst of Light (BOL)*, published in 1988, Lorde comments on ways that popular media represents, or more correctly, underrepresents, women of colour, queer women, and women who are socio-economically disadvantaged. On December 7, 1986, after having learned that her

breast cancer had metastasized to her liver, Lorde wrote a journal entry which appears in *BOL* to discuss how the popular motion picture *Terms of Endearment* prompted her to both “laugh” and weep:

While I was watching it, involved in the situation of a young mother dying of breast cancer, I was also very aware of that standard of living, taken for granted in the film, that made the expression of her tragedy possible. Her mother’s maid and the manicured garden, the unremarked but very tangible money so evident through its effects. . . . [The protagonists] live in a white-shingled house with trees, not in some rack-ass tenement on the Lower East Side or in Harlem for which they pay too much rent. (129)

While the stereotypes perpetuated by popular media disturbed Lorde and prompted her to “resolve to talk about [her] experiences with cancer as a Black woman” (*BOL* 129), she also saw media as the site of potential. During an interview with Dagmar Schultz and Erika Fink (1984), reprinted in a monograph entitled *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, Lorde remarked that for many women, magazines such as *Daily News*, *Ladies Home Companion*, and *Ms.* served as sources of information about breast cancer (133). Lorde, who was vehemently opposed to breast reconstruction and to wearing a prosthetic breast, acknowledged that attractive clothing could bolster a woman’s self esteem after breast cancer surgery. In her view, fashion and beauty culture could be redefined and made to accommodate diversity (qtd. in Schultz and Fink 141). During the interview, Lorde explained that she designed clothing and jewellery for “one-breasted women who do not wear a prosthesis,” and she also stated that *Ms.* had promoted

her designs in a 1979 issue (qtd. in Schultz and Fink 140). While *Ms.* magazine's value as an effective feminist publication has been contested and widely argued by feminists themselves, some committed feminists believed that fashion and beauty culture could and should be appropriated by activists seeking to encourage others to embrace difference and diversity. Lorde aimed to do so for women who had lost one or both breasts to cancer.

Another woman to understand the popular media's potential was JoAnne Motichka (Matuschka as she is commonly known). After undergoing an "unnecessary mastectomy performed by an overzealous surgeon" (King ix), the former model, artist, and activist used her first-hand knowledge of the beauty industry and breast cancer to critique the medical institution, and to challenge "the masses to be comfortable with, and to include, [those with] imperfect bodies as . . . members of society" (Petersen and Matuschka 508). Matuschka wanted to show women that they did not need to "hid[e] or conceal" (*Barbie* 250) their one-breasted bodies and she felt popular media could be used to "reach middle America" in this regard (*Barbie* 251). The artist's iconic self portrait in photography entitled "Beauty out of Damage" was featured on the cover of an edition of the *New York Times Magazine* on August 15, 1993 (see Fig. 7). Disability theorist Rosemary Garland-Thomson describes the photograph as "stunning" for the way it "invites" spectatorship (*Staring* 154). As Garland-Thomson explains, Matuschka "gave breast cancer activism more than a face" (*Staring* 151). "Beauty out of Damage" depicts the artist as she strikes an elegant model's pose to reveal her profile which is one part flawless couture and one part

mastectomy scar. At the time of its initial publication, the photo was accompanied by an article written by Susan Ferraro entitled “The Anguished Politics of Breast Cancer.” Ferraro refers to breast cancer as “the feminist issue of the 1990’s” (28) and it is here that one can tie Matuschka’s work to the National Breast Cancer Coalition (NBCC), an organization co-founded in 1991 by Dr. Susan Love who, like Matuschka, hoped to inspire a revolution by encouraging women “to be . . . the obnoxious voice” of reform (qtd. in Ferraro 27). Indeed, Matuschka first drew the attention of the *New York Times* when one of its reporters observed her wearing a poster board which displayed some of her mastectomy artwork at a public lecture given by Dr. Susan Love (Petersen and Matuschka 498).

However, Matuschka’s *New York Times* photograph generated considerable controversy: as she points out, although the “positive reception” to her work exceeded her expectations (Peterson and Matuschka 507), she and *The Times* “received hate mail” after “Beauty out of Damage” was published (Petersen and Matuschka 504). For example, Kathlyn Conway, author of the breast cancer narrative entitled *Ordinary Life: A Memoir of Illness* (1996) claimed to have been “shocked” by the image and horrified by the prospect that her friends might have been prompted by the photograph to imagine her body as they viewed their newspapers “over their morning coffee” (184-185). Conway, who was coping with her own breast cancer ordeal when “Beauty out of Damage” was published, describes Matuschka as looking “anorectic and deathlike” in the photograph, and wonders why the artist needs to “depict this mastectomy as so

horrific” (184). In the scholarly monograph, *Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy*, Cathy A. Malchiodi praises Matuschka, but also suggests that art therapists who want their patients to engage with Matuschka’s work ought to introduce it “sensitively,” especially to those “women who have been newly diagnosed and are working with initial feelings of loss and grief” (59). Of course, many women have been “personally inspired” by Matuschka as well (Malchiodi 59), and the photograph certainly continues to prompt productive discussion which was what Matuschka intended as she sought to redefine mass culture’s views on what sorts of bodies are held up as ideal ones.

While Matuschka used popular media for activist purposes, the woman who came to be known “as the breast cancer pin-up girl of the nineties” had her work re-appropriated to serve objectives other than those which she originally intended (Petersen and Matuschka 499). Matuschka’s image, a subversive reworking of semiotics associated with the fashion and beauty industries, was soon replicated by capitalist institutions which saw an opportunity to strengthen their holds on female consumers thus benefitting from the controversy this earlier work had inspired. Samantha King compares *The New York Times* photograph of Matuschka with a subsequent one which appears in December, 1996 (viii-ix). The latter photograph of supermodel Linda Evangelista (see Fig. 8) introduced a nine-page feature article by Lisa Belkin entitled “Charity Begins at . . . The Marketing Meeting, The Gala Event, The Product Tie In.” As Samantha King explains in her comparison of the two features, Belkin’s article “declares breast cancer as ‘This Year’s Hot Charity’” (qtd. in King vii). Its publication parallels capitalism’s clear

move to “change how breast cancer is conceptualized in the realm of the popular” (King ix-x). The photograph featured “a nude-from-the-waist-up” image of Evangelista who— in stark contrast to Matuschka who exposes a scar— uses her hand to demurely cover two “perfectly intact breasts” (King x). Evangelista, the model famously known to have remarked that she does not bother to “wake up for less than \$10, 000 a day,” claims an interest in breast cancer because her grandmother and a friend were diagnosed with the disease (Jones). Whatever Evangelista’s motivations, the difference between the two women’s breast cancer photos is unsettling, particularly given that, in the later one, any trace of the aftermath of mastectomy is kept out of view, thus implying that Evangelista’s body is the ideal and that women who have had breast cancer surgeries are aberrations.

The moment when *The New York Times* supplants Matuschka’s “Beauty out of Damage” with a photo of an American supermodel and a story about high-society philanthropy constitutes a pivotal one in the history of breast cancer in the United States—a point when activism starts to be associated with upper-class “charity” events which involve conspicuous consumption. The comparison of the two photos reveals clearly how large fundraisers with ties to corporate America and, subsequently, to mass media could refigure expressions of female protest. While Matuschka’s “Beauty of Damage” served to introduce an article about the NBCC, the Evangelista image was used to introduce an article written to promote work being done by “Nancy Brinker, founder of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, who is widely credited with turning the disease into a

marketable product with which consumers, corporations, and politicians are eager to associate” (King vii). As one commentator explains, Brinker, who formed her foundation in 1982, was ideally situated in wealthy, upper-class society to dominate the conversation taking place over breast cancer in the American mainstream: “She was married to Norman Brinker, an entrepreneur who had launched the national restaurant chains Steak & Ale and Chili's Inc.”; additionally, she had “picked up some marketing sense from her former boss, Neiman Marcus founder Stanley Marcus” (Ingram 373-374). Beyond this, Brinker acknowledges that “the local oil boom had helped the Foundation's early fundraising efforts” (Ingram 374). Significantly, Brinker had previously declined an invitation to join with the more activist-oriented NBCC: it has thus been pointed out by Gail Sulik that “the NBCC and Komen represent an ideological split in the national breast cancer movement about what constitutes beneficial content for breast cancer awareness and organizing activities and appropriate sources of breast cancer funding” (52). The worry by critics such as Sulik is that Komen only funds projects that are no threat to the interests of its corporate sponsors: these include representatives from the cosmetic and fashion industry with a stake in perpetuating normative beauty standards, as well as any number of corporations which create and disseminate products which are bad for health. Matuschka’s dismay over this new trend in publicity is apparent when she condemns what she perceives to be a “Backlash in the Breast Cancer Movement,” claiming that advertisements and media portrayals—like the one featuring Evangelista—are “offensive to women who have had breast cancer” (“Barbie”

262). Although her own work is sometimes criticized by those who believe it reinforces normative beauty standards, Matuschka argues it was never her intent to “push women into buying illusions via commercial products—with breast cancer activism” (“Barbie” 263).

By positioning Matuschka’s photobiography as belonging to a body of life narratives which express a feminist perspective from within popular culture, it becomes possible to see how popular feminism eventually becomes refigured and phased out within mainstream media. Coincidentally, one of the examples McRobbie uses to illustrate feminism’s disappearance from the mainstream culture in the United Kingdom is a Wonderbra billboard featuring Eva Herzigova which appeared in the mid-1990s. McRobbie notes the interplay between the UK’s and the US’s media cultures when she notes how the Wonderbra advertisement “explicitly” invokes “Hollywood and the famous lines of the actress Mae West” (*Aftermath* 16). The message imparted by Herzigova’s photograph is not dissimilar to the one of Evangelista who also conveys a sexualized “come hither” expression in the photo: such images work by presenting women as having access to sexual liberation and thereby implying that feminism is no longer needed—“a thing of the past” (*Aftermath* 16). Significantly, this messaging is tied to representations of exaggerated femininity as depicted through overtly sexualized representations of the female breast (see Fig. 9). It is in this atmosphere that, in 1994, Matuschka noted mass culture’s ambivalence toward her when *Working Women* magazine withdrew its invitation to feature her on their October cover. Initially, the artist had been excited about

having been asked to appear on the magazine because she wanted to bring attention to her “activist activities” (“Barbie” 263). Given that the corporatization of breast cancer was now well underway in an atmosphere where feminism was also being redefined as redundant, it is reasonable to speculate that Matuschka’s affiliation with organizations such as Greenpeace and her work on the “chlorine-free environment campaign” had something to do with the magazine’s decision not to feature her work (“Barbie” 263-264). While the artist has continued to add to her collection of self portraits depicting her breast cancer journey over the years, since she created “Beauty out of Damage,” her work has not circulated widely in mass media culture.¹⁵

The shift one perceives through a comparison of Matuschka’s portrait with the image of Evangelista corresponds with one taking place in breast cancer memoirs which also gradually phase away from feminist activism. To make this point, it is helpful to briefly compare Joyce Wadler’s *My Breast* (1992) and Rollin’s *First, You Cry*.¹⁶ These narratives share many similarities: the authors both talk about how breast cancer complicates their romantic lives, both authors are successful journalists, both use humour to tell their personal stories, and both of these memoirs were adapted into films. As the older of the two women, Rollin, in fact, writes one of the blurbs to endorse Wadler’s memoir. Unlike Rollin, Wadler does not, in her memoir, use the women’s movement to devise a metaphor

¹⁵ For additional examples of Matuschka’s work, see her website *The Art of Matuschka*.

¹⁶ Direct quotations from *My Breast* are taken from the first edition published by Addison Wesley in 1992 unless otherwise indicated.

by which to discuss her breast cancer. While she does briefly acknowledge identity politics related to class difference when stating that she pities “poor women [with breast cancer] who don’t have medical insurance” (50), and she does appreciate that “a feminist spirit” exists on the hospital’s “breast-cancer floor” (122), she does not discuss the movement and what it stands for in any sort of detail. The manner in which Wadler casually mentions feminism and its benefits is interesting for the way it can confirm life writing as one of the “various sites within popular culture where this work of undoing feminism with some subtlety becomes visible” (*Aftermath*, McRobbie16). I do not believe that feminism is unimportant to Wadler— some of her work elsewhere suggests that she is interested in lobbying for medical reform—but as an autobiographical subject of memoir in the 1990s, she feels no real need to emphasize the movement in her book.¹⁷ In a sense, this doing away with feminism happens in Rollin’s text too; however, even though Rollin takes feminism lightly at points, she ultimately grapples with what the movement stands for, claims to possess feminist sensibilities, and she claims to admire women like Steinem and Friedan. In fact, Friedan’s endorsement of Rollin’s memoir appears on the work’s dust jacket and has remained a part of each new edition.

¹⁷ See, for example, Wadler as she appears on the talk show *Charlie Rose* on March 25, 1994. Wadler is a guest on the program along with Matuschka where she and the panel discuss recent controversies regarding the clinical protocols used to treat breast cancer. At the time of this writing, the interview is available on YouTube under the heading “Charlie Rose: March 25, 1994.”

This latter point brings us to a discussion of *My Breast's* publishing paratexts which, while preserving a tie to feminism, also shows how this redefining or muting of its activism is happening in a publication which was widely disseminated in mass culture. *My Breast* was published in soft cover and audio versions by Pocket, a division of Simon and Schuster, in 1994 and 1997: around this time, the book was also adapted into a television movie with the same name featuring Meredith Baxter as Wadler. Interestingly, the hard and soft cover editions of Wadler's text include a strongly-worded afterword composed by Dr. Susan Love. In this appendix, Love challenges Wadler and "every woman and man in the country" to join "The Breast Cancer Coalition" (179) and she explicitly identifies her work as "political activism" (179) while encouraging women to be assertive and angry when asking government to fund research to end this disease. Yet the stark tone found in Love's afterword appears less polemical when juxtaposed against other elements of paratext found on the exterior text. Much of *My Breast* is feminized and made to seem less serious than other narratives which I have previously discussed. This is particularly the case with the 1994 paperback edition: in this edition, the title as it appears on the cover of the book is set in a cursive font, and superimposed over a silhouette of a woman's torso with a breast and nipple intact (see Fig. 10). Such a cover is a precursor to the highly-stylized, upbeat covers which soon come to be found on chick lit. While the 1997 reissue of *My Breast* does not feature the silhouette on its cover, it includes an increased number of blurbs which depict Wadler using adjectives such as "savvy," and "irreverent," as well as "wisecracking, hip and profound." A

blurb by Gloria Steinem also appears on both the 1994 and 1997 editions, but on the latter edition is set against one by pop singer Olivia Newton John. Both Steinem and John are by this time breast cancer survivors themselves: Steinem in 1986 and John in 1992. These factors all work to blur messages about breast cancer with those found in popular culture in a stronger way than before. Perhaps most insidiously, such paratextual devices begin to characterize the successful female author and survivor of breast cancer as someone who is outspoken (thus already enjoying the effects of having been liberated), but also a comic figure and, consequently, someone who need not be taken too seriously. In short, the female life writer and survivor of breast cancer is becoming a chick.

The Appropriation of Protest

In this chapter, I have been suggesting that the breast cancer narrative as a genre of life writing comes to materialize in ways which reflect the ongoing ideological struggle taking place in American culture over feminism and its perceived value. Feminists who occupied a variety of subject positions in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s worked to help women with breast cancer surmount the gender inequities they faced while seeking competent healthcare and social support. Even those women who wrote a more “popular” type of feminist-informed breast cancer memoir than those published by women writing them for dissident presses drew on the discourses stemming from the women’s movement, and seemed confident that by doing so they could achieve credibility for their work. By the 1990s, however, feminist rhetoric starts to disappear from, or

become exceedingly muted within, breast cancer narratives published by mainstream presses. This happens as feminist rhetoric is adjusted by the hegemonies with the power to redefine the movement in ways which link the idea of female “empowerment” to activities which involve consumption. Indeed, feminist figureheads were themselves stereotyped by media (a reason why some factions of the feminist movement explicitly sought to distance themselves from it) (Farrell 23-24). As Farrell notes in her analysis of how the feminist magazine *Ms.* is subsumed by its mainstream sponsors, advertisers quickly came to understand the benefits of “latching” onto feminism’s ideals including “the dream for equality, for fairness, for justice, for a world that values women” (194). However, these advertisers were also determined to “whittle away parts [of feminism] less amenable to their purposes” (Farrell 194) and this is how a woman’s capacity to consume comes to be the marker of her empowerment in popular media.

Thus breast cancer activism—one of feminism’s important causes—is appropriated by capitalist institutions who manage quite successfully to shift breast cancer discourse away from one of protest to consumption. Even one of breast cancer activism’s most identifiable symbols, the pink ribbon, was once a symbol of protest and part of a grassroots movement. As Sandy Fernandez, a representative for Breast Cancer Action points out, using a coloured ribbon as a symbol of protest was not originally tied to breast cancer at all. In the United States, a yellow ribbon was used in 1979 by those protesting the taking of American hostages in Iran; a little more than a decade later, AIDS activists used a

red ribbon to symbolize their cause (Fernandez). In 1991, The Susan G. Komen Foundation handed out pink ribbons to participants in its New York City race though, according to Fernandez, Komen did not intend to brand the ribbon at that time: the first time Komen used the pink ribbon, it was “just a detail in the larger and more important story of the race” (Fernandez). As Samantha King further explains, while also citing Fernandez, in 1992 “Charlotte Haley . . . began making peach-coloured ribbons in her dining room at home” (King xxiv). Haley distributed her ribbons with cards, each of which read: “The National Cancer Institute annual budget is 1.8 billion, only 5 percent goes for cancer prevention” (qtd. in King xxiv). Since ribbons were clearly trendy at the time, *Self* magazine in partnership with the cosmetic guru Evelyn Lauder also “decided to create a [breast cancer] ribbon that would be distributed at the company’s cosmetics counters across the country” (King xxiv). Representatives from *Self* approached Haley and asked her to “relinquish the concept of the ribbon” which she ultimately refused to do because, intuitively, “she feared the commercialization of her approach” (King xxv). Consequently, *Self* consulted its legal department and was advised to create a ribbon of a “different color: pink” (King xxv).¹⁸ The ribbon which they distributed at cosmetic counters did result in the collection of “200, 000 pink ribbon petitions urging the White House to push for increased funding for research” (Fernandez). The connection between breast cancer and the

¹⁸ King also explains that the idea to use a ribbon to symbolize breast cancer advocacy occurs just after the red ribbon begins to symbolize AIDS activism in the early 1990s (xxiii-xxiv).

cosmetic industry was powerfully reinforced in this moment, and certainly this event has helped to develop in the public's mind the tendency to consider shopping to be a type of advocacy.

Chick lit, like the breast cancer narrative, is also a genre of women's writing which begins because of feminism but gets appropriated by mainstream capitalist institutions seeking to commodify women's protest literature. In 1995, right around the time that Wadler's narrative is republished with its feminized cover, and right around the time that the Evangelista photo replaces Matuschka's "Beauty out of Damage," Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell published a short story collection entitled *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*. A year later, with the help of a third editor DeShell and Mazza assembled *Chick-Lit2*. These anthologies were published by *Fiction Collective Two (FC2)*, an independent press which bills itself as "an author-run, not-for-profit publisher of artistically adventurous, non-traditional fiction" (FC2). As Mazza clarifies, *Chick-Lit* made "decent to good [sales] for an independent-press book, fueled by university course adoptions" ("Laughing," Mazza 21). As one would expect after reading FC2's mandate, the authors of the works included in these anthologies generated experimental pieces using a variety of alternative discourses and non-traditional formats. One of these stories is about cancer: Vicki Lindner's "Mother is Dying," is narrated by a speaker whose loses her mother to what appears to be breast cancer (though this detail is not explicitly stated). The piece of short fiction, which begins "The night Mother died I dreamed I was a man. . . . I dreamed I was sexually molested on a desiccated flood plain by a slim, red-haired woman" (21), is a somber and at times

abstract account of a daughter's ambivalent response to her mother's terminal illness. The work idealizes neither the daughter nor the deceased woman: its point seems to be that cancer does not necessarily ennoble those involved. In this way it moves past usual representations of the disease as it is often portrayed in fiction which can romanticize cancer while constraining those impacted by it to stereotyped roles.

In her subsequent article entitled "Who's Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of a Genre," Mazza suggests that she and her co-editors were the first to describe such works as "chick-lit," and then goes on to supply a theory as to how the term gets appropriated by retailers to eventually pertain to a genre characterized by its "pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels" ("Laughing" 18). Indeed, it was shortly after *Chick-Lit2* had received some negative press from mainstream conservative groups—Mazza suspects Focus on the Family—that the term surfaced in *The New Yorker* where chick lit began to be characterized as "pop fiction" ("Laughing" 22). Yet as Mazza suggests, the anthology appears at a point when the public's anxieties about feminism have already been heightened. As its title suggests, *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* is originally offered as a venue for women to write and read about how perceptions of feminism have been changing in the nineties. In her foreword to the first volume, Mazza claims that the women who submitted work to this anthology wanted to "honestly assess and define themselves without having to live up to standards imposed by either a persistent patriarchal world or the insistence that [women] achieve self-

empowerment” (“What is Postfeminist Fiction?” n.p.). However, before *Chick-Lit* becomes a genre which can deal explicitly with such questions, the term gets hi-jacked by parties who are aware of the term as controversial, and who seek to capitalize on the attention generated by the term through using it to describe novels which essentially depict women who are obsessed with consumption and romance. In this way, the emergence of chick lit as a media phenomenon begins to be used to describe works of contemporary romantic fiction like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Sex and the City*, the latter of which, in particular, equates consumption with empowerment. Although other critics are now showing that this evolved, more commercial chick lit may also be its own form of female protest, Mazza is not very happy about the evolution she witnesses because, in her view, this new brand of chick lit misrepresents women as “shopping-and-dieting airheads” (“Laughing,” Mazza 27).

Enter the Sick Chick

In what remains of this chapter, I want to turn to *Cancer Vixen*, a representative work of sick lit which I mentioned briefly in the introduction. The text reveals the culmination of capitalist culture’s multiple appropriations of feminism as it has taken place in two genres: chick lit and the breast cancer narrative. Published in 2006 by Knopf, a subsidiary company of the publishing giant Random House, and authored by a cartoonist who for many years has written for *The New Yorker* and *Glamour*, *Cancer Vixen* is, like its popular feminist precursors, intimately connected to capitalist culture and mainstream

media. *Cancer Vixen* remains in print into 2013 amidst internet rumours that negotiations are underway to adapt the memoir into a Home Box Office television movie starring Cate Blanchett (Williams). These factors again suggest that breast cancer memoirs which are affiliated with large commercial presses have a chance at a long and lucrative shelf life: “In 2008 Random House was still the largest trade publisher in the United States, with €1.72 billion (\$2.53 billion) in sales” (Benbow-Pfalzgraf, Bianco, Telgen 396). The text’s solid position in the mainstream is a reflection of corporate culture’s work to market breast cancer activism and female protest. *Cancer Vixen* conveys in tacit ways how breast cancer activism has become all about consumption. The hyper-feminine pink cover of the paperback edition confirms as much when it reassures the reader of two things: the first is that the memoir’s “shoe crazy” author “triumphs” over breast cancer (front-inside cover), while the second is that she is a good citizen because she plans to donate “a percentage of the proceeds from [sales of the] book” to a breast cancer charity (rear-inside cover). These examples point to ways that breast-cancer sick lit can perpetuate the “corporatization” of breast cancer activism (King 59). Moreover, the work’s paratexts shows how the ideal breast cancer survivor continues to be manufactured as ever more young, pretty, and passive. The 2006 hardcover edition of *Cancer Vixen* had on its purple cover a drawing of an angry woman who, despite wearing stilettos, was actively executing a martial arts kick. The Pantheon (also a division of Random House) edition which emerges in 2009 in soft cover has on its pink front the drawing of a woman who, although assuming a confident posture, is much more conventionally

pretty and less active than the woman on the earlier cover (see Fig. 11 and Fig. 12).

What is important to note here is that *Cancer Vixen*'s publication coincides with the latter part of the postfeminist decade: this is a time when the chick as a cultural icon is particularly entrenched in popular culture due in no small part to the television program *Sex and the City* which, more than any other chick text, equates consumption with female empowerment. I discuss the representation of the "chick" and the texts where she can be found more thoroughly in the next chapter: for now, I will note that Marchetto's memoir is "chick" for the way it presents Marchetto's conspicuous consumption as the key to her recovery from breast cancer. Throughout the graphic memoir, the author boasts about her collection of designer footwear—take for instance her drawing of the "Charles Jourdan blue metallic snakeskin lucite pumps" (138)—which she claims provided her with "support" during her cancer ordeal (138). Marchetto's decision to combat cancer by wearing designer footwear is undertaken at the advice of her "BFF" Bob (3): when Bob witnesses Marchetto in the throes of a post-diagnosis depression—an emotional response which causes her to venture out in public wearing "sweatpants [and] sneakers"—he remonstrates, telling Marchetto that if she is truly wants to feel better, she will need to "change that outfit!"(106).

Marchetto's obvious love of consumer culture has not engendered a positive response from contemporary literary critics interested in feminism and women's texts. As Hillary Chute remarks, *Cancer Vixen* is, at times, "an irritating

book in its obsession with brand names, skinniness, and the ins and outs of New York celebrity/media culture” (“Our Cancer Year” 416). However, Chute also argues that the female author can use the graphic memoir to “picture what is often placed outside of public discourse” (*Graphic Women* 5). Thus, when reviewing Marchetto’s text, Chute does give Marchetto her dues: “Beyond this [graphic memoir’s] cuteness,” she writes, “the book deploys its visual form in a way that demonstrates what a visual-verbal—as opposed to simply verbal—text can do” (“Our Cancer Year” 417). According to Chute, Marchetto’s art capably conveys the unspeakable horrors of cancer: “The visual capacity of comics allows Marchetto to diagram medical equipment and procedures [in ways which are powerful]: she draws the actual size of the core biopsy needle—its real length, real width—along with the true size of the biopsied cancerous tissue from the tumor [to evoke her reader’s response]” (“Our Cancer Year” 417). What Chute’s comment suggests is that Marchetto uses the graphic medium to give expression to her cancer trauma. Along these lines, the cuteness which is found throughout *Cancer Vixen* may also be a form of subterfuge. For instance, Marchetto includes a two-page spread titled “The Cancer Guessing Game” to illustrate the irreconcilable web of discourses which circulate in culture about the causes of breast cancer (34-35). The game presents its player with a series of contradictions; for example, one of its squares depicts a “corporate head” who reassures the public that “parabens have a very, very good safety profile” (34-35). However, if the reader follows the instructions on this square of the game board by “mov[ing] up 4 spaces,” she will land on another “research head” who states “Our study

indicates more research is needed. . . traces of parabens have been found in tumour samples” (35). The sketch—a confusing labyrinth of rapidly-shifting and contradictory medical, corporate, and popular culture discourses—replicates the confusion a woman can experience when trying to discern the possible causes of cancer: as such, it can be read as a critique of consumer and media culture, as well as the institutions which inform their production.

What complicates such a reading of *Cancer Vixen*, however, is that the work itself is rife with strange juxtapositions and contradictory messages. When Marchetto tallies up all of the “factors that contribute to any breast cancer diagnosis[:] . . . the pill, hormones in beef, dairy and poultry, radiation, overeating,” she realizes that “99% of the reasons are created by human beings” (36). This panel is followed by Marchetto’s touching rendition of a group of people who have died of cancers possibly caused by corporate greed (37). This sequence is effective in laying out the basis for a productive social critique; however, Marchetto stops this discussion abruptly when she turns back to the narrative of her romance to focus on what it was like to be pursued by her Maserati-driving boyfriend. There can be no doubt that image is important to Marchetto: her identity hinges on the approval she receives for the way she looks, so much so, that at the time of her diagnosis, she does not have medical insurance—an expense she has overlooked to purchase shoes (Marchetto qtd. in “OUCH”, Lucas). Marchetto’s worries over not having medical insurance are all too neatly resolved, however, by her wealthy fiancé who tells her not to worry because he will “take care of it” (Marchetto 67). While Marchetto has gone on to

develop the Cancer Vixen Fund which serves “uninsured and underinsured” women (CancerVixenFUNd.org), the text itself is disappointing because, apart from feeling embarrassed that she allowed her insurance to lapse, Marchetto does little to explore how capitalist culture creates barriers between women and health services. She writes her text in ways that reify the division between classes and which present the heteronormative romance as a solution to economic disparity. The effect of this is that any sort of comment she makes elsewhere about capitalism and consumption as causes of breast cancer is undermined.¹⁹

Despite such problems, I argue that Marchetto is acutely aware of mass culture’s contradictory rules regarding gender and how these dictate how a woman with breast cancer is expected to behave. Capitalism’s appropriation of feminism has left Marchetto without any explicit means to critique mainstream social discourses. As representatives of the “new female subject [of postfeminism],” women like Marchetto who speak from popular culture are “called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as modern sophisticated girl[s]” (*Aftermath*, McRobbie 18). What remains for Marchetto and other sick-lit authors is the discourse of self recrimination. Thus, as she ponders the possible reasons for getting sick, Marchetto wonders if getting breast cancer may have been all her fault: “Was it something I said? Was it something I ate, drank, smoked, inhaled, put on, put inside by body? Why? Why? Why?” (65).

¹⁹ Marchetto also claims to have “personally funded 38 mammograms for uninsured and underinsured women at St Vincents Comprehensive Cancer Center, where [she] had [her] treatments” (CancerVixenFUNd.org).

Yet, elsewhere, Marchetto invites her reader to be critical of her for her consumptive habits by admitting she is a “self-aware narcissist” (12). Although the sick-lit writer points to social issues which are problems, she always gives her reader permission to dismiss her as she does so. Whatever popularity her work garners, a percentage of readers do just this: for example, self-proclaimed feminist, blogger, and breast-cancer sufferer Sue Wisenberg remarks that Marchetto’s obsession with “fancy, expensive, high-heeled shoes” is but one of several reasons “not to like her” (43). While any life narrative always has its critics, the ease with which Marchetto slips into self-blaming rhetoric shows how some women conceive of their cancer experiences in what Dubriwny refers to as “the absence of a feminist perspective on breast cancer generally in mainstream public discourse” (*Vulnerable* 35). Dubriwny’s point which I explore in more detail in the third chapter is that women are being encouraged to believe that they can avoid getting breast cancer through certain behaviours, most of which involve the consumption of products or services upheld by the heteronormative social order. In contrast, women who write breast cancer narratives and who identify with or as feminists can use the movement’s discourses to redirect blame and to challenge institutionalized forms of sexism.

Such indecipherable moments which are frequent in sick-lit texts are examples of what McRobbie refers to as “illegible rage” (*Aftermath* 95). To set up this discussion, McRobbie sums up the postfeminist woman’s situation by asking: “What does it mean for young women to live out a situation which tells them they are now equal, and that for sure there is no longer any need for sexual

politics, and yet which also suggests that this equality has been mysteriously arrived at, without requiring adjustment or dramatic change on the part of patriarchal authority” (*Aftermath* 105). As she draws upon Judith Butler’s work on melancholia, McRobbie argues that “in order to count as real young women [during this time of postfeminism,] Feminism, with its critique of masculine domination, is given up” (*Aftermath* 95). This is the repudiation of feminism which McRobbie claims women must enact in exchange for the right to speak. At the same time, she also points out that, in order to position themselves as apart from feminism, young women “preserve unconsciously” some concept of feminism and what it stands for (*Aftermath* 95). Although McRobbie is not arguing that contemporary women necessarily harbour “some kind of nostalgia for . . . a golden age of second wave feminism” (*Aftermath* 9), she does indicate that, broadly, there is still subtle recognition of the need for social change for which it can be difficult to find an outlet.

Marchetto’s *Cancer Vixen* does preserve a sort of rebellious tone when she makes what may or may not be an intentional reference to Ferraro’s “The Anguished Politics of Breast Cancer.” When Marchetto depicts herself having a mammogram in *Cancer Vixen*, she experiences discomfort from the procedure and thus asks: “WHY DON’T THEY PUT TESTICLES IN A VICE?” (85). By doing so, she suggests men undergo no similar procedures and thus implies sexism to be alive and well in the medical institution. Marchetto’s joke is reminiscent of a moment from Ferraro’s article. One of the sources Ferraro cites in her piece on breast cancer is an interview with Liz LoRusso, a woman

undergoing radiation for breast cancer. When a thoughtless radiology technician chides LoRusso for asking to have her torso covered during a medical procedure, LoRusso responds by asking the man how he would feel if his torso were exposed after “[having his] testicles cut off” (25). Ferraro follows this anecdote by explaining that although LoRusso had never before been “political” (25), she now “has joined 1 in 9, an advocacy group . . . [which] ask[s] hard questions about environmental factors that may lie behind Long Island's suspected cancer clusters and high breast cancer rate” (26). The article continues by stating that “[LoRusso] thinks the ‘establishment’ has patronized women and neglected or ignored the facts about breast cancer” (26). LoRusso’s identification with feminism’s causes are ultimately what gives the comment about male genitalia its weight. Marchetto’s text does not have this added context, so the gesture—though wry—lacks meaningful context. This factor is what separates Marchetto’s text from Ferraro’s and even Rollin’s. Rollin may not represent the women’s movement in all its complexity, but she still claims her “feminist bile” (21) as a means of expressing her dissatisfaction over her place in a patriarchal social order. Wadler does so less in *My Breast*, though the afterword by Susan Love which is a part of her text does still invite her reader to situate her within some activist activity that is going on at the time, even despite the fact that feminism is beginning to disappear from popular social discourse. As a text coming solidly out of the postfeminist decade, Marchetto’s narrative lacks any explicit moment of identification with feminism. The text is reminiscent of some sort of protest,

but lacking in explicit critique. In this way, it does not demand to be taken seriously.

Sick lit is thus an *extreme* manifestation of what happens when feminism is disarticulated from what is traditionally a genre of protest. If McRobbie is correct, the vacillation one observes in Marchetto's narrative, and in other works of sick lit as well, are the outcome of postfeminism and the illegible rage this disarticulation produces. Although sick-lit writers do not usually self identify as feminists, they are nonetheless working with a genre of autobiography which has come to be identified with feminism; thus, as these writers work to follow certain generic conventions, they know invariably that they should speak about constraints they have faced. Many women who write sick lit do perform work on the behalf of other women with breast cancer. However, as subjects of popular and consumer culture, sick-lit authors are not easily able to critique dominant hegemonies through claiming an association with feminism. Moments of illegible rage thus surface in sick lit in ways which cause it to appear either chaotic or flat, particularly when the narrators begin to express dissatisfaction with the social order, but then must move away from making explicit claims for gender equity on behalf of other women or themselves. Sick lit paratexts also tend to contain clues which support the idea that sick lit is a genre which is a product of duress.

While these early findings may seem bleak, I will end this chapter by clarifying that the sick-lit author is clearly an active agent and that the genre is one of hope. The life writing practices she undertakes do a particular sort of work for her insofar as they help her to work through her cancer ordeal. As an

autobiographical subject, she works with a set of conventions and constraints in ways that enable her to identify the self, not as a feminist or activist necessarily, but as someone who, through a particular set of narrative overtures, can claim to be variably and ambiguously (dis)empowered by the heteronormative, consumer-obsessed culture to which she belongs. To do this work, the sick-lit author aligns herself with the chick. In the next chapter, I show how the chick with breast cancer comes to be recognizable as a figure in American popular culture. By setting out this foundation, it becomes possible to see how sick-lit writers like Marchetto are both challenging and reifying the master narrative that makes up contemporary breast cancer culture in the absence of feminism.

Chapter Two

Feminism's Echoes in Contemporary Postfeminist Media: Hailing the Sick Chick with Breast Cancer

In her 2008 monograph *What A Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, Diane Negra argues that a “potent combination of cinematic, televisual, journalistic, and other discourse cumulatively articulate the character and content of female experience” (Negra 9). Contemporary pop memoirs by women, as types of popular media in their own right—and as expressions of female subjectivity—more than confirm her claim. Indeed, each one of the six sick-lit texts I discuss has an intertextual relationship with HBO television’s *Sex and the City* (*SATC*). This finding is less of a surprise than one might suppose since, as recently as 2011, *SATC* was “still [being] watched in reruns on TBS by an average of 2.5 million viewers every day” (*Chick Lit*, Harzewski 96).

Although HBO ended production of the series in 2004, its status as a media phenomenon remains unparalleled. As Kim Akass and Janet McCabe recall in *Reading Sex and the City*, a “‘buzz’ [existed] around the series” (5). If you owned a television or browsed any sort of mainstream magazine or newspaper, chances are you had a sense of what this program was all about, even if you did not watch it. *SATC*’s themes—single, glamorous women seeking to balance romance with career, claiming sexual agency, and celebrating their friendships with each other—filtered into the mainstream public consciousness along with the program’s signature iconography, which depicted glamorous cityscapes and

conventionally-attractive fashionistas dressed in luscious haute couture. Beyond this, however, *SATC* is one of many contemporary pop media texts in which one of the primary characters is diagnosed with breast cancer, a factor which contributes, no doubt, to the fact that a number of breast cancer memoirs written and published around the same time as the television program was in production use references to the program's actresses as a touchstone.²⁰

SATC's representation of breast cancer, along with several other chick texts which also depict a woman with this disease, is part of what Negra describes as the "echo chamber" of repetition and reinforcement" (9) which occurs frequently in popular media and certainly in what has been referred to as chick culture. Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young use the term "chick culture" to refer to "contemporary popular culture media forms focused primarily (but not exclusively) on twenty- to thirtysomething middle-class women" (chickculture.com). The critics clarify that while "the most prominent chick

²⁰ In addition to the six sick-lit texts I analyze, I came across two others sick-lit memoirs written by women who make one or more direct reference to that program or to one of its characters. The opening sentence of Gail Konop Baker's *Cancer is a Bitch, or I'd Rather be Having a Midlife Crisis* begins as follows: "I'm picturing Carrie on *Sex and the City* cross-legged on her bed in sexy boy-cut undies and a cleavage revealing push-up bra" (1). In the UK, Lisa Lynch's introduction to the *The C-Word* includes the following reference to an iconic scene in the *Sex and the City* episode "An American Girl in Paris, Part Une" where the program's main character trips and falls in a high-end fashion establishment: "Carrie Bradshaw fell in Dior, I fell in Debenhams. It was May 2008, and it . . . was Significant Moment #1 in discovering that I had grade-three breast cancer" (1).

cultural forms are chick lit, chick flicks and chick TV programming[,] other pop culture manifestations such as magazines, blogs, music--even car designs and energy drinks—can be included in the chick line-up” (Ferris and Young, chickculture.com). What Ferris and Young seem to be acknowledging is the way chick semiotics—the cityscape, the caricature, pastel colours, certain catch phrases, etc.—get used by retailers to market any number of products to women. Indeed, Avon’s Rethink Breast Cancer attaches such marketing to one of its campaigns: one of this organization’s pink-ribbon bears has attached to it a double-sided flyer which educates women about breast health. The flyer is decorated by cheerful caricatures of women reminiscent of the sort found on the covers of chick-lit novels (see Fig. 13). The fact that organizers of a breast cancer awareness campaign see fit to promote one of their fundraisers using chick iconography reveals something else about chick culture: it is a space where consumer forces are seeking to gain control over women in a particularly aggressive and, in some sense, a hostile way. On the surface, cute caricatures seem innocuous, yet they are also deeply sexist for the way they reduce a serious women’s health concern into something that is comedic. Arguably, this kind of representation is able to garner appeal because it makes breast cancer seem less terrifying: so long as one has the financial means to be a chick, thinking about breast cancer as a crisis in this context makes the disease seem less imposing. Still, it should be recalled that chick texts deal with a host of issues which are of concern to many women and all of these are also being represented using the same cute, ultra-feminine images and rhetoric. Along these lines, it should come

as no surprise that many texts which echo traces of the chick reify disturbing gender stereotypes, as well as conservative and neoliberal values with regard to matters like marriage, family, and consumption.

This example begins to show that echoes of chick culture can be found in media of all sorts, particularly during or around the time of the postfeminist decade. According to Negra, the “echo effect” helps to expose the power of a “synergistic media environment . . . [and] to explain the complex relations between social life and media representation” (9). In her view, it is important to examine “contemporaneous developments in film, television, print culture, and journalism” because these do reflect and influence the public’s perceptions of social issues (9). This chapter does this work by analyzing a number of texts which echo the themes, rhetoric, and imagery that are most often associated with chick culture. By looking at these examples, I show how they repeatedly present the breast cancer subject as, on the one hand, an independent and liberated woman and, on the other hand, as a subject who needs to be reformed.

The objective of this chapter is twofold. Broadly, as has already been suggested, this chapter’s purpose is to show that breast cancer is a crisis that is represented relatively often in chick texts. Chick flicks and chick lit are said, after all, to reflect the crises many young, ordinary American women experience in their everyday lives (*Chick Lit*, Ferris and Young 3). Fictional texts which belong to chick culture show women working through these crises in a variety of ways, often with plots which restore very traditional gender hierarchies. The frequency with which breast cancer is becoming one of the chick’s featured crises confirms

Americans' preoccupation with this disease. This fascination is perpetuated by institutions which drive what McRobbie has referred to as "the neo-liberal project" ("Top Girls?" 1) including government, a profit-oriented medical system, retail (particularly the beauty and fashion industries), and news media. The "neo-liberal project" as McRobbie terms it in a lecture entitled "Top Girls? Young Women and the New Sexual Contract" is explained as "the political project [which] promotes deregulation, privatisation and the shrinking of the public sector and welfare state, while at the same time resurrect[ing] an ideal of the social according to the values of the market" ("Top Girls?" 1). As McRobbie further notes, this project "speaks loudly about choice and freedom . . . and it promotes self-reliance and individualisation through mobilising notions of human capital" ("Top Girls?" 1). McRobbie also cites Judith Butler to show that it is "in this sphere that we can detect a kind of orchestration of power 'at the juncture of everyday life'" ("Top Girls?" 1). Finally, she asks: "How does what used to be a feminist kind of political discourse come to be co-opted and absorbed by the neo-liberal project?" ("Top Girls?" 1). Chick culture and the texts produced within it deal precisely with the everyday: it is thus an ideal location from which to explore the question which McRobbie asks.

The first thing I show in this chapter is that chick culture is a site where the tensions produced by this absorption of feminism are being played out. I begin with a discussion of *SATC* to show that the chick protagonist encounters uneasily the master narrative which is reinforced in American mainstream culture broadly: this is the story of a woman who uses her trials to become a better person (a better

partner, mother, sister, daughter, and so forth) as well as a better citizen. Of course, this gender ideal echoes throughout chick culture; the difference is, however, that audiences understand chicks be a little transgressive in the way they respond to these social expectations. Cathy Yardley, author of *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* suggests that the chick's complex personality is marked by the "rise of the anti-heroine" (18). The chick-lit protagonist's story of "overcoming her fears and joining the world" means that some "protagonists actually do 'bad' things—lying, conniving, participating in office warfare, cheating on their significant others" (Yardley 19). Specifically, there is some tendency for a chick protagonist to be angry or dissatisfied at the outset of her narrative—it is often in this way that she invokes a feminist project like workplace equity or even breast cancer activism, though it is almost never named as such. At the same time, in chick texts, female subjects tend to butt up against some force which pushes them to channel their anger in ways which support institutions that stand to benefit from the support of compliant female consumers. As was shown in the previous chapter's discussion of *Cancer Vixen*, a graphic memoir which closely follows the tropes found in many fictional chick texts, chick authors do not always sustain moments which begin as productive social critiques; rather, these articulations tend to be reined back to reify social arrangements which benefit the institutions which women in chick lit often initially seem ready to rebut. In the case of chick fiction which features breast cancer as its crisis, the woman is hailed to work for a cancer-awareness campaign, some fundraiser, or a charity: by doing so, she often begins to relinquish her

transgressive side. This pattern is found in *SATC* and some other chick fictions which I analyze including the television series *The L Word*, and a chick-lit novel entitled *The Department of Lost & Found: A Novel*. The analysis of the latter text shows a relationship between what is happening in chick texts and American political culture.

The final text I analyze in this chapter is an episode of the reality makeover program *What Not to Wear (WNTW)* which features a woman named Sara Jordan who has survived breast cancer. The study of Jordan's life narrative is intended to bridge contemporary popular fiction and life narratives to show that the confrontation which happens between chicks and polite society is in fact replicated in autobiographical texts. My claim that such tropes find their way into life narratives should come as no surprise. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain, "some well-known patterns for presenting processes of self-knowing are linked to other genres of literature . . . and provide templates for autobiographical storytelling" (*Reading* 91). Chick lit's origins are, after all, tied to life writing genres in the first place, with many iconic works taking the form of journal entries (recall, for example, *Bridget Jones's Diary*). However, by expanding the definition of chick culture to include life narratives, by the end of this chapter, the stakes are raised—particularly since, by doing so, I begin to show how the fantasies which lead to the creation of chick culture in the first place signify women's intense desires to belong to the mainstream social order: this social order grants them full acceptance only when a set of difficult-to-achieve requisites are achieved. Yardley explains what these requisites are when she notes that chick

lit is rife with “deliberate name-dropping: Prada, Manolo Blahnick, BCBG, Givenchy, Juicy Couture” (14). She advises new writers to the genre that chick-lit novels refer to conspicuous consumption to “play directly on a reader’s sense of lifestyle envy” (14). This brings me to the second thing I want to do with this chapter which is to show that autobiographical sick lit is by women who are, in a sense, responding to what is identified by Yardley (though she does not use these terms) as a deliberate hailing of women to yield to consumptive desire. In chick culture, women with breast cancer are aggressively hailed by consumer culture. Tension in *WNTW* occurs when Jordan’s legitimate wish not to be subsumed by the normative values which drive consumerism vie with her desire to belong to, and be accepted by, the dominant social order. Although it is clear that capitalist interests are served by *WNTW*, the analysis of Jordan’s life story as it is depicted on this program also reveals some hope when it acknowledges Jordan’s agency by showing that she does not believe it is necessary for women to undergo painful reconstructive surgeries after mastectomies. In this way, I leave the chapter on an optimistic note by beginning to show that life narrators who step into chick culture enter a site of potential.

The Chick Gets Breast Cancer

When Home Box Office (HBO), the creators of *SATC*, chose to incorporate a breast cancer storyline into the program’s sixth and final season, they established chick culture as the recognizable site for debates taking place over the commercialization of this disease. Given *SATC*’s popularity and

widespread exposure—and given that the works of sick lit I discuss in the rest of the dissertation can be linked to it—it makes sense to begin with a discussion of this program.²¹ Before proceeding too much further, some background to the series may prove useful. *SATC* centred on the life of a woman named Carrie Bradshaw (played by Sarah Jessica Parker) and three of her friends: Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), Charlotte York (Kristen Davis) and Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), the latter of whom is the character to get breast cancer during the program’s final season. The primary role in the series belonged to Parker who, as Bradshaw, played a journalist who wrote a relationship and lifestyle column. It was through this character’s perspective—often presented in the form of voiceovers—that the stories of all four women were told. The television program is based on Candace Bushnell’s newspaper column and 1996 novel of the same name. Although Bushnell’s work is popular in its own right, it is the television adaptation which is best known. Hence, my discussion of *SATC* is limited to the television program as well as, elsewhere in this dissertation, to the motion-picture sequels starring the same cast which came out after the program ended.

²¹ *SATC* is not the only chick text to depict breast cancer. The popular story collection *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999) by Melissa Bank includes a short story entitled “It Could Be Anyone” which features an unnamed protagonist with breast cancer. Chick-lit author Erica Orloff’s *Do They Wear High Heels in Heaven* (2005) is the story of Lily, a woman who dies of breast cancer. A more commercially successful example of chick lit featuring a protagonist with breast cancer—and one which I will discuss in this chapter—is Allison Winn Scotch’s *The Department of Lost & Found: A Novel* (2007).

Since the sixth and final season of *SATC* aired in 2004, a number of media critics have celebrated the series' depiction of breast cancer which took place that same year. For instance, it has been pointed out that Samantha Jones' trials with breast cancer are important for the way they prompted viewers to be proactive about their health. Jennifer B. Gray, as one example, argues that *SATC*'s breast cancer episodes function as "edutainment" (399). "Edutainment," writes Gray, "may present various dimensions of particular health issues" (399). Although she acknowledges the class disparity taking place in the program, Gray concludes that *SATC*, while not "a completely successful prosocial, educational form of edutainment," is nonetheless a "valuable" one, particularly because it depicts the significance of a closely-knit social support network comprised of female friends who encourage Samantha during her illness (411). For this and other reasons, Heidi Hatfield Edwards' study of viewer comments published on *SATC*'s online bulletin board confirmed the program's capacity "to impact its audience" (19). She explains that several women were, as a result of watching *SATC*, motivated to perform self-exams on their breasts: two such women found lumps that would otherwise have gone undetected (19). While Edwards points to the way that the program causes some women to be more proactive regarding their health, Marta Fernández-Morales, a critic who refers to *SATC* as "dramedy" (676), suggests that Samantha's story is important because of the way it disrupts medical culture's pathologization of women who opt not to have children (677-680). In this instance, Fernández-Morales is referring to the exchange which Samantha has

with a male doctor who tells her that she may have become ill because she has never given birth.

Samantha's refusal to tolerate the physician's detached professionalism (or outright condescension depending on how you read this scene) constitutes a high point in the program's treatment of the breast cancer theme because of the way it critiques medicine for perpetuating a form of institutional sexism founded upon the heteronormative social order. In this episode entitled "Catch-38," Samantha's medical appointment begins very badly when the doctor, without warning, brusquely reaches into her gown to palpate her afflicted breast. Samantha flinches, but tolerates the physician's first act of disrespect. However, when Samantha asks the physician what may have caused her cancer, he formulaically responds that it was likely caused by "lifestyle choices" (3:00). He qualifies this claim by citing research which indicates that women who have not had children may be at a higher risk to develop breast cancer than women who have given birth. Samantha becomes very agitated by the comment and, after she angrily tells the physician that he is "lucky to have touched her breasts," she storms from the office still dressed in the exam gown (3:20). She later justifies her behaviour to Carrie, Miranda and Charlotte, stating that she has decided she will no longer see this physician since he "basically considers her a whore who deserves chemo" (3:50). Despite the confidence Samantha typically shows, in this episode she reveals that she has internalized social expectations related to normative gender roles which uphold motherhood and monogamy as ideals: the breast cancer

episodes suggest that Samantha's illness causes her to become sensitive to the fact that she does not neatly fit into the dominant heteronormative social order.

Fernández-Morales claims that the physician-Samantha encounter works to address “a victim-blaming discourse present in science and in popular culture” which is often aimed at women (679) and which causes Samantha to feel as though her cancer may be a punishment for her refusal to live in accordance with social norms. The program tries to question this view by having Samantha meet and befriend a nun who has also been diagnosed. After speaking with the nun, Carrie's voiceover explains that Samantha has been comforted to learn that “saints and sinners, despite their habits, get the same treatment when it comes to cancer” (“Catch-38” 9:04). By demonstrating Samantha's awareness of herself as a woman with unconventional stances regarding children and marriage, and by exploring the difficulties this awareness causes her to experience as she seeks treatment for breast cancer, *SATC* begins to show the harm that normative culture can create in women's lives when they feel that they do not live up to society's expectations. In addition to the added emotional duress she experiences because she feels judged by this doctor, Samantha experiences a material difficulty—though as I will clarify in a moment, it is short-lived and neatly surmounted—when medical wait times make it difficult for her to obtain an appointment with a new and more empathetic physician who can continue her treatment.

While *SATC* is significant for its treatment of the physician-patient relationship, this anecdote is by no means the only significant one in the breast cancer story. Over its last season, the series also commented on the politics of the

breast cancer fundraiser. As a public relations professional and socialite, Samantha has organized events such as “Paint for the Cure” in the past (“Catch-38” 6:48). When she gets cancer, Samantha realizes that such events are often created with little consideration for the women whom they are intended to serve. While planning an annual event at which organizers traditionally hand out goodie bags containing pink baked goods, Samantha tells co-organizers that women who are “battling cancer need something more inspirational or outrageous than a fucking cookie” (“An American Girl, Part Une” 10:10). She then promises to personally deliver a speech that will inspire those in the audience currently being treated for this disease. On the day of the fundraiser, Samantha begins to deliver a cliché-riddled speech. When, however, the character experiences a chemotherapy-induced hot flash, she drops her facade—here she exclaims “Oh fuck it!”—and removes her wig to fan her drenched face and chest. Other women at the fundraiser stand and remove their own hairpieces in what becomes a gesture of female solidarity (“An American Girl, Part Une” 28:06).

M.E. Rollins claims that watching Samantha give this speech provided her with a much needed reprieve from the more maudlin cancer narratives she found elsewhere while she too was being treated for the disease. Rollins writes:

I found it fitting that [Samantha’s] character got to deal with breast cancer in her own way. She expressed all the real emotions I was feeling, rational and otherwise. She dumped a perfectly decent doctor . . . [and] later, she threw her wig up in the air . . . while making a speech at a cancer

fundraiser because of the hot flashes from the chemo. I loved that part and kept going back to watch it again. (“Why I Walk”)

Along these lines, Fernández-Morales deems this scene to hold “the highest potential of empowerment for the female audience” (684). Her claim is based on the observation that Samantha’s character finally brings to the program at least a partial reality of what it means to embody this disease. According to Fernández-Morales, “Samantha not only *has* a body; she *is* the body in full function: she sweats, has hot flashes, shakes nervously” (684). Rollins’ response to *SATC* suggests that Fernández-Morales is correct in her assessment of the program’s potential to motivate some viewers.

However, while the *SATC* fundraiser scene delivers an affective moment for viewers, the cancer episodes require some additional analysis, particularly for the way they conflate Samantha’s rejection of her physician and her service to other women at the fundraiser with ideologies of consumption and, by extension, for the ways they undermine the goals and objectives of feminism through the depiction of her romantic story. Samantha’s behaviour at the fundraiser echoes faintly a feminist critique. For instance, her mocking of the pink-ribbon cookie is reminiscent of Barbara Ehrenreich’s 2001 essay “Welcome to Cancerland: A Mammogram Leads to the Cult of Pink Kitsch,” an influential editorial in which Ehrenreich argues that pink-ribbon culture and its associated fundraisers infantilize women. In this essay, Ehrenreich self-identifies as a former “activist” in the Women’s Health Movement of the 1970s and 1980s and praises any “feminists” who might still exist “within the vast pink sea of the breast-cancer

crusade” (47). Given that *SATC* is clearly therapeutic for some viewers—and thus useful for the ways it helps some women articulate their frustrations with culture’s responses to their illness—one hopes that Samantha might be unsettling a sexist pink culture in the way Ehrenreich suggests is necessary. However, while *SATC* presents viewers with opportunities to laugh at the stereotypical overly-pretentious socialite, it is important to be clear about precisely what is and is not being refuted by this text.

SATC does not address classism, environmental abuses, or the other forms of social injustice that a thoroughly rigorous feminist critique would undertake. As an elite subject of capitalism, Samantha removes her wig, and this inspires other women of a similar class standing. Throughout her ordeal with breast cancer, Samantha is depicted wearing an enormous variety of wigs and beautiful scarves, not to mention her usual designer wardrobe. While *SATC* never denies that cancer is a serious issue in any woman’s life, it is clear that Samantha does not find the costs associated with the purchase of such items to be prohibitive during her cancer ordeal. She has the professional success and thus the economic advantage to simply buy whatever she needs to remain conventionally attractive; in this way, the program perpetuates beauty norms and certainly implies that women can choose to remain glamorous while being treated for cancer so long as they purchase certain products.

Here, as promised, it is also useful to return to the exchange between Samantha and the medical institution. Samantha’s success as a healthcare consumer occurs due to her economic success and her status as a heterosexual

woman. After Samantha challenges her first doctor, she uses her wealth, privilege, and ultimately her professional and personal connections to circumvent physician wait times to obtain an appointment with the city's "top-rated oncologist by New York Magazine four years running" ("Catch-38" 4:12). The secretary to this oncologist initially refuses to advance Samantha's place in the queue; however, when Samantha learns that the secretary has a crush on her actor boyfriend Smith Jerrod (Jason Lewis), she offers the woman the chance to meet Smith in exchange for an appointment ("Catch-38" 25:24). This is the very model of cancer survivorship which Marisa Acocella Marchetto replicates in *Cancer Vixen* when it is her status as the girlfriend of a wealthy celebrity restaurateur—as opposed to her own ingenuity—which allows her to overcome what would otherwise be a devastating barrier to receiving healthcare (no medical insurance). Since Samantha is also Smith's publicity agent, her bartering of him is meant to reflect both her personal and professional success. Although Samantha does use her relationship with Smith to obtain an appointment for another woman as well, the viewer is clearly expected to see Samantha, not as someone who objectifies her partner, but as the sort of "self-managing, autonomous and enterprising" (Gill and Scharff 5) subject who is the product of postfeminism and, as these scholars suggest, is thus complicit in the neoliberal project.

Finally, Samantha's relationship with Smith as it is depicted in the series finale of *SATC* undoes what might otherwise be a solid critique of normative and heteronormative viewpoints which in the first place made Samantha feel objectified (see Fig. 14 and Fig. 15). When chemotherapy diminishes Samantha's

sex drive, she encourages Smith to obtain sexual gratification with other women (“An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux” 13:40). The reaction is not out of character for Samantha who does not privilege monogamy. However, Smith does and is thus unwilling to comply with Samantha’s directions. In what is the television program’s final portrayal of Samantha’s personal life in that same episode, Smith’s devotion prompts Samantha to confess to him that “[he] has meant more to her than any man [she’s] even known” (40: 20). Such denouements occur for all the characters and cause Negra to conclude that “The much-celebrated/much-debated *Sex and the City* came to closure in a strikingly ideologically conservative fashion” (10). Her statement refers to each of the program’s protagonists: in addition to Samantha’s being redeemed by Smith, the final episode leaves Carrie partnered with a powerful businessman, Miranda married and becoming a caregiver to her husband’s aged mother, and Charlotte and her husband finalizing plans to adopt a child. While Samantha remains unmarried, her union with Smith at the series’ end invites audience members to interpret Smith as having taught Samantha a moral lesson.²² This is perhaps why Jennifer B. Gray, in a study of ways that *SATC* functions as “a health information source” (397), casually remarks that “Samantha’s sexual drive is renewed as she heals, and she is ready to share this part of herself with someone for whom she truly cares” (405). Such an interpretation stems from the dominant culture’s

²² Samantha and Smith do end their relationship in *Sex and the City: The Movie*, the first of two movie sequels to the television program which aired in 2008.

anxieties over female sexual autonomy. Unfortunately, then, the program's final plotline is often interpreted as returning the chick to traditional gender hierarchies.

It must be stressed that Samantha's resistance, though reminiscent of a popular feminism, lacks a solid foundation: this statement is especially apparent at the cancer fundraiser where it is never entirely clear what Samantha is criticizing other than the superficiality of the event itself. One of the concerns that has been stated about popular media representations of women's cancers broadly is that they "effectively shift [the] focus from larger social, environmental, political, and economic issues surrounding breast cancer" (Fosket, Karran, and LaFia, qtd. in Khalid 701). A real concern with *SATC* is that by virtue of its associations with consumer culture, it cannot critique industry's abuses to the environment which cause cancer, questionable medical pathways used to detect and treat the disease, or the disease's commercialization. Such disappointing moments in popular culture are discussed by Susannah B. Mintz who argues that television is dominated by "Contradictory representations of women" ("Baywatch" 57). According to Mintz, the majority of programs both "challenge and underwrite traditional attitudes toward gender" ("Baywatch" 57). Although Mintz acknowledges that some programs treat social issues with "remarkable seriousness" ("Baywatch" 68), she also shows that the majority of them "perpetuate those illusions that problematize so-called 'power' feminism" ("Baywatch," Mintz 59). The idea of an "imaginary feminist" which Negra locates in postfeminist media also works here (10) as does McRobbie's claim that feminism is "undone" by hegemonic institutions which influence the production

of popular culture through invoking the movement's causes but not allowing for the movement's discourse in those representations (*Aftermath* 17).

In closing, I want to point out that Samantha moves from being a chick to being a representation of mainstream culture's ideal breast cancer subject. As a chick, she is outspoken and, at times, even a bit rude: this sates the viewer's desire to watch female characters who can be read as refusing to allow others to dominate them. Ultimately, though, Samantha becomes a representation of sentimental and romantic values that American culture holds dear as evidenced when she returns by choice to conventional gender roles. Samantha finds self worth through her heterosexual romance. She also possesses the means to access items from consumer culture that enable her to uphold conventional beauty norms that make her worthy of that man's love. Finally—and this is particularly important—Samantha becomes a productive citizen when she finds a way to help women at the breast cancer benefit. This charitable act takes the place of activism: it recalls feminism, but is tied to the sort of social status which can only be accomplished through her participation in consumer culture.

Breast Cancer and Ladies who Lunch (a.k.a. Redemption through Shopping)

To begin to examine how chick culture can help to reinforce an ideal breast cancer subject in a variety of different contexts, I want now to turn to an analysis of Showtime network's *The L Word*, a dramatic television series which aired between 2004 and 2009, and which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, was the first television drama to focus on the "lives of a group of women most of

whom are lesbian” (“Foreword” xix). What Akass and McCabe point to initially in their commentary on *The L Word* is that the rhetoric used to market it invited prospective viewers to recall *SATC*’s themes: according to these critics, “Same sex, different city” was the slogan that appeared on trailers and billboards to announce the arrival of this program (“Preface,” Akass and McCabe). *SATC*’s unprecedented success had created the perfect opportunity for *The L Word*’s makers to market their text as the HBO program’s “successor” (xxv) with the goal of expanding the scope of its audience. Sarah Warn states that while *The L Word*’s creators Ilene Chaiken and Rose Troche created the program for “the gay community,” they needed to draw a “broader audience” to remain financially viable (4). Elsewhere, as Jonathan Gray shows, such “entryway paratexts” help narratives to do this kind of work by literally telling an audience how to interpret a given text (35); simultaneously, the public comes to associate certain conventions with a given genre. In other words, *The L Word*’s paratext invites prospective audiences to search for similarities between the two programs of which there are several. Both are “ensemble drama[s] centring on a close-knit group of female friends who regularly enjoy gabfests” (“Preface,” Akass and McCabe xxv). Both are about conventionally beautiful, glamorous, upper-class women. Both programs are viewed as transgressive since they offer what many deem to be “risqué” sex scenes as they depict women “playing the field” (“Preface,” Akass and McCabe xxv). Thus, although *The L Word* is a drama as opposed to dramedy, and it is not about the heterosexual romance, it could still offer viewers similar pleasures to *SATC*.

Another similarity between *SATC* and *The L Word* is that both included storylines about a major character diagnosed with breast cancer. During *The L Word's* third season, Dana Fairbanks (Erin Daniels)—one of the characters most beloved by the program's fans—was diagnosed with breast cancer and died from it. By way of introducing a discussion of these episodes, it can be noted that *The L Word's* creators use references to *SATC* to upend the heteronormative culture which upholds the heterosexual romance as the ideal. Although *The L Word* has been criticized for, among other things, “shamelessly pandering to the male heterosexual gaze” (Wolfe and Roripaugh 43), others believe that the program “makes a sophisticated attempt to acknowledge . . . anxieties [surrounding lesbian] representation in ways that are ultimately both savvy and subversive” (Wolfe and Roripaugh 54). This type of subversion takes place even in the program's paratexts where a blurb on the packaging of the *The L Word: The Complete Third Season* in DVD promises that the enclosed is “the definitive new *Sex and the City*, only with more true sex and more dramatic intent.” This blurb, an excerpt from a review written by Tim Goodman of the San Francisco Chronicle, is used by *The L Word's* promoters who develop marketing strategies to encourage wide consumption of the DVDs while still retaining for its lesbian audience members some sense of the program being distinct from—and indeed superior to—the heterosexual chick flick. This subversion is in its own way important since it demonstrates how paratext can announce and declare a work's genre, but still be used by a text's creators and audiences in ways that expand the parameters of heteronormativity. It confirms Ferriss and Young's observation that

“chick lit [has the] remarkable ability to transform itself into new varieties” (*Chick Lit* 7). At the same time, the subversion also shows how *SATC*’s superficialities and heterosexism are imposed on other texts: when the blurb is read in its original context, Goodman acknowledges that the similarities he points to between *SATC* and *The L Word* are liable to “annoy or nauseate [the latter program’s] producers” (“Like Fine Wine”). These ideas become important to consider later on when I examine how sick- lit writers and their publishers can promote their works while still revising and expanding generic conventions, but that by doing so, these parties must navigate of many constraining factors.

The point I wish to make now is that Dana’s storyline has much in common with Samantha’s. Initially, this may not seem to be the case, particularly since *The L Word* depicts the body with cancer in starker, more graphic ways. Dana’s medical appointments are filmed using camera angles and sounds that accentuate the alienation she feels as a patient in the health system (“Lifesize”). Additionally, the aftermath of Dana’s mastectomy is shown in the episode “Late Comer” which includes a shot of Dana’s bare and scarred torso (see Fig.16). This graphic depiction differs dramatically from that of *SATC* where Samantha endures a less invasive lumpectomy and with viewers being made aware of no changes to her body, beyond brief glimpses of the character’s loss of hair. Last, *The L Word* depicts romantic relationships in a far less idealized way than *SATC* does. When Dana’s partner Lara (Lauren Lee Smith), along with all of Dana’s friends, attempt to comfort Dana with a “chemo cake” to mark the commencement of medical treatment, Dana snaps that she “is fucking sick” and that breast cancer is no cause

for celebration (“Lone Star” 21:00). Dana’s response to her cake is far more unsettling than *SATC*’s Samantha’s comedic disavowal of the breast-cancer cookie. Likewise, Dana’s romantic story is not resolved by the narrative’s end: Lara cannot withstand Dana’s hostility and the two separate with Dana dying before amends are made.

However, like Samantha, Dana is beautiful, successful, fashionable, and at times outspoken. Like Samantha, Dana also answers the call to do charitable work—work, which in turn, upholds ideologies of consumption. *The L Word*’s validation of consumer culture in the breast cancer episodes occurs in a context where feminist projects associated with women’s health are frequently recalled, though not explicitly named. For instance, when Dana shows her mastectomy scar, the program affirms that the female body which has been altered by a mastectomy is still beautiful. Likewise, when *The L Word* depicts Dana’s hospital stay in the episode entitled “Lifesize,” they depict the realities of heterosexism. While Dana is recovering from her mastectomy, Lara is prevented from visiting her because the institution’s policies and Dana’s parents would not recognize her as Dana’s partner. Finally, in the episode entitled “Lead, Follow, or Get out of the Way,” Dr. Susan Love makes a cameo on the program (see Fig. 17). Love plays a pivotal role in helping Dana to realize that she can use her cancer experience to the service of others. This happens when Love takes Dana and her former girlfriend Alice (Leisha Hailey) to lunch. During the lunch, Love endorses Dana’s decision to have chemotherapy, but is also pleased that Dana is going to do “complimentary therapies as well” (“Lead” 10:20). She explains her research

to Alice and Dana while stressing that her foundation “needs all the help it can get,” and Dana is anxious to “help” however she can (“Lead” 11:15). As Love explains, new research being done at her foundation may not only “cure breast cancer but may even be a way of preventing it” (“Lead” 11:05). Here *The L Word* can be interpreted as working to educate viewers through its introduction of Love’s research which, if one notes the language, is political in the sense that it hopes to *cure* and *prevent* cancer, and because Love is open to non-traditional treatment options as well.

On the face of it, Love’s appearance on the program makes good sense. This respected figurehead who has been described as “The nation’s premiere breast cancer specialist and lesbian cancer activist” (Brownworth) uses the program to support the lesbian community specifically, while also fostering awareness of her work generally. The episode promotes Love’s monograph entitled *Dr. Susan Love’s Breast Book* and it provides a brief description of Love’s research, likely in the hope of acquiring financial support for her foundation. After “Lead, Follow or Get out the Way” aired, a writer for *Echelon* reported that an anonymous donation had been made to the Dr. Susan Love Research Foundation in the amount of one million dollars to honour Dana’s character. As part of the publicity which circulated in response to this donation, it was reported that this same individual promised to match any donations received by the fund in the future (“Dr. Susan Love Research Foundation Receives \$ 1 Million” 10). However, a question which gets raised here is whether or not the majority of viewers are actually motivated to look closely at the organizations

which they choose to support, and how the program's creators might have further encouraged viewers to do so. When *The L Word's* actors and creators prepared a public service announcement entitled "A Goodbye to Dana," it advised women to "help in the fight against breast cancer" by contacting either The Susan G. Komen Foundation Breast Cancer Foundation and/or The National Lesbian Health Organization's Mautner Project (6:56). Although the program itself and its paratexts include a variety of charities, *The L Word* blurs together the organizations which campaign for breast cancer dollars. Viewers could benefit from even a brief reminder to carefully consider the mandate of charities they want to support.

What is particularly worrisome about *SATC's* and *The L Word's* breast cancer episodes are the ways they position the women who lead fundraisers at the top of a hierarchy determined by personal wealth. While Josephine Khalid worries that viewers might interpret Dana's death as punishment for her failure to have the lump in her breast checked as soon as she noticed it—thereby failing to "control her body as she should have" (702)—from a feminist perspective what is also unsettling about *The L Word's* breast cancer storyline is the way it contributes to the refashioning of what has formerly been the work of women's health activists. In other words, feminist activity is refigured as polite fundraising work which is executed around events that entail conspicuous consumption. Just prior to the lunch scene which involves Love, Dana has an epiphany while looking at her reflection in the window of a high-end clothing store. She and Alice have been shopping for a "Lyon-Martin benefit" which Dana is going to

attend (“Lead” 5:40).²³ As Dana pauses to examine a mannequin and to ponder her own reflection in the store’s window, Alice tells her that “bald IS beautiful” to which Dana responds, “I think so” (“Lead” 6:15). This dialogue which reflects a turning point for Dana is preceded by another shot of her beaming as she carries elegant packages toward the trendy restaurant where she and Alice meet Love. One of Dana’s packages flashes toward the camera to reveal the GUCCI logo (see Fig.18). The gesture is a small one perhaps, but it has the effect of blurring Dana’s advocacy with shopping. In this way, it depicts the work done to address gender inequity in the health system as something tied to class-based leisure.

Here again is a narrative which, though gesturing broadly at a past feminism, does not explicitly name the movement or use its rhetoric to sustain any particular protest. Dana’s anger at the outset of her cancer ordeal, the display of her scar, and the program’s critique of heterosexism cause *The L Word* to seem as though it is cutting edge, but cancer is also depicted in ways which reify harmful stereotypes. In both *SATC* and *The L Word*, women stop being angry when they work for breast cancer benefits. The message is occurring in programs which seem progressive in the sense that the women in them are depicted as they assert their sexual agency. As many of the *The L Word’s* fans made clear, the program had great meaning for its lesbian followers, an audience who are vastly

²³ Lyon-Martin is a San Francisco based health institution with the mandate to “provide excellent health care to women, lesbians, and transgender people in a safe and compassionate environment, with sensitivity to sexual orientation and gender identity” (Lyon-Martin Health Services).

underrepresented in popular culture. Yet as McRobbie reminds, these narratives are tricky: the fact that certain popular narratives are more inclusive in terms of the way they represent sexual desire and sexuality can perpetuate the objectification of women because, within such representations, there seems to be “even less reason to inquire as to what might be entailed in these rituals of enjoyment” (*Aftermath* 8). Dana’s and Samantha’s breast cancer stories are underpinned by regressive gender politics because they affirm normative beauty standards and uphold class division. As women who are presented as empowered by virtue of their social class and appearance, they cannot straightforwardly protest against forces which enable them to present themselves as such.

American Politics and its Echoes in Breast Cancer Discourse and Chick Culture

Turning now from *SATC* and *The L Word*, I will discuss how American mainstream culture has been primed to see the upper-class woman who works at fundraising as the ideal breast cancer subject. What I want to do, ultimately, is show that chick culture is a site where anxieties about who this subject is and what she represents are being worked out. However, before delving more into autobiographical narratives which also follow this pattern, I will introduce one other fictional text, a chick-lit novel, to show that this narrative trajectory—the chick who is hailed by the organizer of a breast cancer charity—is occurring within other chick culture media outside of television. Importantly, the representation I am going to discuss has a connection to the American political

sphere, a site where undertaking breast cancer advocacy is presented as a responsibility of citizenship.

Allison Winn Scotch's *The Department of Lost & Found: A Novel* (*TDOLF*) (2007) is all about the protagonist's journey to discover her place in the personal and the professional spheres. The novel's purpose seems to be to question whether or not women are using the power that they have achieved wisely when they choose to prioritize career advancement. For Natalie, the answer to this dilemma lies in her realization that her romantic relationships have wrongly been given less priority than her career, a lesson she only learns after she is diagnosed with breast cancer.

Like the majority of chick-lit protagonists, Natalie is young, single, probably white, heterosexual, and presumably an agent of free choice. And like the many chick protagonists who are portrayed as working in media or publishing professions, Natalie works in public relations. Typical of chick-lit protagonists, her personality is a series of contradictions: as chick-lit.us explains, "the heroine of these books can be rude, shallow, overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, witty or surprisingly all of the above" (qtd. in *Chick Lit*, Ferris and Young 4). This statement is true of Natalie who, on the one hand, is depicted as a bold and confident protagonist who "Knock[s] that fucking disease right out of the park" (Scotch 305). At the same time, her ambition is depicted as negative trait which causes her to behave ruthlessly while employed as a public relations officer who works for an unethical female senator. In her role as an assistant to a prominent politician, Natalie has worked hard to implement a bill approving stem-

cell research which would “offer potential cures to Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, cancers, and a litany of other diseases” (Scotch 298). Ultimately, however, Natalie resigns from her job because her employer refuses to take the controversial stand needed to pass this bill. After much inner turmoil, stage III breast cancer causes her to re-evaluate her priorities and to make life changes—she chooses love over career—to become what readers are to interpret as both a more moral and fulfilled person. Part of Natalie’s transition also involves her refocusing her talents and interest in health advocacy to become involved in a breast cancer charity. All of these developments to Natalie’s personality are summed up by a paternal physician who tells her that once people get cancer, they “find the lives they want to live, rather than the lives that they think they should be living” (Scotch 262).

Breast cancer is a crisis within this chick-lit novel which seems to test the postfeminist assumption that the contemporary woman is simply free to choose between multiple options without fear of retribution. While she is sick, Natalie becomes isolated and, as a result, is motivated to contact several former lovers to gain their perspectives on why her relationships with each one of them failed. Her exchanges with these old love interests invite the reader to be critical of Natalie’s previous actions toward these men. Jake, the most significant of Natalie’s exes, summarizes Natalie’s approach to relationships by stating that “the only reason [she] drove herself at 160 miles an hour was to beat everyone else at the race” (Scotch 58). Natalie’s focus on career seems to have meant that she treated the men in her life with little regard. Consequently, when the ill Natalie connects

with a childhood sweetheart to ask why the two of them did not remain together, Colin tells her that she was “*bigger than what [he] wanted . . . [and that] [he] was smaller than what [she] wanted*” (Scotch 73). As Natalie records the details of this conversation in her diary, she recalls that Colin “*tried to preserve [their] bond*” but that she had resisted his advances so that she could devote her full attention to attending college (Scotch 74).

The novel makes it clear that Natalie has wrongfully chosen to invest too much time and energy in pursuit of her career and not enough time in her relationships. When another of Natalie’s lovers, Brandon, cheats on her with another woman, he explains his behaviour by stating to Natalie that had she “*fought for [him] the way that [she had] for so much else in [her] life,*” he would have married her (Scotch 105). Like Colin, Brandon implies that Natalie’s career is her priority and claims to have left her because he was unprepared to “*risk . . . it all for someone who was in it to win it*” (Scotch 105). While the novel does not quite endorse his treatment of Natalie, she nonetheless admits in her diary that Brandon was “*probably right*” in his assessment of her conduct (Scotch 105). Given that Natalie is portrayed as sick, depressed, and isolated when she makes these discoveries about past relationships, her character is established as that of a woman who finds herself alone and desperate because she has pursued career ambitions. This representation is constructed on the premise that illness should, in some way, cause the sufferer to evolve or transform to reach a state of enlightenment. Thus Natalie’s decision to finally commit to a relationship with her “alpha” Zach (Scotch 311) is represented as evidence of her maturation. The

moral of this story is that romantic fulfillment ought to be the most important priority in a young woman's life. Remission from her breast cancer occurs as Natalie quits her job and prepares to start life with her new love Zach: it is then that Natalie muses that "Cancer didn't just change [her] life [;] it gave [her] one instead" (Scotch 312). While it is important that Natalie renegotiate the conditions under which she performs her job—her employer treats Natalie with a lack of respect and shows disregard for her well being—the solution that the novel provides to resolving this dilemma is to predict Natalie's return to a traditional gender hierarchy.

Perhaps what is most disturbing about this narrative is the manner in which it suggests that Natalie learns a lesson from having cancer. The ease with which the more aggressive, career-minded version of Natalie can be interpreted as having a "cancer personality" is disturbing, especially since the novel explicitly presents breast cancer as a crisis that teaches this chick protagonist how to live a proper life. As Susan Sontag pointed out more than thirty years ago, cancer has traditionally been associated with a certain personality type. She cites research conducted during the 1970s which taught that people "[who have] difficulty in maintaining close relationships" were prone to cancer (Claus and Bahnson, qtd. in Sontag 51). Although *SATC* can also be read this way, the program's creators do work to pre-empt this interpretation by having Samantha come to understand that the reasons for getting cancer are arbitrary. This is not the case with *TDOLF*. By the time Natalie is declared in remission—after a mere six months of treatment—she "no longer has cancer" (Scotch 305); however, Natalie is portrayed as

realizing that, without cancer, she “might never have found [her] way toward [Zach]” (Scotch 311). This implies, not only that the woman with cancer has a defective personality, but that being seriously ill is what ultimately causes Natalie to improve and find happiness.

The idea that the post-cancer Natalie might be better equipped to enjoy a productive life is further reinforced by the novel’s depiction of Natalie’s mother and of a second woman named Susanna Taylor. These women, both of whom function as potential role models for Natalie, are polarized in ways which ultimately show, yet again, feminism being repudiated. In *TDOLF*, the representation of the dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship and negative representations of women in the workplace represents this disavowal of feminism. As Astrid Henry notes when analyzing depictions of women and feminism in numerous texts which belong to the third wave, generation gaps can contribute to feminism’s crisis: in her view, “many of the young women [in the texts she has studied] . . . see their most radical act toward mother feminism as breaking the mother-daughter connection precisely in order to create separate identities or take over existing power” (*Not My Mother’s Sister* 48). This premise seems more than adequate to assess this chick-lit novel which works to emphasize the protagonist’s strained relationship with a strong and independent maternal figure while also needing to portray Natalie as an empowered woman who is free to make her own choices. Natalie is shown to have an ambivalent relationship with her mother who is often portrayed as emotionally unavailable (hence unnatural) and whom Natalie describes unflatteringly as an “alpha dog” (Scotch 183). It is implied that

Natalie's inability to form relationships as an adult stems from the neglect she sustained at the hands of her "always right, always-stoic" mother (Scotch 171). Natalie's mother, "the first woman partner at her law firm" (Scotch 142), is also heavily invested in her career. This daughter is not particularly proud of her mother; rather, Natalie yearns for a brief time during her childhood when her mother performed domestic duties such as "[sewing] outfits and living room drapes" (Scotch 142). While Natalie's mother is a flat character—and therefore undeveloped in terms of how she situates herself in relation to feminism—she is clearly a woman who has achieved some success outside the home and done so during a time when the work force was dominated by men. Moreover, Natalie's mother has built a career while married and raising a family. This accomplishment is not cause for celebration in the novel where women's career advancement—Natalie's and her mother's—are depicted as selfish and of secondary importance to their domestic and personal responsibilities. The tension one perceives in this text raises questions about what it means to be a female citizen in America: specifically, if the competitive workplace is not conducive to personal and familial health, then how does the enlightened postfeminist woman use her skills and education to reflect her agency? In particular, how does she do so if she has—or has had—breast cancer?

Susanna Taylor is the character who supplies the answer. Taylor is older than Natalie and a survivor of breast cancer. She is also the wife of a prominent politician who opposes Senator Dupris' policies (Senator Dupris is the unethical female senator for whom Natalie works and who is yet another negative depiction

of a career-minded woman in the novel). In her role as Dupris' public relations assistant, Natalie uncovers that Taylor's husband consorts with prostitutes and leaks information about his activities to the press to discredit him in the political arena. The plan backfires because Taylor has breast cancer; as a result, the public is more sympathetic toward her than it is towards Dupris. In the public's eyes, Taylor is respected as "one of the leading faces of cancer" (Scotch 67). She is also a successful lawyer; however, in contrast to Natalie's mother who is portrayed as selfish for her ambition, Taylor is represented as generous and likeable because she selflessly uses her legal expertise to develop a foundation to help other women who have cancer. When Natalie eventually meets Taylor, she is surprised to discover that the woman is quick to accept an apology for the breach visited on her. Taylor responds to Natalie's apology with an expression of concern about Natalie's cancer and the comment that she understands that "the world isn't necessarily black and white" (Scotch138). Taylor, who is ultimately portrayed as a model wife and citizen, tells Natalie that she loves her husband and that she has "moved past [his] 'problem' because for [her], right now, there is no other way" (Scotch 139). The novel hints that Taylor may not be wholly happy with her marriage. It soon becomes clear, however, that Taylor's primary concern is to look after the support group which she has founded "for women who are dealing with cancer" (Scotch 139). Any difficulty that Taylor experiences in her marriage is made to seem secondary to that goal.

Although Natalie is reluctant to attend Taylor's group, she ultimately comes to respect the woman. As Natalie begins her new relationship with Zach,

she hints in her diary that she will go to work in some capacity for Taylor's cancer organization where, strangely, she hopes to "get back . . . to being a good man" (Scotch 311). Rhetoric of this sort occurs at an earlier point in the novel as well when Natalie affirms that Susanna Taylor *is* "a good man" (Scotch 299). When Natalie uses such language, the reader can interpret the novel as taking a progressive approach to gender. Here again, however, is the disavowal of feminism. Natalie suggests, on the one hand, that women have come to a place where gender inequity has been resolved; however, she leaves her job to join Taylor in a role that restores gender stereotypes since Taylor describes her support group as a place where women can "[shop] and . . . sit around and cry" (Scotch 139). This paradox occurs frequently in chick texts and is one the reasons Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff argue that "positive models of independence and career success are conspicuous by their absence in chick lit" (496). As is the case with the previous texts discussed in this chapter, *TDOLF* ultimately defines the woman with breast cancer as a consuming subject: she is a good female citizen who "gives back" to other members of the community as she shops and is careful not to encroach too far into what has been re-established in the novel as the male-dominated workspace. In this text, the chick learns how to behave appropriately by watching a woman with ties to the political sphere. In a sense, Susanna Taylor is a figure who disciplines the unruly qualities Natalie embodies as a chick: these are depicted in the novel as Natalie putting her own ambitions ahead of those belonging to her male counterparts.

Taylor is a fictional character in a novel but stories of her sort resonate elsewhere in American culture and are part of a master narrative with strong ties to the political arena. In some regards, the fictional depiction of Taylor is similar to the late Elizabeth Edwards who died from metastatic breast cancer in December 2010. Edwards, the wife of Democratic senator and former presidential candidate John Edwards was, like the fictional Taylor, a lawyer and health advocate married to a politician. Like her fictional counterpart, Edwards also had to endure a scandal involving her husband's infidelity. John Edwards' affair with a woman named Rielle Hunter was reported by the media prior to Elizabeth Edwards' death and, since that time, John Edwards has, in addition to being publicly disgraced, faced criminal allegations that he used 1.2 million dollars in campaign funds illegally to hide his affair (Westfall, Cotliar, and McNeil 76). Elizabeth Edwards wrote two memoirs about her and her husband's political lives, both of which also discuss her breast cancer and her relationship with her husband. In her first memoir, *Saving Graces*, published in 2006, Edwards is optimistic that she will survive her cancer and speaks of the ways that her diagnosis helped her and her husband to better comprehend the difficulties that a health crisis can impose on the nuclear family. She writes, for instance, that she and John, despite being lawyers, could not decipher much of the correspondence that they received from their insurance company: as a result, Edwards implies that she and John became more attuned to the difficulties other American people encounter when seeking assistance with medical claims (SG 304).

Edwards' memoir, like Betty Ford's, must be contextualized as part of a system always at work to garner political favour, particularly given the Edwards' aspirations to have John become president. As I have already shown elsewhere, in the United States there is a long history of women with political affiliations being diagnosed with breast cancer and being mythologized by popular media as they cope with the disease. Betty Ford stands out as the most famous case, but Happy Rockefeller who was diagnosed with breast cancer only a few weeks after Ford, is also an example (*The Times of My Life*, Ford 193). Ford was conscious that her diagnosis had prompted other "women [to] go for cancer checkups" (194), but another part of the way she represents her cancer experience is by stressing that she refused to let it get in the way of her political duties: as she is quick to point out in her memoir, on the day before her mastectomy she attended "ground-breaking ceremonies . . . [and] invited Lady Bird and the girls and their husbands to come for tea at the White House" (183). "In between," remarks Ford, "I made a speech at a luncheon for the Salvation Army" (183). Likewise, Edwards works to "encourage women to get the mammogram [she] had not gotten for too many years," and does so by participating in "interviews about the breast cancer with Katie Couric and Larry King" (SG 308). As politician's wives, Ford and Edwards help to construct a representation of the ideal breast cancer subject as someone who continues to do her work on behalf of others unfailingly, even after she is diagnosed with the disease. For women associated with the political sphere, this work takes place in upper-class society—although her good acts are visible to all classes by virtue of the publicity she receives.

As the wife of a politician, Edwards is a figurehead who models the rules of citizenship which other women are encouraged to follow: these rules, which invariably link consumption to public service, echo across multiple media in popular culture. When, in 2009 Elizabeth Edwards appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to promote what would be her final memoir *Resilience*, Edwards clarified that, as of 2007, her cancer had metastasized and was now terminal. It was during this interview, portions of which were included in the June 2009 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, that Edwards also commented on her husband's affair. When Winfrey asked Edwards what she planned to do about her husband's infidelity, the latter responded somewhat tellingly that she hoped her family could "come out of it . . . so [they] could keep [their] story" ("The O Interview," Edwards 150-155). Significantly, Edwards's interview with Winfrey took place in the Edwards family's conspicuously expensive yet traditionally-styled home which Elizabeth Edwards claims to have designed "with [her] kids in mind" ("The O Interview," Edwards 150-155) (see Fig. 19). Indeed, at the time of this writing, images of the home continue to be featured prominently on Winfrey's website.²⁴ Such a setting emphasizes Edwards' success as a mother and consumer and is coded to deliver a particular message. According to Negra, one of postfeminism's "master narratives" is that of the woman who "comes home" (5). In addition to supplying a particular narrative which "operates as a powerful device for

²⁴ See Oprah.com which includes a link to a page which includes several photographs of the Edwards' "sprawling home near Chapel Hill, North Carolina" ("Inside the Edwards Home").

shepherding women out of the public sphere” (5), Negra notes that “Postfeminist culture places a premium on showplace domesticity, with the achievement of a comfortable domestic life also a marker of personal virtue” (128). By accentuating her own success as a wife and homemaker, Edwards draws on socially-sanctioned heteronormative values to position herself as superior to the so-called, morally ambiguous “other woman.” Yet, as I have also shown, part of the way she makes this point is by referring back to her duty to serve the public as a health advocate; thus, her focus on home as a space which signifies her success is also inextricably related to the work she does to achieve health reform and to her own breast cancer. Edwards clearly aims to represent herself as a devoted and long-suffering spouse because, in her final memoir, she remains concerned about “fixing a [health] system that does not work for too many of us” (*Resilience* 161). Edwards’ self depiction as a model wife and mother who remains committed to the good of her fellow citizens despite her personal hardships and troubled marriage echoes what is found in both fictional and nonfictional texts about women with breast cancer.

The Elizabeth Edwards example reveals that those same ideals, fantasies, and tensions which in one instance shape romantic fiction also shape female identity as it gets expressed within the American political sphere and, by extension, in life writing which comes from that arena. Irrespective of whether or not Scotch was thinking of any particular person or persons as she wrote her novel, the similarities between Susanna Taylor and Elizabeth Edwards suggest

something significant.²⁵ The point is that Scotch and Edwards both aim to represent a gender ideal: the upper-class woman who unfailingly works to preserve a troubled marriage (a sacrifice of the self) so that she might help other women with cancer while also redeeming her husband. Elizabeth Edwards attempts to represent herself this way, while the fictional Taylor is depicted as such by Scotch—though what is important to recognize here is that Taylor is not a chick per se. In *TDOLF*, her role is to guide the chick protagonist: she influences Natalie by showing her how to become a subject who is willing to conform to a more traditional set of gender rules. Taylor is still a subject of postfeminism who represents an ideal recognizable in mainstream culture broadly: that is, Taylor is a repudiation of the woman who represents the stereotypical too aggressive feminist figure.

However, each of the chick texts I have discussed becomes complex at this juncture. *TDOLF* comes close to affirming what it is that Taylor stands for when it ends with the suggestion that Natalie will follow in Taylor's footsteps. Still, with this outcome not quite fully confirmed, Natalie may yet choose another option. To some extent, Dana Fairbanks' outcome is also ambiguous: although her story ends with the suggestion that she will dedicate herself to breast cancer charity work, the extent to which she will be willing to work as a socialite is never known because she dies. Samantha Jones also leaves the audience with a series of

²⁵ To be clear, *TDOLF* includes a standard disclaimer stating that “any [character's] resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental” (*TDOLF*).

unknowns: she departs *SATC* in Smith's embrace, though not married or engaged to him. These examples help to show why it is that chick culture can be understood as a site of struggle, as a site where complex debates over female conduct are being enacted on the chick's body. The types of texts which are produced by women who belong to chick culture variably aim to navigate the complex gender rules imposed by the heteronormative and neo-liberal social order of which figureheads such as Elizabeth Edwards are a significant part.

By now I have begun to show that the chick is manifestation of a struggle over what constitutes appropriate female conduct during and around the time of the postfeminist decade: in other words, the chick is a subject under duress. I have also begun to show that some of the patterns found in chick culture have ties to auto/biographical narratives. In the final example which I discuss in this chapter, it is possible to see the figure of the chick surfacing in an autobiographical text found in mainstream media where she attempts to navigate constraints imposed on her. Along such lines, Smith and Watson remind that "when we read or listen to autobiographical narratives, we need to attend to methods of self-examination, introspection, and remembering encoded in them through generic conventions" (*Reading* 91). By doing so, it becomes apparent that "the [life] narrator interrogates cultural forms of knowledge valued at the historical moment of writing" (*Reading* 91). The final section shows that although chick culture is rife with constraints and unknowns, life narrators can establish a point of identification with it—chicks are enormously popular after all—to broaden the rules which govern the normative social order. This does not solve all the

problems which normativity perpetuates, but it does help to show that chick culture is a site of potential.

The Auto/biographical Chick and Bending the Rules

In March, 2010, TLC's popular makeover program *What Not To Wear* (*WNTW*) aired an episode entitled "Sara" in which the program hosts gave style advice to Sara Jordan, a young breast cancer survivor and ordinary middle-class woman. Prior to discussing the episode featuring Jordan, a short overview of the ways in which *WNTW*—which is currently heading into its final season set to air in August, 2013—structures each of its episodes will be useful. Each week hosts Stacy London and Clinton Kelly make over a different participant who has been nominated by friends or family on the grounds that she or he is in dire need of a transformation. In addition to the usual information the audience is given about each guest—generally something about the person's profession, life partner if one exists, and whether or not there are children—some sort of crisis is also revealed as having taken place in each participant's life. This life-changing event might be something like a career difficulty, a divorce, or the death of a loved one. In exchange for a five-thousand-dollar shopping spree, each participant agrees to allow London and Kelly to dispose of her existing wardrobe—a process which involves the participant's willingness to withstand a well-intentioned, if not scathing, verbal flogging for past fashion transgressions—and then to follow the hosts' prescriptive shopping "rules" while selecting a new wardrobe. Each participant also receives a professional make-up application and hairstyle: along

with these, she (or sometimes he) receives a good deal of pseudo-psychology because the hosts are adept at linking the participant's need for an enhanced life to the consumption of nicer clothes.

As the *WNTW* episode featuring Jordan begins, details about her past are revealed in a voiceover supplied by Kelly who introduces "Sara" as "a 28-year-old hardworking mom, who like many women constantly struggled with her weight" (00:06). Biographical information of this sort is essential since, as auto/biography scholar Gabriele Helms notes when citing Jane Roscoe, "Audiences [for reality programs] derive . . . pleasure from seeing people like themselves" (47). In Jordan's case, however, the crisis is different from the usual ones experienced by many other guests on the program. Jordan, the audience discovers, is having a difficult time dressing her body, not merely because of an extreme weight loss, but because she also has recently been treated for breast cancer. This grave proclamation is immediately countered by London's upbeat voiceover which confirms that all is well since Jordan "kicked cancer's butt" (01:25). This rhetoric ties Jordan to chick culture. Marchetto's mantra of "kicking cancer's bony butt" registers here (CancerVixenFUNd.org), but the phrase also is repeated in *TDOLF* when Natalie's love interest praises her for her ability to "kick cancer's ass" (208). What the audience next learns is that Jordan underwent a double mastectomy and, despite having the confidence not to have reconstructive surgery—a decision she claims to have made to teach her daughters that beauty is about "who you are on the inside" (00:28)—she is now uncomfortable with her physique. Sara's stance on reconstruction is also

reminiscent of a popular feminist position on the issue, but in a context that is disarticulated from the movement, Jordan seems more like the women in chick fiction who defy convention as they give cancer the ass-kicking it deserves.

Like the women in chick fiction, Jordan is also presented as having a flaw. As more information is provided about her, the audience is encouraged to view Jordan's disinterest in fashion as her failure to perform as a good citizen. After viewing herself in the "secret footage" that *WNTW* producers collected in preparation for the episode, Jordan is made to confess that her insecurities over the way she looks have caused her to avoid attending to her physical appearance, even though she frequently appears before the public as an American Cancer Society volunteer spokesperson. This revelation appears to shock London and Kelly, both of whom insist that Jordan lacks authority in her volunteer role because she often appears in public wearing "matching track suits" (20:13) and "hammer heels" (7:00). London goes so far as to inform Jordan that, with her current wardrobe, she is "giving breast cancer awareness a bad name" (07:22) while Kelly's mocking of Jordan's derided "mom jeans" (07:22) shows that Jordan is not measuring up in her familial duties either. When Jordan suggests that too great a preoccupation on her part with wardrobe might signal to others that she is vain, London tells her that it is her duty to "boast" so that she "can save someone else's life" (16:38). London and Kelly make it clear that, as a cancer survivor, Sara is obliged to inspire other American women with her cancer story; however, they emphasize that this endeavour will only succeed if Jordan dresses in the right clothes. Jordan's existing wardrobe is an affront, but with a new one,

she can be the right kind of breast cancer representative at the American Cancer society functions she attends.

Nothing much has changed here. Similar to each of the other texts I have discussed in this chapter, *WNTW* presents the good female citizen as a woman who consumes. In these texts, women with breast cancer are presented as having a particular set of responsibilities which necessitate consumption—while women generally are targeted as consumers, women with breast cancer in particular are charged with the burden of saving other women's lives through their consumption. Jordan (and almost every other participant on the program) is presented as an average woman, but the program makes it clear that average women still have a duty to purchase responsibly. What the program teaches middle-class women to do is to replicate the lifestyles represented on programs like *The L Word* and *SATC*. Although *WNTW* does not work with high-end designer-name fashions like GUCCI—a factor which invites middle-class viewers to see the clothes on the program as within their reach—a deconstruction of the makeover experience shows that women are still expected to put a significant amount of money into the process of looking good. To summarize, the sort of wardrobe that makes it possible for Jordan to claim the rights of citizenship is one which costs five thousand dollars. However, the five thousand dollars *WNTW* provides for clothing does not take into account what a fashion consultation with London and Kelly would cost another woman not featured on the program, nor does it figure in the price of the beauty services Jordan receives which, in this instance, involve a professional hairstyle and makeup application. While the

amount of these services is never discussed on the program, a viewer wishing to book a basic haircut with *WNTW*'s "celebrity" hairstylist Ted Gibson will pay \$1250.00 (Ted Gibson) while a consultation with the program's make-up artist Carmindy costs \$1000.00 payable in "cash only" (Carmindy). These costs are, perhaps, within the reach of some middle-class consumers—but they are still significant and still high enough to exclude many women. Based on what this program teaches its viewers, women who cannot afford these expenses cannot claim the full rights of citizenship.

Despite this problem, Jordan manages to achieve something important by appearing on this program. As Jordan completes the makeover process, she rewrites her life story to become a part of a larger group of women who are targeted by consumer culture. This is London's point when she declares that the self-contempt Jordan feels about her breastless body is the same sort of insecurity "all women suffer from" (29:25). According to London, the crisis Jordan is ultimately experiencing has little to do with her mastectomy and more to do with "a deep seated body self-consciousness" (28:35) which many women experience as a result of living in a culture that views an idealized version of the female body as the norm. When Jordan hears from London that "everyone has different issues with their body (sic) . . . so we want you to know that [being breastless] is not going to be an issue" (10:00), women who have had mastectomies—or in Jordan's case a bi-lateral mastectomy—are reassured that they can still be recognized as legitimate members of the fashion community; on the program, women come together to share in their realization that fashion culture targets them

unfairly when it presents them with an ideal body of an unattainable size and shape. London leads this movement when she suggests that by carefully selecting and tailoring clothing so that it fits the individual body type, it is possible to better navigate (not avoid) a capitalist system that targets women by pressuring them to achieve an impossible-to-achieve physical ideal. “Our whole argument,” London explains to Jordan, “is [that] you never accept clothing the way you find it [in stores]. You make it your own” (06:15). Thus while it is true that, on the one hand, *WNTW* simply “translate[s] the demands of the neoliberal economy . . . into people’s capacities to carry out the new requirements of work being placed on them” (Ouellette and Hay 100), it is through the unsettling of this arrangement from within the fashion industry that Jordan achieves some validation for choices she has made. Ellen Gorsevski contests that “Fashion has long been used as a tool of ideology and propaganda, especially during wartime” (186). Her comments are of particular interest in this context since, in the episode being analyzed, *WNTW* clearly establishes twenty-first century breast cancer activism as the site of class warfare.

Jordan sustains a feminist critique of mass culture’s tendency to idealize a normative body (though feminism is not a term used on the program) when she refuses to surgically reconstruct her body after her bilateral mastectomy. While Jordan and the program’s hosts also repudiate a feminist position by teaching Jordan to disguise her profile by using clothes designed to “create the visual illusion of some sort of volume at [the] chest” (17:25)—thereby linking Jordan’s newfound empowerment to consumption—the program does nonetheless present

some women with a viable and less costly alternative to painful and risky surgical reconstruction. Indeed, one significant feature of *WNTW* is that its hosts do not have participants undergo plastic surgery or any medically invasive procedures. Where programs such as *The Swan* or *The Biggest Loser* seek to transform and discipline the physical body using violent surgeries or extreme diet and exercise regimens, the hosts of *WNTW* encourage self-acceptance along with the fashion “rules” to present the body at its best. While what happens on reality television is certainly mediated— as Mishka Kavka explains, “the intimacy that arises out of [these] amplified situation[s] is real both for the participants and the viewers” (25)—Jordan’s gratitude at the program’s conclusion appears genuine. It seems clear that the reassurance she has received by appearing on the program and through learning to wear a different style of clothing has been legitimately meaningful to her.

This *WNTW* episode shows how certain tropes associated with women portrayed in chick culture surface in auto/biographical discourse and, finally, how the rhetoric one finds in chick texts is infiltrating the conversation that is taking place about breast cancer in the American mainstream. Jordan is an ordinary woman who goes on to achieve membership in a modified version of the same fashion community populated by glamorous women such as the ones on *SATC* and *The L Word*. I say modified in the sense that she is not working with designer fashions. One of the reasons she needs to situate herself in this fantasy realm is because, as a woman who has survived breast cancer, she has a particular job to do. This job—her work as a cancer spokeswoman—demands she wear stylish

clothes. As a woman feisty enough to kick cancer's ass and who also requires a transformation to atone for her transgressions, Jordan shares some similarities with the subjects of chick fiction. Although there are problems with *WNTW*, particularly the way it develops its own type of middle-class hierarchy, there is potential here as well. Jordan assumes an identity that is popular and by doing so participates in a cultural fantasy while still using auto/biographical discourse to reconcile normative culture's demands on her—something that becomes apparent when she uses the program to legitimize her decision not to have reconstructive surgery after her bilateral mastectomy. As I begin to show in the next chapter, the authors of sick lit use the life-writing process to (re)invent themselves after illness thereby reclaiming some of the agency that being diagnosed with breast cancer and forced into a confrontation with mortality might otherwise strip away. With what remains of this dissertation, I now turn to analyzing the works of sick lit themselves, and to exploring how the authors who use this particular approach to narrate their illness experiences are similarly embroiled in the struggle for legitimacy.

Chapter Three

Sick lit and Its Material Practices: Author Agency in the Context of Postfeminism and the Chick Culture Craze

In the not-too-distant past, women who wrote breast cancer memoirs and their publishers could draw upon feminism to achieve credibility for their works. Although feminism has always been controversial, it is generally acknowledged that during the latter decades of the twentieth century, “The Women’s Movement . . . receiv[ed] increased attention from politicians, the media, employers and educators” (O’Shea 347) as its members initiated needed reforms to healthcare. Thus Betty Rollin’s *First, You Cry* (1976) and Joyce Wadler’s *My Breast* (1992)—breast cancer memoirs which, due to their authors’ uses of humour and emphases on romance might be considered precursors to sick lit—are enclosed in covers featuring blurbs written by prominent feminist role models. Rollin’s memoir includes a blurb by Betty Friedan while one of the blurbs on the 1994 and 1997 editions of Wadler’s *My Breast* is written by Gloria Steinem. Although a feminist influence is becoming less easy to perceive within the works themselves by the time Wadler publishes *My Breast*, feminism clearly helped women to write about the social issues they encountered after they were diagnosed with this disease between 1970 and the mid-1990s approximately.

Christina Scharff is among the critics who note the “forceful and hostile rejections of feminism” which happen toward the end of the twentieth century and beyond (3). When Scharff interviewed forty European women in an “attempt to understand the affective nature of engagements with feminism” (3), she found that

although women “want to be treated equally and are aware of gender inequalities [within western culture broadly],” they are “reluctant to claim feminism” (Scharff 1). Although Scharff’s study is European, what she says also applies to the United States. Here Debra Baker Beck attributes this shift to mainstream media’s negative depiction of feminists when she suggests that around 1989, American women started to become more hesitant to identify with the movement (140). She cites media studies research by Pamela Creedon who, in 1993, shows that popular media “consistently framed [feminists] as deviant sexually [and as] a bunch of man-haters out to destroy ‘family values’” (qtd. in Beck 143). Thus the ideology during the postfeminist decade which becomes dominant stresses that the women’s movement has done its work and is therefore no longer necessary. Nonetheless, it is still the case that almost every woman who creates a breast cancer narrative claims to have encountered some type of gender-based disparity while ill. This contradiction manifests itself in women’s life writing with works that begin establish a distance from feminism. Again, this latter statement pertains to breast cancer narratives written for mainstream audiences since narratives written by and for feminists and published for feminist presses have retained their feminist vocabulary.

Given this disparity, it is not a surprise that chick culture and the texts that comprise it emerge as the site of women’s ambiguously stated retorts to the established social order. Nor is it a surprise that the paratexts which authorize breast cancer narratives begin to feature references to recognizable personalities like the women on *Sex and the City* (*SATC*) who stand in as role models for

writers and readers of these works. Cathy Bueti's *Breastless in the City: A Young Woman's Story of Love, Loss and Breast Cancer (Breastless)* and Geralyn Lucas's *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy (WIWL)* are both accompanied by paratexts which invite readers to compare the authors to characters from the television program *SATC*. The title of Bueti's memoir is an obvious appropriation of the title belonging to the iconic television program. This intertextual moment is reinforced by a blurb on the inside flap of *Breastless*'s dust jacket which states that "when it comes to dating, Carrie Bradshaw has nothing on Cathy Bueti."²⁶ Likewise, Geralyn Lucas's memoir also includes a reference to a *SATC* personality on its cover, this time in the form of a blurb authored by actress Kim Cattrall. Cattrall, who played Samantha Jones on HBO's *SATC* and in the subsequent motion-picture sequels which followed the television series, endorses Lucas's memoir, stating "I played [having breast cancer], Geralyn lived it. Read this book and you'll never wear lipstick the same way again."²⁷

The work of this chapter is to show that these young women can work with this chick genre of life writing to achieve material and psychological benefits after they have been diagnosed with breast cancer during or around the postfeminist decade, a time when it is not appropriate to self identify as a feminist

²⁶ The reference to Carrie Bradshaw is located on the second edition of *Breastless in the City* published by Kaplan Publishing. All direct quotations from *Breastless in the City* are taken from this edition unless otherwise noted in the parenthetical documentation.

²⁷ Direct quotations from *Why I Wore Lipstick to my Mastectomy* are taken from the hardcover edition published by St. Martin's Press in 2004.

or with what have traditionally been feminism's causes. Respectively, Bueti and Lucas write sick lit to facilitate personal healing through, in effect, positioning themselves within the conversation that is taking place in mainstream culture about breast cancer. The first way each author does this is by participating in the autobiographical practice of confessing her transgressions. While the confession is, to some extent, socially imposed, it is also her first step to declaring herself as part of a community. After I show how each of these memoirists is redeemed by the charity work she does on behalf of women with breast cancer, I show how her work as an author facilitates belonging and citizenship in broader and important ways. From this point, I also discuss the ways her work as a sick-lit author takes on political significance, particularly as it pertains to the subjectivities of young women. The political significance of each writer's work is often realized by a study of its paratexts. Paratexts reflect social preoccupations at work during the time of a text's publication and it is in them that the authors' repudiation or upholding of feminism is often also perceived. Thus throughout this chapter I will shift between analyses of the memoirs' paratexts and contents to explore how these postfeminist women achieves agency through writing what has traditionally been a genre of protest. Since Bueti and Lucas are both involved in breast cancer charities or foundations, I will end by commenting on what the writers' relationships to philanthropy indicate about the subject position of contemporary young women who experience breast cancer and, by doing so, move away from subjecting the works to a polarizing analysis which merely sees each as either endorsing or repudiating feminism.

For instance, references on these sick-lit memoirs are an obvious strategy undertaken by publishers to market these works by attaching them to a media sensation. The frequency with which marketers have used references to *SATC* to entice people to purchase products is something Stephanie Harzewski comments upon when she writes that “it is difficult to identify a consumer or media area that [*Sex and the City*] has not permeated” (*Chick Lit* 97). Beyond this, however, references to these texts can stand in as a feminist subtext: for some women, Carrie and her group represent feminist ideas even if the f-word itself does not get used to describe them. Beck believes that many “American women support the basic concepts of feminism, [even though] they tend to shy away from the feminist label” (140). This absence of feminist discourse does not mean that many women do not believe in what feminism stands for in the popular sense of believing women deserve equitable treatment. This raises the possibility that the references to *SATC* on the cover can stand in for what has, in the past, been popular feminism. Astrid Henry, for instance, believes that “In many ways, *Sex and the City* has functioned as a forum about women’s sexuality as it has been shaped by the feminist movement of the last 30 years” (“Orgasms and Empowerment” 66). She contends that with its four protagonists, *SATC* “provides four different perspectives on contemporary women’s lives . . . [all of which] are decidedly feminist, or at least influenced by the women’s movement” (“Orgasms and Empowerment” 67). Specifically, Henry views the program’s positive depiction of female friendship, its reconfiguration of the traditional family through depictions of women who support themselves while choosing not to

marry or have children, and its characters' expressions and enactments of sexual desire, all as outcomes of feminism ("Orgasms and Empowerment" 67). Although Henry also points to the problems of racial inequality, classism and heterosexism that are found in *SATC*, many of the program's viewers saw the characters as defying gender inequity. The *SATC* characters' function as feminist surrogates is substantiated by knowledge that viewers' interests in the characters could remain with the program as opposed to the actresses themselves. According to Hilary Radner, this is especially true of Sarah Jessica Parker who played the program's major protagonist. Radner traces and analyzes the tabloid media's representations of Parker, noting that unlike many other female celebrities whose personal lives are a source of fascination outside their acting roles, the bulk of media and fan attention focused on Parker during her time on *SATC* tied the actress "irrevocably" to Carrie [Bradshaw]" (162). For many people, Carrie, and by extension Parker "represented a democratization of style" because, on the television program in particular, Carrie achieved class mobility in part by dressing in a mix of high-fashion and "flea market" finds (Radner 162). The audience's fascination with this aspect of Carrie's persona reveals their willingness to subscribe to the ideology which flourishes during the postfeminist decade which equates consumption with female empowerment. At the same time, Carrie's ability to supplement her wardrobe with second-hand clothes also gives viewers some recourse against the capitalist society to which they belong and which targets them aggressively as consumers.

Although Cattrall has perhaps not received the same fan following as Parker, viewers have still been encouraged to associate Samantha Jones with certain values and beliefs that reach back to feminism. In *Kiss and Tell*, an episode guide to *Sex and the City*, the writers describe Samantha's response to breast cancer as a response to sexism when stating that "Samantha's outrage [toward the physician who suggested that her cancer was caused by not having children] was the outrage of women everywhere whose choices aren't respected" (Sohn, Parker, Wildman 168). Although the storyline of Samantha's breast cancer is not really made to challenge the commoditization of the disease in an entirely satisfactory way, it is still accurate to say that many viewers interpreted Samantha as refusing to tolerate sexism, particularly during the program's final season when the character is diagnosed with breast cancer.

Cathy Bueti notes that her decision to title her memoir after *SATC* was about more than marketing her book. Bueti states that she drew strength from the *SATC* breast cancer episodes because "as a young, single woman going through it [herself], [she] thought [the program's creators] handled the topic well and portrayed a realistic view of issues such as hair loss and chemo induced menopause" ("Sex and the City 2"). For Bueti, the naming of her memoir after the iconic chick television program was a personal statement. Although her views on *SATC* would change—a point I will return to at the end of this dissertation—at the time that the episodes first aired, Bueti found she could identify with Samantha's approach to the side effects of cancer treatment and their impact on her personal life. As will be discussed shortly, Bueti's publishers sought to

market her book with paratexts that accentuate the work's intertextuality. In a sense, this situation can be explained with a reference to auto/biography theorist Gillian Whitlock who uses the term " 'minority' genre" to refer to life narratives by "those who struggle for cultural authority" (17). Minority genres rely heavily on their paratexts which include "endorsements and authorizations in the form of introductions, prefaces, appendixes, and blurbs [all of which] guide the reception of the text" (Whitlock 20). Previously, I demonstrated that *The L Word's* paratexts was designed to invite prospective viewers to compare the program to *SATC* both as a form of ironic commentary and to market a television drama which depicted a group of women who did not self identify as heterosexual. Interestingly, others who have "appropriated" *SATC's* title to attract viewers include the creators of reality programs such as *Single in the City* and *Amish in the City* (*Chick Lit*, Harzewski 97). Both of these programs' titles refer to persons who occupy an outsider position in mainstream culture.

Intertextual references to *SATC* are perhaps less pronounced on the cover of Geralyn Lucas's *Why I Wore Lipstick to my Mastectomy*. The blurb by Cattrall is on the back cover where, though still prominent, it exists as one of many. The reference to *SATC* on Lucas's book refers to the program's breast cancer episodes, but with its reference to lipstick, it connects the disease to the glamour which the actresses have come to represent. Like Buetti, Geralyn Lucas has been quick to claim an association with chick culture. Lisa Fickenscher cites Lucas as informing readers that although "[her] book is about breast cancer, it's almost chick lit" (6). Here Lucas seems to reassure her audience that even though her

book is about cancer, it will still be a fun and entertaining text to read. This latter statement brings me to the reasons I consider sick lit to be a minority memoir. Many of the women who write sick lit—Bueti and Lucas among them—claim that as young women with breast cancer, they had fewer social supports within the health system than the more mature women with whom the disease is typically associated. Lisa Cox Hall who conducted a qualitative study to determine how women perceive the media’s depiction of breast cancer found that “thirty year olds [tended to believe] . . . that the media does not do enough. That is, the media (referred to broadly as magazines, television, and the journalists and celebrities who represented breast cancer) gave too little information on breast cancer in general, and on young (‘under 40’) women with breast cancer, specifically” (9). Trends in women’s cancer writing reveal that a ready market exists for narratives by a younger demographic. Kris Carr’s *Crazy Sexy Cancer Tips* and Kairol Rosenthal’s *Everything Changes: The Insider’s Guide to Cancer in your 20s and 30s* are part their authors’ life stories and part self help. These works, though not about breast cancers exclusively, are by writers who claim that younger women experience a different set of challenges than do more mature women when diagnosed. These challenges include everything from finding trendy clothes to wear, to continuing to date and to have sex, to managing work obligations, all while undergoing cancer treatment.

Young women who write memoirs can find it difficult to be taken seriously in other ways as well. G. Thomas Couser implies that sexism and reverse ageism underpins what he refers to as “the backlash against [the memoir

boom]” (SB 2). In Couser’s view, part of the reason for this backlash is that many contemporary memoirs are authored by “young, female, and highly educated” writers (*Memoir 2*). What I believe Couser is implying here is that the types of matters which are of concern to some women in this age group—subjects like shopping and dating—are not considered worthy literary topics by some who regard themselves as serious readers. Bueti indirectly admits her status as a “nobody writer” when she reveals that *Breastless* was rejected numerous times by publishers who informed her that “medical memoirs were a hard sell” (Goldman). Indeed, “nobody memoirs”—a term used by Couser to refer to memoirs by authors previously unknown—“[must] create their readership from scratch by means of marketing, reviews, and word of mouth” (SB 1). As I will discuss eventually, Lucas’s memoir has circulated widely in prestigious circles; however, she also is an unknown author whose success is certainly due in part to the fact that she is working in media culture and is thus positioned within media culture already. If these factors were not enough evidence that young women encounter sexism and reverse ageism when they attempt to speak about this disease or any other serious matter, there is also considerable debate over what it is that a women with breast cancer—and subsequently women who write about having breast cancer—are supposed to do and say. Although Bueti and Lucas manage to write memoirs which have done well—Lucas’s in particular—they have attracted their share of criticism that is quite personal in nature. Cari B. Clark, a reader who reviewed *WIWL* on Amazon.com, describes Lucas as “self-absorbed and whiny” while Pattib refers to her as “superficial and egocentric.” Bueti is described on

Amazon.com by one reader as “functionally illiterate” (DebbieD) and Bette Lee Fox writes in an edition the *Library Journal* that “the humour that might have made this text palatable or inspirational is sorely lacking” (92). I cite these negative responses to these memoirs, not because they are representative of responses to the works overall—indeed, the number of four and of five star responses to the memoirs on Amazon.com outweigh reviews which give one or two stars— but because they depict the sort of personalized assaults which young women writers who belong to chick culture can face.²⁸ Ferris and Young, for example, have documented how established and respected authors such as Doris Lessing and Beryl Bainbridge deride chick lit (*Chick Lit* 1-2). Along similar lines, Elizabeth Merrick writes that “Chick lit’s formula numbs our senses” (ix). Merrick does not consider chick lit to be literature but states, instead, that it “reduces the complexity of human experience” (ix). Yet, clearly, the women who write in these chick genres are gaining something in the process. While financial remuneration is part of what is gained in some instances, I want to suggest that, as life narrators, sick-lit writers gain other benefits from writing these memoirs as well.

²⁸ Bueti’s *Breastless in the City* has, at the time of this writing in July 2013, a total of ten customer reviews on Amazon.com. Eight of the reviews give the book five out of five stars, while one gives it a four-star rating. Only one reviewer gives the work one star. *Why I Wore Lipstick to my Mastectomy* has received far more attention from consumers. This memoir has received 40 customer reviews with 30 of these giving the text a five-star ranking. In addition, four consumers gave the book four stars with the remainder of reviews split between one and two-star ratings.

A Word on Chick Culture and the Confession

Sick lit's particular brand of generic hybridism (a type of life narrative that is marketed as a product of chick culture) helps to explain the emphasis on confession which can be perceived in *Breastless* and *WIWL*. In the wake of Sophie Kinsella's extraordinarily popular *Confessions of a Shopaholic*—a chick-lit novel which has grown into a bestselling series—a number of chick-lit writers have built the term into the titles of their works: Cathy Yardley mentions several including Michelle Cunnah's *Confessions of a Serial Dater* (194), Adèle Lang's *Confessions of a Sociopathic Social Climber* (129) and Swan Adamson's *Confessions of a Pregnant Princess* (200). *The Confessions of St. Augustine* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* are canonical texts often studied by autobiography scholars. For the purposes of this project, it is more useful to note some titles of contemporary memoirs which also resonate as chick. Jill Smokler's *Confessions of a Scary Mommy: An Honest and Irreverent Look at Motherhood—the Good, the Bad and the Scary* is the author's confession that she finds motherhood difficult while A.J. Rochester's *Confessions of a Reformed Dieter: How I Dropped 8 Dress Sizes and Took My Life Back* is the writer's story of her battle to lose weight. It is these works' paratexts which first announce them as chick. In the late 1980s, Rita Felski noted that the feminist confession "is often marketed in such a way as to foreground the persona of an author" (84). I have already noted elsewhere certain distinguishing semiotics found on the covers of chick texts including images of the metropolis, shoes, purses, or women's fashionably-clad torsos (see Fig. 21). In terms of the text's content, Felski

identified “feminist confessional literature [as] explicitly seek[ing] to disclose the most intimate and often traumatic details of the author’s life and to elucidate their broader implications” (83). In chick culture, the subject of autobiography, and of fiction, has to overcome what is often her inability to measure up to prescribed gender rules—a factor made apparent by the titles of all the women’s texts listed in this paragraph thus far, whether fiction or autobiography. Although Bueti and Lucas, the authors studied in this chapter, do not title their works using the word confession, their narratives follow a similar pattern. Indeed, both of these young women are self presented and represented as needing to overcome insecurity and self doubt to deal with their breast cancer crises successfully.

When Felski did her work on confession, she referred primarily to works published in the 1970s and 1980s; at the time, what interested Felski was “a consideration of the logic of confessional discourse as such in relation to its recent appropriation by the women’s movement” (83). Because of this appropriation, Felski found that “feminist confession is less concerned with unique individuality or notions of essential humanity than with delineating the specific problems and experiences which bind women together” (85). Although sick-lit writers are clearly influenced by postfeminism and neo-liberal ideologies which privilege the individual as opposed to the collective, these women can also be concerned about addressing a problem which binds a particular community of women together. As I began to show when discussing Sara Jordan’s work on *WNTW*, women can take up aspects of a chick identity and use them to renegotiate the increased pressure they are experiencing to undergo violent and costly beauty procedures. Jordan

does this when she uses the makeover program as a platform to discuss reconstruction: although she first must confess her fashion transgressions, she can, from there, show that women who have not undergone reconstructive surgeries can still belong to the fashion community. The sick-lit writer can also do this work of using the confession to construct a subject position around which a group or groups can organize: this process of belonging can facilitate the writer's healing of the self and, in some instances, can be used to generate an effective social critique.

*From Confession to Community to Echoes of Feminism in Cathy Bueti's
Breastless in the City*

Cathy Bueti's *Breastless in the City* is a confessional narrative in which the author depicts her life as a single woman whose quest for romance is complicated when she is diagnosed with breast cancer. Her narrative commences with an account of the years leading up to her illness which include sharing with readers that she is the daughter of an alcoholic father, and that she fears intimacy as a result. Her first confession is that she and her first husband Paul did not consummate their marriage. The guilt Bueti feels about this is compounded when Paul is killed in an automobile accident. Bueti's cancer diagnosis happens five years later, just at the point when she has determined that she is ready emotionally to have a relationship again. Despite the change to her health status, Bueti continues with her plan to join an online dating service and, by doing so, initiates relationships with several men. Since her earliest interactions with these men take

place over the internet and by telephone, she is able to forestall telling them about her breast cancer. The bulk of her memoir is her confessions regarding the disappointing relationships she has with these potential mates. Some of the men Bueti meets through the dating service terminate contact with her after they learn she has cancer, while others exploit her. After several negative experiences, Bueti begins to assume that breast cancer has left her undesirable and, for a time, she remains in a relationship with an abusive man because she believes “nobody” else could want her (183). After much soul searching, Bueti determines that she will “be honest with anyone she [meets] in an attempt to weed out any guys who couldn’t handle what [she] was going through” (207). When Bueti meets Lou, the man she eventually marries, she resolves to tell him about her cancer “that first night” (207). Her honesty is rewarded because Lou turns out to be “very nice” (207) and the two become involved in a relationship which soon leads to marriage.

The title of Bueti’s memoir is, as I have previously noted, a way for her to signal her appreciation for a popular narrative which helped her to cope with her own cancer diagnosis and treatment. When Cleveland Clinic Press, “a small one-year-old [publisher of] medical guides” (Bueti, Interview with Rosenthal) agreed to publish *Breastless* in 2006, its design staff worked to attract a readership for the memoir by further accentuating the connection to *SATC* which Bueti had already started to create. In its first edition, Bueti’s distinctive title appears in a feminized-pink cursive font which is superimposed onto a photograph of a young man and woman sharing a kiss over a cityscape (See Fig. 1). While these images were,

from the start, reminiscent of those found in chick culture, Bueti notes that the “small press” which first published her work did not help her to distribute and disseminate the text (Bueti, Interview with Rosenthal). As a result, Bueti was disappointed when only eight hundred copies of her memoir sold in two years (Bueti, Interview with Rosenthal). Part of the reason for the limited sales is that the first edition’s paratext targets both a medical audience and an audience of young women. The romantic image on the cover along with its title is at odds with some of the other paratext within and on the Cleveland edition which often focuses on the hospital as opposed to Bueti. As a result, the first edition of *Breastless* conveys a distinctly medicalized tone with paratexts that include blurbs about the skilled surgeons at Cleveland Clinic Hospital and the institution’s medical logo which is displayed quite prominently on the back cover. These clinical signifiers are at odds with the pretty, overly romantic image and rhetoric found elsewhere on the cover.

After Cleveland Press was acquired by the larger, more commercially successful Kaplan Publishing, *Breastless in the City* was released in a second revised edition in 2009 which its new publishers reworked so the book’s connection to chick culture was further intensified. In addition to the prominent title, the book’s inside cover conspicuously proclaims that “When it comes to dating, Carrie Bradshaw has nothing on Cathy Bueti” (inside cover). The slim, elegant woman pictured in the caricature on the cover is dashing somewhere in the metropolis: viewers know the woman is in a hurry because she is looking at her watch. The “cartoon,” as Joanna Webb Johnson confirms, is standard fare on

the chick-lit cover (152). To further emphasize the intertextuality that is taking place here, the Kaplan cover of *Breastless* can be compared to one of many editions of Allison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It: The Life of Kate Reddy, Working Mother* (See Fig. 22 and Fig. 23). This latter mentioned cover of what has become an important chick-lit novel for the way it "effectively mirrors the anxieties many middle-class women experience surrounding motherhood" (Hewett 130), also features a cartoon-image of a fashionable woman carrying a briefcase and running while wearing stilettos, this time superimposed onto an alarm clock. The echoes between the two works only continue. When Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* was adapted for a Hollywood film, it was Sarah Jessica Parker who played the lead protagonist. After Parker was chosen to play in the American adaptation of the well-known British mommy-lit novel, the text was reissued in an edition which featured on its cover a photograph of Parker balancing a briefcase, cellular phone, tablet, and diaper bag. Parker is stylishly dressed and a cityscape is seen in the background (See Fig. 24). The point is that these chick images continue to overlap and reinforce one another and, in the case of *Breastless*, invite readers to expect similarities between Bueti and Parker/Bradshaw.

The postfeminist subject of sick lit is consistently marketed by publishers in ways that emphasize she has learned a much-needed moral lesson which she can share with other women. Consequently, *Breastless's* new cover also reinforced to an extreme degree the belief that women necessarily have something to atone for, and that achieving a successful femininity is an ongoing project.

Medical imagery and discourse which objectifies Bueti on the Cleveland edition is replaced by paratexts which includes a blurb from *Women's World* magazine: this latter mentioned states that Bueti's memoir "shows other young women how they can cope with loss – of love, of a breast, of whatever matters most," while the inside flap of the new dust jacket (directly under the prominent statement about Bradshaw) reads that Bueti encountered "one Mr. Wrong after another" but that ultimately, she "[came] to terms with what was really keeping her from finding love." In the context of chick culture, these messages all coalesce. As Jane Arthurs has identified, HBO's *SATC* actually manages to "dramatize the kind of consumer and sexual advice offered by women's magazines" (90); consequently, Bradshaw's name on this cover prepares readers for the discourse of confession and subsequent theme of self improvement. Here it bears noting that the blurb on Bueti's monograph resembles any number of other ones found on chick lit. For example, a review provided by a writer for *Glamour* to celebrate the launch of the 10th Anniversary edition of Jennifer Weiner's chick-lit novel *Good in Bed* applauds Weiner's "fresh, funny look at a woman who conquers her obsession with food, figure, family, and finding a nice Jewish boy" (blurb). While this type of upbeat paratext is in its own way condescending, it does effectively lessen the hegemonic presence of the medical institution on Bueti's text. Although Bueti's revised memoir retains the same physician foreword found in the first edition, medical discourse and imagery no longer dominate *Breastless* quite so much. This is a significant departure from what happens with some women's medical memoirs such as Rose Kushner's *Breast Cancer* where the physician speaks over

the patient. Consequently, one of chick culture's potentials is its capacity to reduce the medical institution's presence on the narrative.

This example only just begins to show how hegemonic institutions guide the production of these memoirs by young female authors who are writing about being diagnosed with breast cancer. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe in some detail the process by which “people are coaxed or coerced into ‘getting a life’” (*Reading* 64). In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson use the term “coaxer/coercer,” a term they borrow from Ken Plummer, when discussing “any person or institution or set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell their stories” (*Reading* 64). During an interview with Kairol Rosenthal, Bueti discloses the role that her agent and publisher has played in coaxing her life story into a marketable form: when Kaplan took over the publication of her memoir, Bueti states she was told to include “more scenes, background info, dialogue, and content about [her] life after cancer” (Bueti, Interview with Rosenthal). What this advice prompts Bueti to do is emphasize the confessional aspects of the text. This does not mean that Bueti does not confess in the first text as well. Still, the changes she makes to *Breastless*—though subtle—work by emphasizing those “intimate and often traumatic details” Felski associates with confession in ways that accentuate what the reader is to identify as the flawed thinking Bueti must overcome (83).

Although Bueti does not specify to Rosenthal which portions of her text she was advised to change, the revisions she makes are often ones which emphasize her anxieties over body image after her mastectomy, particularly as

these pertain to her worries that the loss of a breast will make it more difficult for her to be loved by a man. Conversely, she deemphasizes other moments in the text which are not essential to the concerns she has about her romantic life. In the Cleveland edition, Bueti includes an anecdote during which she depicts the incontinence she experiences while in hospital after undergoing her mastectomy. Here Bueti recalls that, for several days after surgery, she was unable to have bowel movement. When Bueti's gastrointestinal system finally began to work again, she experienced "such a bad bout of the runs, [she] was afraid [she'd] overflow the commode bucket" (55). This event takes place as Bueti was receiving company in her hospital room: as she is forced into her washroom for a prolonged period, she is aware that she is "creating quite a stink in the room" (55). Bueti writes that she could not have felt "more embarrassed" and refers to the instance as "another bitter taste of what it's like to be a patient" (55). Her choice to include this anecdote in the first edition of her memoir is important because it produces dialogue about the loss of bodily control that leaves many people feeling isolated and ashamed while ill. Disability studies scholar Cindy LaCom who suffers from Crohn's Disease explains that people are generally made uncomfortable with any discussion of symptoms related to incontinence: any mention of "shit," LaCom states bluntly, produces "verbal constipation" (n.p.). Couser describes what LaCom experiences when he explains how people who have been diagnosed with a serious illness such as cancer "are required to account for [their bodies] (*SB* 17): it is through the reactions of those around them that people who are ill or disabled learn the parameters of what constitutes

acceptable narration. When symptoms defy articulation because they produce a negative reaction from the listener, the narrator becomes alienated and knowledge of a particular illness becomes very compartmentalized. This is what happens to LaCom when she learns that much of mainstream culture prefers that she articulate a particular version of her illness that excludes any mention of her incontinence. Her acquaintances' general unwillingness to bear witness to her pain produces a significant barrier to her. This is why, initially, it is important that Bueti shares an unpleasant post-operative experience: by doing so, she makes a space to talk about a cancer experience that might otherwise be considered too shameful to discuss.

The subtraction of the commode anecdote from the revised version of *Breastless* reminds us that “cultural discourses determine which aspects of bodies become meaningful” (*Reading*, Smith and Watson 50). Whatever reason Bueti had for downplaying this event in her second edition, the decision to reduce certain emphases while adding to others suggests that knowledge about the body is always partial. Bueti's wish to construct an account of breast cancer that is also about romance means that she moves away from prolonged graphic depictions of certain symptoms or side effects which do not fit with stories about dating. Instead, she must lean more toward conversations about the cosmetic issues associated with breast cancer. In the second edition of *Breastless*, Bueti strengthens her focus on those parts of her cancer experience which can be tied to her romantic life and her fear that, after a mastectomy, she is not going to be able to attract a mate. For example, a pivotal moment in many breast cancer memoirs

takes place when the narrator must face the results of either her lumpectomy or mastectomy. Bueti, who opts to undergo a mastectomy and reconstruction simultaneously, experiences anxiety in this regard. In the Cleveland version of *Breastless*, descriptions of this revelation are succinct. When Bueti removes her hospital gown to look at her newly reconstructed breast, she is disturbed because she has “no nipple” and because “the mound looked like a hard rock that was stuck to [her] chest” (57). The incision which stretches “right below [her] belly button, going from one hip to the other” also disturbs her, prompting her to cry “What a mess!” (57).

In the Kaplan edition, Bueti rewrites this moment in a way that prolongs the critique she makes of her surgically altered body. When adding to this anecdote, Bueti claims to have been “shocked at [her] appearance and scared [she] would never look any better.” Most tellingly, she “wonders if any man could ever fall in love with [her] scarred up like this . . . and if [she] would always hate [herself] (96-97). The author’s tendency to confess that she was anxious about how her body will be perceived by men after cancer is apparent elsewhere as well. For instance, in the Kaplan edition of her text, Bueti adds a long paragraph to emphasize her fears by imagining a man’s reaction to discovering that she is losing her hair as the two of them “make out” (145). Bueti revises her text to show that, after breast cancer, she becomes obsessed with her body’s inability to maintain the standards associated with normative femininity. This mindset accords with what is found in chick lit, at least according to Gill and Herdieckerhoff who argue that “the body in chick lit novels . . . is always already

unruly and requires constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodeling into order to conform to judgments of normative femininity” (498). Although this tendency to monitor the body is also present in the first edition of *Breastless*, the intensity with which Bueti subjects her body to scrutiny increases as she revises her work. The revisions that Bueti incorporates at the prompting of her new publisher cause her to emphasize particular sorts of flaws regarding her physical appearance. As she confesses all that is wrong with her body (according to normative beauty standards), she conveys a stronger sense of the cause of her insecurities, and how these exacerbate her willingness to tolerate poor treatment from her romantic partners. Ultimately, this self deprecation is Bueti’s flaw or the thing she must confess: the failure on her part to understand that she is still attractive after her surgery and, subsequently, her failure to demand respect from the men she dates.

When I suggest that the coaxer/coercer’s intervention causes Bueti to accentuate her confession to emphasize a particular focus on the body, I am not attempting to argue that Bueti is being encouraged to say things that she does not mean. I do want to emphasize, however, that the publication history of Bueti’s memoir shows her being prompted to (re)write her memories, an action she undertakes with her explicitly stated awareness she did so to make her text *sell*, and that this factor, along with the ways in which her work is marketed on its exterior, influences how we come to understand the experiences of young women who are ill with breast cancer. “Memory has a history,” explain Smith and Watson: “We learn how to remember, what to remember, and the uses of

remembering, all of which are specific to our cultural and historical location” (*Interfaces* 9). This logic suggests, particularly in the case of memoirs written for mainstream audiences, that what gets memorialized and the bid to increase memoir sales are closely related. In short, there is a connection between claiming the right to speak publicly and what gets remembered and articulated in the narrative itself.

To this end, it is interesting to note that Bueti’s narrative follows the same sort of pattern that has already been mapped out in the previous chapter. Like the women discussed previously, Bueti strives to become a better citizen through public service. This gesture happens at the end of *Breastless* when Bueti confesses that she “had not been involved in fund-raising for cancer research . . . and felt a little guilty about it” (241): it is after this acknowledgement that she begins to work with an organization called the I’m Too Young For This! Cancer Foundation or “i[2]y” as Bueti refers to it (242). It is through her work with i[2]y that Bueti meets “Jennifer,” a woman with whom she develops a “good friendship” (243). As Bueti explains, Jennifer is “A survivor herself [:] she understands much of how I feel, which is priceless, and I never would have experienced it if not for i[2]y” (243). When Bueti begins to attend an i[2]y support group, she discovers “for the first time in six years . . . a sense of belonging” (243). Beyond this however, Bueti is drawn to i[2]y because “one of its focuses [is] on living with the face of cancer” (242). In Bueti’s view, “this is unique because so many cancer organizations only focus on raising money for a cure” (242). “Not that research isn’t important,” continues Bueti, “but what about

all the people living with cancer?" (242). Thus *Breastless in the City* documents what is, essentially, its young author's recognition of some of the political issues which pervade the existing discourse about cancer. This is a realization she makes through her confession and despite her work's status as a product of consumer culture.

This political consciousness which Bueti begins to develop in *Breastless* further evolves when she uses the internet to continue to chronicle her breast cancer journey, often by expanding upon the messages contained within the actual memoir. This awareness comes to be communicated as part of the work she does to promote her book on her author website which is titled *Cathy Bueti: Author, Speaker, Cancer Survivor* and which includes a link to Bueti's weblog *In My Life*. R. Lyle Skains correctly suggests that "online communities . . . [can serve as] models of a bridge between print and digital storytelling conventions [which] expand the dynamic between author, text, and reader" (96). As a cancer survivor who has also published a memoir about her experiences with the disease, Bueti can position herself as a credible online presence: she has knowledge informed by experience, and she has the additional prestige of having published a book. Such a memoirist can, in the online environment, add layers of autobiographical authority to her work, clarifying points within the memoir and sometimes elaborating upon them. In cases where the memoirist maintains a weblog or some other interactive technology which she routinely updates, she can continue to revise her life story indefinitely. She can also use the authority she gains as a published author to create a platform from which to perform and promote other sorts of work she

does, whether this be other writing projects, public speaking, or campaigning for the social good. While part of the reason Bueti maintains a website and blog is to promote sales of her memoir—as evidenced by her ongoing references to the work, and by the image of her book which appears prominently on each page of her website and weblog—she can use online technologies to show readers what her recovery might entail over time, as well as to comment on debates taking place within mass media over breast cancer. For as long as she chooses to continue to maintain a webpage and weblog, Bueti can update her followers on invitations she receives to do public speaking, as well as on the outcomes of her cancer screenings including the frequent bouts of “scanxiety” she experiences each time she must undergo a mammogram (“Scanxiety: How do you Deal?”).

The point I ultimately wish to accentuate is that by creating and maintaining an auto/biographical website—a standard process undertaken by many authors to disseminate their works—Bueti finds a space from which she can offer her views on breast cancer as they evolve since first writing the memoir. Bueti has, in recent months, written several entries in support of the “Think Before You Pink Campaign.” Fellow memoirist Shelley Lewis explains that members of this organization charge that many corporations “are themselves guilty of using or manufacturing potentially carcinogenic chemicals in their products” (236). This movement which refers to itself as Breast Cancer Action protests what Samantha King describes as “cause-related marketing” where “companies and brands associate themselves with a cause as a means to build the reputation of a brand, increase profit, develop employee loyalty to the company,

and add to their reputation as good corporate citizens” (9). An example King provides of this sort of arrangement is “BMW’s Ultimate Drive campaign, in which the automaker donates one dollar to Komen for each mile anyone test drives a car in the Ultimate Drive collection” (24). As King points out, the BCA has shown how “the polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons present in car exhaust have been linked to breast cancer and other illnesses” (24). Consumers often fail to realize that some of the products they purchase to support breast cancer research are actually harmful to their health and may even be cancer causing; moreover, on an individual basis, the purchases a consumer makes raises at best “a miniscule amount of money” for charity (King 24). For these reasons, BCA has been vocal in its criticism of prominent corporations and brands including “Avon, Eureka, American Express, [and] Yoplait” (King 24) and has worked to show that productive types of social change could be achieved if donors gave money directly to cancer researchers.

As a supporter of this cause, Bueti expresses her vehement distaste for the Susan G. Komen Run For the Cure’s partnering with several retail corporations including, most recently, Discount Guns. After criticizing Komen for a litany of past offences where its organizers collaborated with corporations that create harmful products—these include Komen applying its pink ribbon to tires, oil delivery trucks, and a perfume that contains known carcinogens— Bueti expresses her contempt for the pink-washed handgun (“Seriously Komen?”). Posts such as this one makes Bueti’s online work which happens in conjunction with the publishing of a memoir very significant. As Julie Rak explains, blogging

“is seen by many bloggers as an outlet for unofficial writing that takes place outside professional publishing” (“The Digital Queer” 175). Authors can use the online environment to articulate different types of political claims, perhaps in a more explicit way than they do in the monographs which are disseminated by large commercial publishers. Likewise, media scholar Anthea Taylor identifies weblogs as spaces from which women can take up the women’s movement’s causes when she shows that several “blogs have a more complicated, and less pessimistic, relationship to feminism” (180). Young female bloggers with connections to mainstream media will not necessarily self identify as feminists, but in Taylor’s view, nor do they need to “seek to actively distance themselves from (second-wave) feminism in the way that postfeminist and even third-wave writers have been routinely shown to do” (181). In other words, weblogs can be the space from which women actually “challenge the ‘postfeminist mode of address’ which is believed to be ‘ubiquitous’” (Taylor 181). If one of postfeminism’s underlying beliefs is that women’s conspicuous consumption is a signifier of their empowerment, then Bueti certainly begins to challenge this view when she criticizes corporations who present consumption of their products as antidotes to breast cancer.

As she does this work online, Bueti takes on the qualities of a chick who defies social convention. According to Lewis, the women who are affiliated with the anti-pink Breast Cancer Action movement are known as the “‘Bad Girls of Breast Cancer’” (236). Bad girls are, as I have pointed out, the key ingredient in chick texts. If one briefly recalls Samantha Jones’ choice of explicative when

commenting on a “fucking breast cancer cookie,” it becomes possible to see Bueti as using similar discourse to very direct ends on her weblog when she ends her criticism of the pink handgun with a spirited “WTF???” (“Seriously Komen?”). Ultimately, though, Bueti’s critique is far more pointed than Samantha’s. While Samantha ultimately pokes fun at cancer fundraisers, the character does so without seeming to establish any sort of identifiable critique. Since *Breastless* does include its author’s internet address on the cover of her work, the paratext may well lead its reader to the blog and in this way inform its reader of some of the political conversations taking place about breast cancer. Thus the material practices associated with life writing are what bring Bueti to a place where she participates in what is ultimately a feminist critique. The extent to which professional publishing—at least when it is intended for mainstream audiences—interferes with the content of memoir is difficult to measure. Still, Bueti’s participation in online communities where she discusses the process of publishing her memoir can be examined to gain a few insights into what the young author of a memoir of breast cancer may face when seeking an audience for her life story. What the paratexts associated with Bueti’s work do demonstrate is this author’s growing awareness of the corporatization of breast cancer. While her memoir itself does not take what is ultimately a feminist position on breast cancer, she is nonetheless using the practices associated with writing and disseminating it to critique consumer culture from within.

The Chick Subject as Commodity

The analysis of Cathy Bueti's *Breastless in the City* starts to explore how the chick subject is a marketable commodity. The reason that Cleveland Clinic Press agreed to publish *Breastless* was because they saw the story which Bueti had to tell as having mainstream appeal: in Bueti's words, her relatively new-to-the-business-world publisher felt her memoir could help the company achieve its goal of "expand[ing] into the trade market" (Bueti, Interview with Rosenthal). Significantly, Bueti's work as a memoirist has allowed her to position herself as a young, style-conscious professional. The "Speaking" page found on Bueti's website explains that the "author" is available to speak as an expert on several topics including "Surviving and Thriving as a Young Widow; Dating Through Cancer Treatment; Life After Cancer; and ,The Other Side of the Bed: Transition from OT to Patient." For example, one of the events Bueti highlights on her website is a keynote address which she gave at *In Celebration of National Cancer Survivors Day*, an event hosted by Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, the prominent and well-known health institution which bills itself as "one of the world's premier cancer centers" where Bueti was treated ("Memorial Sloan-Kettering "). Bueti's status as the author of a published memoir is important here: as David Reinking acknowledges, "In the past thirty years, books have increasingly become a commodity and image-making device (e.g., to launch speaking tours, consulting services or political campaigns)" (492). This is precisely what Bueti does when, on her website, she finds opportunities to emphasize her social role as the author of *Breastless*. By doing so, she works to

market herself as a smart, sophisticated expert with the sort of life experience that has equipped her to advise a particular group of women, not only about their health and breast cancer, but about their attitudes and personal relationships as well (see Fig. 25). The fact that women who were not previously public figures can leverage encounters with breast cancer into vocations is not new: as Nancy Brinker remarks almost casually in her 1990 memoir regarding her work to establish the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, she and Rose Kushner are both “cancer patients who made careers out of the disease” (*The Race is Run* 120). Such ventures can be lucrative ones. While Bueti’s fee is not published on the internet, Celebrity Talent International (CTI)—the public relations firm which promotes a number of celebrity and high-profile motivational speakers—indicates on its website that Marisa Acocella Marchetto, author of *Cancer Vixen*, reportedly earns between \$15,000 - \$25 000.00 to appear within the United States (“Marisa Acocella Marchetto Booking Agency Profile”). This agency also represents Geralyn Lucas who is the author of *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* which is the next narrative I will discuss. Lucas commands a similar fee as Marchetto for the work she does as a public speaker on women’s health (“Geralyn Lucas Booking Agency Profile”).

As I have discussed elsewhere, breast cancer narratives which are represented by large mainstream publishers can continue to circulate throughout mass media in conspicuous ways and reach broad audiences. As a starting point for a discussion of Lucas’s memoir, then, it bears noting that Lucas’s sick-lit memoir is published by St. Martin’s, a prominent mainstream publishing house

which delivers about 700 titles per year and represents popular writers such as Janet Evanovich, Dan Brown and Jeffrey Archer (“St. Martin’s Press”).

Adaptation theorist Simone Murray goes so far as to state that “the role of contemporary authorship can only be understood in the context of the book industry’s enmeshment, since the late decades of the twentieth century, within a globalised and conglomerate-dominated media landscape” (26). As a former employee of ABC News 20/20 and later a producer for Lifetime television, Lucas is positioned to write a memoir which demonstrates the situation Murray identifies. Lucas has indeed written one of the more widely disseminated sick-lit texts discussed in this dissertation, an outcome which is certainly owed to the fact that “several major media outlets and fashion retailers [helped] to market [WIWL]” (Danford 6). One of these is Condé Nast Publications Inc. which owns *SELF*, the women’s wellness magazine which in 2005 had a projected audience of 5.4 million readers (Farkas 128). This magazine publishes annually a “Breast Cancer Handbook” as part of its participation in the October Breast Cancer Awareness campaign. The October 2004 issue featured Lucas’s memoir in a special advertising insert promoting “Courage Night,” an event sponsored by “Westin Hotels and Resorts, Betsey Johnson, Lifetime Television, *SELF* Magazine, Stila and breast cancer awareness organizations” (“Courage Night” n.p.). The corporate organizers of this event promised attendees “special shopping and survivor celebrations to benefit breast cancer research and education” (“Courage Night” n.p.). If this were not enough, Lucas’s memoir was also adapted for television as well. In 2006, Lifetime Network made *WIWL* into a television

movie which Lucas co-produced and which, from a stylistic standpoint, resembled *SATC* with its views of the New York City skyline, and with its multiple scenes depicting Lucas (played by Sarah Chalke) as she lunches, drinks wine, and spends time with friends and wandering the city (see Fig. 26 and Fig 27). Given *WIWL*'s role as a chick text, what I wish to explore here is the relationship between the commercially successful chick subject and those institutions which, in turn, benefit from corporate philanthropy and the corporatization of breast cancer. The work Lucas does with corporate philanthropists targets young women particularly and does foster the creation of its own sort of elite community. The observations I will make in this regard suggest that the more widely disseminated the sick-lit text, the more closely allied it is with institutions that repudiate feminism and cultivate compliant female consumers. This in turn raises the issue of how best to read for author agency in these texts.

Why I Wore Lipstick to my Mastectomy (WIWL) includes a number of narrative conventions with which readers of this dissertation should now be familiar. In the first place, Lucas represents herself as woman who transgresses and confesses. At the beginning of the memoir, Lucas explains how she makes a solo visit to a strip bar—she refers to this location as a “mammary Mecca”—because she feels watching the strippers dance will help her make a decision about whether to have a mastectomy or a less invasive lumpectomy (2). While there, she confesses that the visit to such a bar is “taboo” (2); however, she explains that by examining other two-breasted women’s bodies and the male audience’s responses to them, she can then determine if she can exist with “one

boob in a boob-obsessed universe” (2). This moment in *WIWL* corresponds eerily with Angela McRobbie’s comments about how, as subject of postfeminism, “young women quite happily attend lap-dancing clubs . . . as a test of their sophistication and ‘cool’” (*Aftermath* 18). Although Lucas shows herself to be “gender aware” (*Aftermath*, McRobbie 18), the work of her narrative is not to critique the capitalist social order which she recognizes has made “boobs [into] a commodity” (*WIWL* 7). Instead, the narrative is about the author’s overcoming of a personal defect. Like Bueti, Lucas’s mastectomy causes her to lack the self confidence required to present her no longer perfect self to the rest of the world. To prepare the reader for the memoir’s confessional content, its cover emphasizes that Lucas was someone in need of a “transformation.” The publisher’s messaging which appears on the memoir’s dust jacket introduces its author as someone who, despite “losing her vibrancy and her looks” to breast cancer still manages to “discover a story of self-acceptance that will inspire all women.” Most conspicuous is a blurb authored by a representative from *Good Housekeeping* which appears directly on the front cover under the memoir’s title and just over a photograph of a beaming Lucas to ask: “Isn’t attitude everything?” (See Fig. 28). Such wording reifies a problematic social discourse generated by “mainstream cancer organizations” which suggest that “Individuals make choices that guide their life biographies, including choices that make them ‘sick’ or ‘healthy’” (*Vulnerable* Dubriwny 40). By mainstream cancer organizations, Dubriwny means organizations like Komen for the Cure which have conspicuous

public profiles. The confessional aspects of the memoir lend themselves to the objectives of such institutions. These objectives often involve consumption.

Breast cancer causes Lucas to realize that she must discover her “inner cleavage” and, to this end, she begins to wear red lipstick to symbolize her courage (*WIWL* 116). Her metamorphosis is fully achieved when at the end of her memoir she presents herself as having the confidence to become a better wife, a mother, and, perhaps most significantly, someone who does “charity” work on behalf of women with breast cancer (*WIWL* 180). The charity work which Lucas does allows her to refigure and atone for her previous transgressions. Thus Lucas’s first act of public service happens when she accepts an invitation from *SELF* magazine to “pose topless for their breast cancer handbook” (177).²⁹ According to Lucas, other breast cancer sufferers will benefit from seeing a photo which “put[s] a head with a boob” (179). She emphasizes that her decision to pose topless is an act of “charity” for which she is “not getting paid big bucks” (*WIWL* 179-180). It is particularly significant that Lucas clarifies that her charitable act is being done on behalf of “young women” (177). Sarah Projansky has shown that the consumer of popular media is often directed to identify the figure of the girl as an at-risk subject. In her analysis of popular news media, Projansky finds girls are

²⁹ *SELF* was launched in 1979 by Condé Nast Publications, Inc. which also publishes *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and many other popular magazines (Cohen and Rhodes 131-139). This women’s wellness magazine had a projected audience of “5.4 million [in 2005]” (Farkas 128). Lucas and four other women posed topless in the October 2001 edition of *Self* in an article by Judith Newman entitled “Survivor Pride.” The photograph of Lucas specifically is reprinted on *SELF.com*. (“The Power of a Picture”).

represented as at-risk subjects in response to debates which challenge the established heteronormative social order and women's roles within it; for instance, conservative media works to convey that it is girls who are threatened by "access to feminine sexuality (kids and sex, early puberty, abortion)" (53).

Projansky suggest that while the social problems related to such issues are the same ones feminism works to address, mainstream institutions' proposed solutions to them are "postfeminist . . . at least for [her]" (53). By this she means that the solutions posited to contemporary social problems and anxieties are ones which uphold capitalism. For instance, Projansky sees current scientific research geared to developing a procedure which can identify when a woman has "the breast cancer gene" as underpinned by the values which have also created postfeminism as a condition of existence where women understand their empowerment to come from consumption (Projansky 53). Such initiatives are created with middle and upper-middle class women in mind: in other words, they serve women who have the means to afford such tests and the prophylactic mastectomies which may follow them. At the same time, the discourses which inform these projects do not emphasize the "more feminist investment in asking why science is focusing on genetics, rather than say, the environment, women's lack of access to good health care, or the historical lack of medical research that takes gender differences into account" (Projansky 53). In *WIWL*, Lucas's advocacy is directed at the young female consumer interested in a particular fashion and lifestyle magazine. It presents cancer survivorship as achieved by women belonging to a certain economic status and having a particular set of

values and beliefs regarding consumption. When Lucas writes about her reasons for posing in *SELF*, she depicts herself as transitioning from her role as a young, insecure woman to one who provides guidance to a new generation of consuming women who have been conditioned to view the reconstructed body as part of the norm.

This claim returns us to the subject of confessional auto/biographical texts and the moment when Felski points out that “feminist confession seeks to affirm a female experience which has often been repressed and rendered invisible by speaking about it, by writing it into existence” (90). Felski also states that “The act of writing, promises power and control, endowing subjective experience with authority and meaning” (90). She is applying her theories on the confession to writers who are working within feminist communities, but what she says pertains to women writing during the time of postfeminism as well. As the sick-lit author develops, promotes and disseminates her work, she can also receive a certain amount of authorial prestige through affirming her membership in communities. I have shown this outcome when discussing Bueti’s role as a participant and eventual speaker for a cancer support group that brings young cancer patients together. Additionally, the sick-lit author belongs to chick culture and can thus claim belonging in this community as well. In this way, sick lit gives rise to authorial practices which are their own type of what Suzette Henke refers to as “scriptotherapy,” or writing which can “inscribe the victim into a sympathetic discourse-community and inaugurate the possibility of psychological reintegration” (xviii). This happens in chick culture where there is a particular sort

of prestige associated with the authorship and the readership of chick texts. When Caroline Smith attended a book signing for Sheri Krantz's graphic chick-lit novel *The Autobiography of Vivian* at a Barnes and Noble bookstore in New York City, what she saw at the glamorous event populated by fashion-conscious women prompted her to conclude that "real women [have begun] to embrace the image of themselves being sold to them in [chick] fiction" (138). Stephanie Harzewski discusses this matter as it pertains more directly to the women who author chick texts. She describes "the gorge factor" as a phenomenon whereby "chick lit is distinguished by another overlap between author and character—with respect to physical appearance" (*Chick Lit* 159). Harzewski goes on to explain that chick-lit authors are often fashion and beauty icons themselves: she makes this point with regards to chick-lit author Candace Bushnell who, at book signings and readings, is, according to Harzewski, as likely to respond to questions about the latest trends in fashion as she is to discuss her books (*Chick Lit* 161). This suggests that the life narrator who has self represented as a chick can claim a particular sort of authority in this community of readers, particularly if she is a reflection of normative beauty standards herself. As someone who has been subjected to the trauma of a mastectomy, Lucas finds affirmation through assuming this position. Indeed, the sick-lit author can take the gorge factor one step further, since any publicity she receives as a speaker or fundraiser also affirms her value as a citizen, as she uses her platform to educate and motivate others with regards to breast cancer: this subjectivity is possible at the beginning of the twenty-first century because the women who oversee the fundraisers or breast cancer

educational campaigns have come to be associated with “style” (King xxiii). By creating works which resonate as chick, these young memoirists signal that they are young, savvy, style-conscious women whose lives are comparable to ones lived by well-known figures within popular culture.

In summary, the woman who writes for chick culture can achieve sales for her work, and she can receive a level of cultural capital or prestige by belonging to a community of style-conscious middle-to-upper-middle-class women. There is a pleasure here for the women who write these memoirs and for the audience intended to read them: as Julie Rak points out, “genres work across and through all aspects of the production process, and they contain the terms of recognition for audiences too” (*Boom* 27). Indeed, “generic writing works because the recognition of repetition is pleasurable” (*Boom*, Rak 29). The sick-lit author both re-enacts and embodies the narrative pleasures she has learned to associate with other chick texts. Pleasure is derived from the text’s capacity to prompt the writer and reader to believe that the pleasures of consumption can lessen the trauma caused by breast cancer. This claim is applicable to the middle-class and upper-middle-class woman who is the intended and probable reader of these books—a woman who has the capacity and willingness to act on her consumptive desires. Geralyn Lucas, who refers to her doctors as “the Chanel, Gucci, and Prada” of cancer specialists (*WIWL* 20), inhabits a world populated by people who consume high-end fashion. This sort of name dropping is less apparent in Bueti’s work. While Bueti admits in an editorial written for cancerdirectory.com that, unlike the women on *SATC*, she cannot afford expensive fashion items like “Manolo’s [sic]

or a Louis Vuitton bag,” she still emphasizes that, while being treated for breast cancer, “what mattered was feeling good about [her] appearance” (“FASHIONISTA”). Here Bueti associates “looking good” with middle-class consumption as she explains how, while dealing with cancer, she substituted high-end fashion and beauty procedures such as the ones shown on *SATC* with affordable alternatives: “Some days it was as simple as wearing a white boyfriend tee from the Gap paired with a comfy faded wash jean” (“FASHIONISTA”). The pleasure of these texts lies in the fact that shopping is a tangible, active response to a threat that is intangible and difficult to fully comprehend. To shop in response to the threat of breast cancer or its diagnosis is something real which can be done in response to the fear of cancer.

Sick Lit and Echoes of Feminist Repudiation

Lucas’s depiction of how she exposed her reconstructed torso to America for the good of other women can, in one way, be interpreted as expanding the parameters of what constitutes normative beauty: this is what Smith and Watson refer to as the autobiographer’s capacity to “define and distinguish the cultural norms of embodiment” (*Reading* 54). The concern, however, is that given all of the ways *WIWL* echoes across popular media, this memoir cannot help but reify consumer practices which uncritically benefit those institutions that violently target women. This violent targeting means that women who do not play by certain rules are discredited. This is another type of feminist repudiation. It is startling to observe the extent to which the *SELF* “Breast Cancer Handbook”—the

venue which initially promoted Lucas's book— encourages its readers to consume for cancer: the publication is primarily a succession of advertisements for everything from cereal and running shoes to wine, toilet paper, vehicles, and, finally, pharmaceuticals. Thus Gillian Whitlock's claim that life narrative is "a 'soft' weapon" is useful here (3). Whitlock determines that while autobiography can "personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard . . . [it is also] a 'soft' weapon because it is easily co-opted into propaganda" (3). In the same edition of the *Self* handbook which advertises Lucas's book, feminism is acknowledged when the publication seems to substantiate the views of activists who argue that breast cancer's corporatization is leading to the infantilization of women. In "Welcome to Cancerland," Barbara Ehrenreich takes offence to products like the "'breast cancer teddy bear' with a pink ribbon stitched its chest" (43). When recounting her own experiences with breast cancer, Ehrenreich claims she would rather have been "hacked to death by a madman" than made to face "the pink sticky sentiment embodied in that bear" (44). Her critique ends with concerns about the environment and ultimately with questions about whose interests are really being served by the social movement to campaign for breast cancer awareness. *SELF* strategically works to redirect women who may share such a perspective when it includes a short article titled "Pissed Off and Proud of It" which reminds everyone that those "cranky" cancer patients have a valid point (Fleming 130). The article even cites a researcher who debunks the common belief that attitude impacts survivorship (Fleming 130). Then, having made this valuable point, the

article suggests an alternative which summarily renders simplistic and then dismisses this feminist viewpoint. The magazine article invokes Ehrenreich's contempt for the pink-ribbon teddy, but then offers the reader an opportunity to purchase a different product: a small-white "Kibbybear" with "Cancer Sucks" embroidered across its chest (Fleming 130). "Bears like this one," *SELF* promises in a tone which subtly scolds non-compliant consumers, "let survivors vent their angry feelings" (Fleming 130).

The fact that Lucas's work might be co-opted or even co-opting is particularly apparent in a ten-minute mini-documentary she has created entitled "OUCH/Take the 'I Am' Pledge." In this footage, Lucas and Dawn Charles—a woman currently undergoing treatment for breast cancer—travel the New York City streets to survey women about what they are prepared to sacrifice for beauty, and to question them on their knowledge of breast cancer and mammography. Lucas introduces herself as "the author of the book *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy*" and an image of the book is shown within the first seconds of the video. Immediately following this introduction, Lucas explains that she has "travelled around the world" to speak to women about how "early detection saved [her] life." Now," explains Lucas in her address to the viewer, "I want to save yours" (00.10). From a semiotic standpoint, the clip is reminiscent of the glamorous chick flick: images of taxis, cityscapes, and high-end fashion are pictured throughout it (see Fig. 29). Indeed, Lucas's role in this short production is that of the flaneuse, a figure whom Harzewski defines as a staple in chick texts for the way she produces "a sociological commentary on city life" (*Chick Lit*

126). Elsewhere, Deborah Parsons has identified the flaneuse as a representative female subject in literature who “self-conscious[ly] connect[s] [her] place within . . . the city with [her] professional identit[y] as [a] specifically female writer” (15). Lucas can use her status as a sick-lit author to claim the authority she needs to comment upon what it is that women need to know about beauty and breast cancer.

The video, which is also the central feature on the *WJWL* website, celebrates conspicuous consumption to an extreme degree. As Lucas travels the city, she undergoes beauty services including a Brazilian bikini wax, a tattoo, eye-brow threading, and Botox injections. The beauty treatments which Lucas consumes in a single day cost at least \$1725.00 before the mammogram (she includes this information for the cost of each service in the video segment) (“OUCH” 6:21). The expense associated with each one of these procedures is not the main point. Ultimately, Lucas wants to convey that getting a mammogram is far less painful than all of these other beauty procedures. By doing so, she encourages women to view mammography as a beauty ritual and then to tolerate and budget for this procedure in just the same way they would any other beauty treatment. Toward the end of OUCH, one young woman remarks that the mammogram “is beauty” (7:29). She tells the audience that getting a mammogram is “just as important as a pedicure, or a blowout, or heels” (7:29). One positive aspect of this clip is that it democratizes a public conversation which tends be dominated by the medical and scientific discourse communities and presented to the public in ways that are very complex and thus difficult to understand. The

women in this mini-documentary become interested in knowing more about breast health when they can relate it to matters like beauty and fashion which are important to them. However, this sort of approach can also be exploited by fashion and beauty industries, as well as scientific institutions which profit from mammography. To this end, it is unfortunate that Lucas's video does not quite get around to speaking about the risks associated with mammograms. Rather, the piece serves to embroil young women more deeply than ever in consumer culture by normalizing mammography as a beauty practice.

Perhaps what is most troubling about this message is that it targets young women. Although the clip does state that breast cancer is "rare" in young woman (8:49), its overarching message is that younger females are at risk. An unnamed woman who explains that she was diagnosed at age 37 tells the audience that she is "in chemo for life" (8:00), and advises viewers that if they withstand "a few seconds of a mammogram it can save [them] a world of pain and suffering" (8:09). The production does state that the ideal age for a woman to begin having mammograms is 40 unless there is a previous history of breast cancer in her family (4:55). Even so, while this assemblage of testimonials may help young women to understand that they too can get breast cancer, the clip is also part of a mechanism which can seem to exaggerate the importance of screening at the expense of some other health issues. One study facilitated by the Behavioral Medicine Program at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York concluded that "While women are far more likely to develop and die from cardiovascular disease (CVD) than breast cancer . . . they markedly overestimate their personal

risks of breast cancer and underestimate their CVD risks” (Blanchard, Erblich, Montgomery, and Bovbjerg 343). These researchers surmised that the “Overrepresentation of breast cancer . . . is pervasive in popular magazines” (343) and thus state that mass media is a strong contributing factor to this problem. Along similar lines, Lisa Cox Hall reports that “Though seventy-three percent of breast cancer cases occur in women over age sixty, popular culture magazines overwhelmingly feature young women [as its victims], who make up only 11% of actual cases” (1). Hall fears that fashion and beauty corporations which target the young female subject often exaggerate the risk of breast cancer in young women.

In short, Lucas’s memoir and its paratexts seem to have been literally manufactured and made to resonate as part of a coordinated arrangement between the author, agent, and several media outlets and corporations which aggressively target young women as consumers. Natalie Danford, who compares the memoir’s release “to the launch of a lemonade-shop franchise” (23), shows just how wide the dissemination of this memoir came to be with the help of corporate supporters: according to Danford, *Self* magazine promoted the book to its “circulation of 1.3 million” readers while Lifetime television featured the memoir on “all four of its outlets, which reach about 85 million homes” (23). Lucas was invited to appear on the *Today Show* and she was featured in *People* magazine (Danford 23). The book launch becomes a cause-related marketing campaign with clothing designer Betsey Johnson designing a *WIWL* t-shirt which was sold at bookstores as part of the book launch, and Estee Lauder creating a lipstick called GERALYN (Danford 23). According to Lisa Fickenscher, a result of this publicity

was increased book sales. She reports that “the buzz” around the memoir was such that Lucas’s publisher, St. Martin’s, “increase[d] its first printing to 25,000 copies from 17,000” (6). Lucas’s relationship to large corporate entities is confirmed by the memoir’s cover. On it, there is a blurb by the late Evelyn Lauder, the “senior corporate vice president of the Estée Lauder Companies and founder and chairman of the Breast Cancer Research Fund” who praises Lucas for wearing lipstick to reflect “courage and hope.” This blurb is followed by one by Carole Black, “President and CEO of Lifetime Entertainment Services” and “founder of the Stop Breast Cancer for Life Advocacy Campaign.” She states that “Millions of women . . . will be forever grateful for this . . . book.” Lucy Danziger, identified on the cover as the founder of the pink ribbon and the editor of *SELF*, states that *WIWL* is a “must-read.” All of the endorsements are upbeat, and all work to reassure the reader that Lucas has the proper sort of attitude to survive breast cancer as evidenced by her willingness to wear cosmetics in just the right way. Even Marisa Weiss M.D.—the author of the medical blurb which appears on the memoir—replicates this pattern when she playfully notes that since reading Lucas’s book she too has begun to wear lipstick. Here again is the displacement of medical hegemony in a sick-lit text. This blurb is, in its own way, an act of feminist repudiation: medical hegemony has been unsettled thanks to feminism, but now feminism is no longer needed. The blurb works by suggesting that women no longer need to worry that they will be subjected to poor treatment by the health system. It conveys the idea that gender equity in the health system has been achieved: medicine is now occupied by female physicians and, for this

reason, the patient and physician alike can move from talking about disease symptoms or worrying about sexism in the health institution to the sharing of makeup tips.

These paratexts serve to make Lucas's already subtle or ambiguous questioning of consumer culture in the memoir more difficult to discern. Lucas seems, often, to raise a social critique, but then not finish it. When, in *WIWL*, Lucas claims to be distressed by the fact that her daughter wants to play with Barbie dolls, she momentarily takes an assertive stand on a feminist issue, stating that "Barbie dolls have been pissing [her] off lately" (173). She continues by noting that she "has heard the Barbie-bashing arguments and they are convincing" (*WIWL* 173). Yet, after rearticulating these arguments quite emphatically, Lucas confesses that her own anger with Barbie is not due to the fact that the doll represents the unattainable beauty standards imposed on women generally, but because "Barbie's boobs . . . are a deliberate symbol of power" of which she, as a woman who has had a mastectomy, feels "robbed" (*WIWL* 176). One of Angela McRobbie's points is that many contemporary young women are perfectly well aware of mass and media culture's objectifying practices, but that they are obliged to "withhold critique to count as a modern sophisticated girl" (*Aftermath* 18). Lucas's manner of self representation corresponds with what McRobbie finds and with the representations of the women found in the fictional texts discussed in the previous chapter. Like Samantha, Natalie, and Dana, Lucas is a chick redeemed by her consumption and, in return, she can hardly explicitly criticize those institutions which allow for her redemption. While it is impossible to predict with

certainty how Lucas's readers interpret such moments in the text, given the paratexts and history of this work, it seems likely that *WIWL*'s readers will be encouraged to view consumption as necessary to overcoming breast cancer. More serious still, such readers may actually believe themselves to be informed about breast cancer when they are not. Tasha Dubriwny notes that "given the many unknowns of breast cancer etiology, research on how to prevent and/or cure breast cancer has produced highly uncertain knowledge (although this uncertainty is perhaps not clearly understood by the lay public)" (*Vulnerable* 38). The manner in which Lucas invites young women to think of their mammograms as simply another beauty treatment is disturbing, particularly given controversy over the efficacy and safety of the procedure. Rosalie Bertell summarizes one aspect of this controversy by explaining that mammography "exposes the breast to x-radiation, which to this date is the only proven cause of breast cancer" (10). Other potential harms which have been linked to annual mammograms include "false-positive mammograms, unnecessary biopsies, and overdiagnosis" (Mandelblatt, et al).³⁰ Although Lucas briefly mentions the "controversy" when she talks about mammograms on her video (5:06), and lists resources in *WIWL* which might

³⁰ This research concluded that such "harms" could be properly managed through "Biennial screening" (Mandelblatt, et al 738). The findings are controversial (see Squiers, et al).

prompt her reader to look into these matters, an explanation of the issues is not worked into her memoir or its paratexts.³¹

The Sick Lit Paradox and What it Signals

By now it should be apparent that Lucas is allied with some of the institutions that Bueti believes responsible for the commercialization of breast cancer. Although Lucas resents the objectification of women's bodies, she also desires "the power" that comes with being able to fully participate in the capitalist heteronormative social order which continues to sustain these oppressive circumstances (3). In the memoir, any critique Lucas makes of female objectification is softly present, but never explicitly confirmed. Feminist issues are raised, but quietly done away with. The disparity one can notice between the content of various sick-lit texts and their paratexts can have a polarizing effect. Both Lucas and Bueti can seem to be perpetuating forms of disparate propaganda—Bueti's views on corporate involvement in breast cancer fundraising may well appear overly cynical and may overlook the benefits corporate fundraising does create in women's lives through, for instance, establishing spaces of camaraderie. Lucas's pink-ribbon endorsed text and her obvious

³¹ For example, Breast cancer.org is among the resources Lucas recommends. On its website under "Breast Cancer.org Mammogram Recommendations," the organization does acknowledge that the "value of screening mammograms was questioned" in 2009 by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. The site further explains that "recommended changes were very controversial and were not universally adopted." However, at the time of this writing, it does not provide specific details.

connection to corporate culture can create suspicion that the breast cancer narrative, formally a genre of protest, has been co-opted by capitalism. An image found in Lucas's media clip "OUCH" of pink-clad women at a Susan G. Komen Survivor party grasping copies of *WIWL* supports this view (see Fig. 30). Gayle Sulik's *Pink Ribbon Blues* and Samantha King's *Pink Ribbons Inc.* put forth arguments which suggest that the latter is probable. Such concerns raise a question about how to analyze sick lit. While Lucas's text is certainly the more problematic of the two works for its glorifying of consumer practices, it is also the case that Bueti has needed to respond to coaxing as she has written her memoir: this coaxing has come from those who have the power to help the work circulate in the public sphere and may have caused her to omit portions of her cancer story which could have benefited her reader. Both authors reify through its repetition of certain narrative conventions ideologies which are problematic, particularly for the way they can be used by causes that portray young women as a vulnerable population. Here I want to be clear that Bueti and Lucas did—as young women—experience this disease and, by doing so, I acknowledge that their traumas have been real ones. When she comments on cancer narratives by women who have undergone prophylactic mastectomies, Tasha Dubriwny is careful to distinguish that her "criticism is reserved for the narrative—that is, the ways women and their choices are represented in public discourse—and is not aimed at the decisions that women . . . make when facing a positive result from a genetic test" (*Vulnerable* 46).³² My critique of these women's narratives is rendered along similar lines.

³² In *The Vulnerable Empowered Woman* Dubriwny finds that popular media is shaping a

Perhaps the most important thing to take away from these memoirs is that young women with breast cancer are literally figuring their experiences with the disease through their affiliations with the cancer charity, support group, or fundraising institution. By doing so, the writer of a twenty-first century breast cancer memoir seems obliged to situate herself in any number of politically charged debates and causes: these include making decisions about what sort of cancer organization to support, whether or not to have reconstructive surgery, whether to run for the cure or to protest pink-washing, and so forth. Sarah Projansky suggests that the ultimate problem with media during the time of postfeminism is that “the collective representation of girls in popular culture . . . obsessively *asks* us to take sides” (69). “Us” refers here to feminist critics who are often divided by views over contemporary media when they attempt to decide whether a text is either feminist or antifeminist, oppressive or progressive, etc. However, based on what these memoirs indicate, women who are diagnosed with breast cancer experience a similar calling to “take a side.” A convention worth paying attention to is that the sick-lit author seems obliged to position herself in relation to the decisions she makes with respect to consumption and those charities or foundations which represent breast cancer in the public sphere. Indirectly, this process requires that she side against feminism. The taking of a side is often a matter of narrative survival since it is by doing so that she achieves the authorization needed to bring her work to the public’s attention. Although

narrative which holds women accountable to control and direct their health outcomes by choosing a violent surgical procedure to prevent breast cancer.

each sick-lit writer's identification—or as we will see in the next chapter, her disidentification—with a fundraising, charitable, or educational institution provides her with a platform to speak from, its presence in, on, or around her work is a response to social expectation.

Fortunately, chick culture is also a place where women can and do break rules. Fictional chicks like Samantha, Dana, and Natalie transgress boundaries even despite the fact that they are often portrayed as needing redemption by the end. Sick-lit authors are members of chick culture and thus are positioned to rewrite rules also. Geralyn Lucas can perform the “striptease of [her] life” and show young women a restructured torso (*WIWL* 9). Cathy Bueti can write a conventional memoir about dating and romance. From there, she can use the profile she achieves as a stylish young author to become a bad girl of breast cancer who questions corporate interference in cancer research. In the next chapter, I continue to explore the sick-lit writer's relationship to the mainstream cancer institution and how she can use her position in chick culture to refuse its oppressive and pervasive rhetoric.

Chapter Four

Irreverent Chicks with Cancer Critique the Breast Cancer Normate

On December 13, 2010, the blogger who self identifies as american amazon published a post in which she “publicly profess[ed] [her] love” for the author of *My One Night Stand with Cancer*, Tania Katan (“Cancer? I Laughed So Hard I Cried”). The reason which she gives—that she “love[s] . . . funny women with cancer”—is followed by a comment from “Amy” who recommends Meredith Norton’s *Lopsided: How Having Breast Cancer can be Really Distracting* on the similar grounds that, it too, is written by “another funny BC survivor.” While Amy also recommends Geralyn Lucas’s *Why I Wore Lipstick to Mastectomy*, it is Katan’s and Norton’s texts respectively which the bloggers single out for discussion on the basis of the authors’ humour. While all the sick-lit authors discussed in this dissertation use humour occasionally to narrate their experiences of breast cancer, Norton and Katan sustain its usage throughout their works to undermine the normative social order.

The point of this chapter is to observe how the conventions associated with chick lit and memoir converge in the form of sick lit to become subversive autobiographical performances. In the preceding chapter, I suggested that sick lit can establish its authors as members of communities, and in this way they can reclaim their identities after experiencing the trauma resulting from enduring breast cancer. As the paratexts surrounding sick lit suggest, the practices associated with writing and publishing these memoirs can facilitate author agency: often, this process takes place through autobiographical performances

conducted outside the book as the author assumes the identity of life writer and, by extension, becomes an “expert.” Sick-lit writers are, like their chick-lit author counterparts, able to perform a type of “gorge factor” authorship consistent with what a particular demographic of readers have come to expect (Harzewski, *Chick lit* 159). The narrator of a breast cancer narrative who recovers to become a stylish author and expert declares her successful return to normative culture: in this way, writing and publishing a memoir is intimately tied to her capacity to prove that she has been able to overcome breast cancer and to rejoin her community as a productive citizen.

Chick culture is also a space from which memoirists can articulate various kinds of social critiques. This is what Norton and Katan do when they use humour throughout their memoirs to criticize various institutions which dictate rules of conduct for women with breast cancer. For example, although most of Norton’s narrative is set in her birthplace in the United States, she begins *Lopsided* with what becomes a prolonged critique of the French medical system specifically and French culture broadly. Norton, who lived for a brief time in Paris with her husband, recalls that each time she sought medical care, the physicians within the French medical system “eyed [her] suspiciously as if [she’d] flown all the way to France simply to exploit their subsidized health care system” (2). Likewise, Katan’s refusal to pay medical practitioners any homage is also apparent at an early point in *My One Night Stand with Cancer* when she explains to her readers that her anxiety over having to attend an appointment at “The Breast Centre” could be managed so long as she imagined herself to be at a “lesbian mixer”

instead of a clinical appointment (1). She further develops the analogy by commenting that “the [kindly] nurse conducting the mammogram seems sweet . . . like someone else’s mom . . . but definitely not someone you’d think about having sex with” (5). As one examines the passage in its full context, it becomes apparent that Katan’s humour stems from the fact that the health institution with which she must deal is governed by heterosexist policy—a point she emphasizes as she completes a medical form which presumes that the female patient is necessarily involved in a heterosexual relationship and thus requires the patient to indicate what form of birth control she uses (2).

As these examples begin to suggest, the sick-lit author undertakes what might be defined as satire when she “irreverently” critiques the institutions with the authority to mandate how it is that women with breast cancer ought to behave. My use of the term “irreverent” is not coincidental; indeed, I have observed this adjective to be one which both authors incorporate into the paratexts surrounding their works. Norton markets *Lopsided* on her personal website by including excerpts taken from several reviews of her memoir, including one from barnsandnoble.com which refers to Norton as “wickedly irreverent” and “incredibly funny” and another from *Cosmopolitan* which describes *Lopsided* as unique because it is a “**hilarious, irreverent**, self-pity-free memoir of a breast cancer survivor” (qtd. in “Reviews,” *Meredith Norton*). Whitney Scott of BOOKLIST also describes *Lopsided* as “[crackling] with heartfelt intensity and irreverence” (qtd. in “Reviews,” *Meredith Norton*). Alternatively, Tania Katan uses this term too when describing herself noting that her motivation for writing

One Night stemmed from the fact that there "weren't any [breast cancer memoirs] that were irreverent and silly and queer and funky" (Katan qtd. in Kasral).

Defined in the online *Oxford English Dictionary* as "showing disrespect to a sacred or venerable person or thing," "irreverent" has, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, become a gendered adjective—one of several buzz words—echoed by publishers, book sellers, and the authors of fiction and memoir to describe narratives by and about women who have transgressed social rules.

"Irreverent" is also a term applied (though not exclusively) to female subjectivity as it is depicted in chick culture; for example, Cathy Yardley, author of *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel* describes works belonging to the genre as "Irreverent in tone" and further explains that such texts are "characterized by sharp internal observations, a fair dose of comedic venting, and sharp-as-razor dialogue" (7). Elsewhere Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young cite chick-lit.us which lists adjectives that ultimately present the fictional chick protagonist as irreverent: "The heroine of [chick lit] is rude, shallow, overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, or all of the above" (*Chick Lit* 4). The memoirists discussed in this chapter take such an approach to life writing, often speaking "irreverently" to show how they resent the ways in which women with breast cancer are objectified by institutions seeking to gain through their misfortune.

This chapter argues the sick-lit author can on occasion appropriate the rhetoric and imagery one associates with chick culture to accomplish a subterfuge which enables her to expand the scope of what it is she is allowed to say in a life

narrative which is to be marketed for mass consumption: what I mean is that the memoirist can perform a double identity as a life narrator and a chick author to say forbidden things. In this way, sick lit can expand narrative conventions which might otherwise constrain its author as she narrates her experience of breast cancer. In what follows, the sick-lit author's capacity to surmount the conditions of production under which she works to create and publish her life narrative in ways which allow her to challenge social norms is explored. To do this work, I read *My One Night Stand with Cancer* and *Lopsided: How Having Breast Cancer Can Be Really Distracting* against a third autobiographical narrative written by an author who, until very recently, occupied a position of unquestioned authority at the top of the social hierarchy which Katan and Norton work to unsettle. This third memoir is Nancy Brinker's *Promise Me, How a Sister's Love Launched the Global Movement to End Breast Cancer* (2010). As the founder of Susan G. Komen for the Cure® (SGK), Brinker's memoir shows how its author has been able to use her wealth and political connections to create an institution which reinforces the message that women's participation in breast cancer fundraisers is a duty of citizenship and one which, coincidentally, is most easily accessed by women who are wealthy and who occupy traditional roles in the heteronormative social order. Norton and Katan both use irreverent humour to question the social hierarchy which enables organizations such as Brinker's to flourish and, by doing so, critique the values and beliefs which allow certain individuals to be held up as role models in culture. Here I will briefly clarify that the publications of Katan's and Norton's memoirs precede Brinker's forced resignation as chair of her

organization which takes place due to a scandal and controversy regarding SGK's politics, a point to which I will return at the end of this chapter.³³

A Word on Women's Humour

According to Alice Sheppard, "women have long [used] humour to seek social change, whether for feminist causes or to fight basic injustices in society" (47). Likewise, Janet Bing points to instances when women use "humor [to] acknowledge that women's lives are not limited simply to a few stereotypical roles" (32) while Nancy A. Walker affirms that a "dominant theme in women's humour is how it feels to be a member of a subordinate group in a culture that prides itself on equality, [and] what it is like to try to meet standards for behaviour that are based on stereotypes rather than on human beings" (Walker x). While a detailed overview of the taxonomy used to classify the different kinds of humour

³³ In addition to the controversy over how Komen allocates its fundraising dollars, and its affiliations with corporations who produce products containing carcinogens, Begley and Roberts explain that "Komen has come under heavy public scrutiny since it moved . . . to cut funding to Planned Parenthood, a women's health network that provides birth control, abortions and other services" in February, 2012 (n.p.). Komen did reverse the decision after the public outcry which took place over this move. However, as Holly Hall outlines, the controversy surrounding this and other decisions Nancy Brinker has made as the leader of SGK has not been calmed even with her 2012 resignation as CEO. Since then, SGK has been further criticized for retaining Nancy Brinker on its board of directors and the amount of money generated by the organization has significantly decreased (21-22).

in women's literature is beyond the scope of this dissertation—indeed, I hope, like Nancy A. Walker, to “sidestep the thorny issue of [humour's] definition” when it comes to setting up this portion of my discussion (xi)—it is thus safe to say that women life writers have often used humour to say what they otherwise are not permitted to say. What is unique about the performance of “irreverent” humour in sick lit is that it takes place during the first decade of the twenty-first century when irreverence as a type of comedic performance comes to be associated with chick texts. Consequently, memoirists with ties to chick culture through paratext or self-identification can represent themselves as a recognizable ideal with whom other women can relate. This is especially important because, during the timeframe under consideration, the “irreverent” woman can in some instances be regarded as a type of anti-heroine in opposition to the stereotypical idealized woman who follows social protocol (recall Samantha's, Dana's, and Natalie's use of “fuck” as well as Sara Jordan's and Marisa Acocella Marchetto's “kicking of cancer's ass”). Although postfeminist discourse aims ultimately to reinforce gender stereotypes, chick writers do on occasion overturn them.

The sorts of stereotypes which sick-lit authors face are complex and intersecting. The author of any conventional illness memoir faces many strictures as she or he sets out to write and publish a text. G. Thomas Couser outlines, for example, how authors of illness memoirs generally are always accountable to “relieve their auditors' discomfort” (*SB*, Couser 17). As Couser further clarifies, a teller's account of her illness or disability (these are not the same thing) is “in effect, predetermined [and must] . . . conform to, and thus confirm, a cultural

script [which already exists]" (SB 17). The author of a breast cancer narrative who wants a readership for her work must narrate what has happened to her in ways which help to alleviate the reader's anxieties about mortality and what will happen to her if she is diagnosed with the disease (or if she has been). As we have seen thus far, sick lit, with its focus on consumption, romance, and its inclusion of humour, clearly works to satisfy the writer and reader who prefers narratives which do not focus extensively on pain and suffering.

What Katan and Norton do specifically as "irreverent" narrators is to circumvent a prescribed cultural script which would have them behave as "nice" or "ladylike" women are expected to behave. Both authors make a point of showing that they are rebels and this is a social role they appear to enjoy. Norton, for instance, includes in her reminiscences an account of how, as a teen-age girl, she kept a "petri dish of moldy skin" in her bedroom, salvaged from the first time she shaved her legs (25), while, in *One Night*, Katan admits to a series of long-standing addictions including, since age seven, "smelling various parts of [her] body, undergarments, and other scented things" and "THE USE OF OBSENIITIES: fuck, shit, dick, and others" (135). This sort of confession differs from the type we have seen before: it can be understood in a context which takes into account what it is that a woman with cancer might want to say but perhaps feels she cannot due to social prescription. According to Jo Anna Isaak who has studied women's cancer narratives by Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke, women can use "humor and non-sense" to "circumvent the fatal codes of narration" (50). Such a fatal code of narration might involve writing narratives which pander to

some readers' desires to understand women with cancer as victims. While Wilke and Spence create works which are typically housed in galleries and presented as high or exclusive types of art, the concept which Isaak sets out works well when applied to popular culture's sick-lit memoirs as well. Indeed, while Isaak defines the performance of "humor and non-sense" as a somewhat indulgent practice, she also explains that "The *use* women artists have made of narcissism as a performative 'act' opens the possibility of women's strategic occupation of narcissism as a site of pleasure and a form of resistance to assigned sexual and social roles" (54). The statement which Isaak applies to the study of works she focuses on in her study can also pertain to certain sick-lit texts as well, particularly when the sick-lit writer performs irreverence in ways which enable her to take on an accepted role in the dominant social order while simultaneously critiquing it. As I want to demonstrate, Norton's and Katan's anecdotes are more than funny and self indulgent stories: they are, in effect, rigorous rejections of the exaggeratedly feminized model of the ideal breast cancer survivor which various powerful institutions within the broader culture perpetuate to their benefit.

The Breast Cancer Normate

The representative example of the ideological subject of breast cancer survivor which I claim that Katan and Norton both undermine can be found in Nancy Brinker's (and Joni Rodger's) *Promise Me: How a Sister's Love Launched the Global Movement to End Breast Cancer*. While Brinker's name may not be immediately recognizable, the "pink-ribbon Race for the Cure" events which she

founded are ubiquitous within North America and, indeed, much of the world. As a result of its popularity, Susan G. Komen for the Cure® is reported to have contributed “685 million on research over the last thirty years” (Begley and Roberts). SGK also positions itself as “the only organization doing breast cancer . . . research, global work, advocacy and community work [collectively]” (Aun qtd. in Begley and Roberts). In 2008, Brinker’s name appeared in *Time* magazine’s list of America’s “100 Most Influential People,” and she has been included in the *Lady’s Home Journal’s* list of the “100 Most Important Women of the 20th Century,” and, finally, as one of *Biography* magazine’s “25 Most Powerful Woman in America” (*Promise Me* 355-356). In *Promise Me*, Brinker further boasts to having served as the “The White House chief of protocol” under George W. Bush (316). Brinker’s success as a role model to women with breast cancer and the American mainstream public generally, as evidenced by the popularity of her pink-ribbon fundraisers, confirms that the values and beliefs upon which her organization thrives have widespread appeal. Brinker admits to understanding the importance of a careful self presentation when she attributes her success with fundraising to her understanding that “you have to entertain people . . . if you want them truly on your side” (*Promise Me* 10). In short, Brinker understands that she can influence her audience with a self representation that ties her to particular values and socially-held ideals.

To explain what sort of “constructed identity” allows individuals to “step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8), disabilities studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson makes use of sociologist Erving

Goffman's sociological term "normate" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8). According to Goffman "[there is] only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports" (Goffman qtd. in Thomson 8). Although Goffman's definition is taken from the 1960s, the heteronormative subject described here is still positioned advantageously within mass culture. While Goffman's focus on the male pronoun during the time of postfeminism initially seems anachronistic for the way it "takes for granted that femaleness [is outside this] . . . sketch of a normative human being" (*Extraordinary Bodies*, Thomson 8), one of the beliefs which make up postfeminism is that women have achieved equity: hence, it makes sense that the ideal female subject during the time of postfeminism would in fact show herself as able to obtain many of the normate's characteristics. Brinker does in fact embody many of these qualities and thereby has what is needed to assume a privileged place in mainstream western society. At the height of her popularity, Brinker is young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, and a mother. She is also college educated and has a conventionally attractive appearance. Perhaps, most important, her record of employment shows that she works as a philanthropist for the good of other citizens. This, as opposed to a record in sports, makes her the perfect companion to the stereotypical powerful male whom Goffman identifies: thus Brinker presents herself in ways which are compatible with the normate, particularly given the way she is always careful to locate her success as a public figure within the domestic sphere and the

heteronormative nuclear family where she also fulfills her duties in traditional domestic roles such as wife, daughter, and sister.

Brinker and the organization she creates represent a return to a traditional gender hierarchy and, by doing so, rely on postfeminist discourses which both uphold and repudiate feminism. This means that Brinker is the quintessential postfeminist subject who has claimed her empowerment by presenting herself as traditionally feminine. For example, Brinker credits much of SGK's success to her ex-husband and the now-deceased restaurant entrepreneur Norman Brinker whom she claims educated her in the business principles that enabled her to develop her charity into the successful enterprise it eventually becomes. Although the Brinker marriage did not last—Brinker makes plenty of room in her memoir to explain that, despite her valiant efforts to preserve it, the marriage failed because Norman's personality changed after he sustained a brain injury during a polo match—she nonetheless points to his support of her venture and his advice that she “build” SGK like any other “business” (*Promise Me* 192). At the same time, Brinker also explains that all the original paperwork she needed to begin Komen was “neatly organized in a shoebox” (*Promise Me* 193) thereby hinting that her institution's origins are similar to the same sort of grassroots activism that takes place in the women's movement, but is now appropriately resituated around the home. Brinker even claims that her decision to work as part of the Bush administration—a move that enables her to increase SGK's profile—was to fulfill the culturally-sanctioned role of dutiful daughter. According to *Promise Me*, it was Brinker's dying father who reminded her of her duty “to serve” (317),

thereby prompting her to accept George Bush's request to work as his chief of protocol.

When Brinker connects her role as a public figure to the traditional roles she claims to hold within her family unit, she assumes a narrative identity which people are encouraged to view as the ideal. This statement is also true of Brinker herself who, according to what she states in *Promise Me*, was taught by her mother that public service is a woman's civic duty. At the beginning of her memoir, Brinker describes a formative experience from her childhood when her mother instills in Brinker the realization that women have a duty to be "good stewards for [their] country" (*Promise Me* 8). Along such lines, Brinker depicts her mother as a tireless volunteer who modelled for her daughters a record of exemplary service to nation through her efforts to assist the victims of the polio outbreak in the United States in the 1950s. The belief that a woman's charity work begins at home has been deeply embedded in American culture for some time. As historian Linda Kerber notes, "Republican Motherhood" as an institution has historically worked by linking women's work with political activity to "fill the gap left by the political theorists of the Enlightenment" ("The Republican Mother" 205). This way of thinking has persisted in twenty-first century America where Republican Motherhood as an ideology is performed and upheld by female politicians or figureheads, whatever their political-party affiliations. As Kerber explains, the republican mother's work is "justified less on her own terms than by her service to her family and her children" ("Women and Individualism," Kerber 597). This commitment to the heteronormative family unit is what gives rise to

class hierarchy. Thus Brinker's mother, who leaves food on the doorsteps of persons afflicted with polio, takes pains to offset any "risk [of] bringing the virus into [her children's] home" (*Promise Me* 7). In this way, Brinker's mother is inscribed as responsibly placing her own family ahead of those whom she serves.

While there is insufficient space to deal with each of the ways that Brinker reifies ideologies underpinning patriarchy and privileging the middle-class to upper-middle class nuclear family, I want to point now to a few examples where she relies on mass culture's reverence for the nuclear family to gain the authority she requires to advance her institution. Currently in her sixties, Brinker was herself diagnosed with breast cancer in 1984 (Lerner 260). However, her motivation to organize fundraisers for breast cancer was not, as she reports it, due to her own brush with breast cancer. Rather, Brinker claims to have established her foundation in honour of her sister the late Susan Komen who was born in 1943 and who died of the disease in 1977. According to Brinker, it was Susan Komen's wish that women with breast cancer be able to receive topnotch medical care, and that they be treated by the public and medical institution with greater recognition and respect. As a result, Brinker claims that her decision to begin her foundation stemmed from "Suzy's" last request which was that Brinker find some way to "Make it better" for the women who would be diagnosed later on (*Promise Me* 147).

Brinker's popularity emphasizes the power she wields by having access to a life story which celebrates normativity as something one acquires through having been born into what the public has learned to perceive as the *right* sort of

nuclear family. As noted, Brinker’s justification for raising millions of dollars for breast cancer research—an activity which is also lucrative for her—is that she is doing it to honour her sister who, in turn, was also motivated, even when facing her death, to serve other women. Service on behalf of others can, however, feed a class hierarchy. Maren Klawiter summarizes the paradox writing that “while the Komen Foundation has been at the forefront of redefining cultural meanings and representations of women with breast cancer, [its organizers] have done so by tying these to norms of white, heterosexual, middle-class, consumerized femininity” (70). Klawiter means that although SGK has helped women to feel less ashamed or embarrassed about having breast cancer, this organization is still founded upon exclusionary practices and gender stereotypes, the latter of which is tied to SGK’s signature pink ribbon. Amy McKinnon cites research by Gleeson and Frith which confirms that, in Western cultures, “pink represents a particular kind of femininity—one that is passive, innocent, asexual, and immature” (473). It is a colour “heavily coded in gendered terms to convey strength and power in femininity” (McKinnon 473). This seems to be what Brinker has in mind when she claims that she chose the pink ribbon as a symbol for her organization because the colour “was poignantly reminiscent of the pink ribbon sash on Suzy’s homecoming queen dress” (*Promise Me* 275). At an earlier point in the memoir, Brinker describes her sister’s gown in more detail as a “dress with a swan-white bodice, voluminous sky-blue skirt, and wide pink ribbon sash” (40). The image that Brinker recalls is one that celebrates an idealized, yet also stereotypical, representation of womanhood in American culture. The homecoming queen with

her “rhinestone tiara and flash photo smile” (*Promise Me*, Brinker 40) perpetuates the most problematically idealized sort of gender and class hierarchy between women imaginable.

At every turn, Brinker’s work to establish SGK is tied to the exclusionary heteronormative social order which privileges those who come closest to having the characteristics possessed by the normate. Norton and Katan see themselves as having a complex place within this hierarchy and thus use humour to express their frustration with the values which Brinker and her sister represent. Although Norton is from an upper-middle-class family, her privileged socio-economic status complicates her attempts to situate her family within the existing social order due to their ethnicity. When describing what it was like to grow up in an affluent African American household, she explains that she and the rest of her family “coped by repressing our emotions” (20). Immediately following this statement, Norton takes the opportunity to jab at the institution of family, ruefully noting that, by virtue of their anxieties and lack of emotional health, she and her African American family “were typical WASPS” (20). When writing *One Night*, Katan is also aware of a social expectation that the woman with breast cancer will both sustain and be sustained by the role she plays in her family unit. Her irritation with this idealization of the family as an institution is apparent in a section of her memoir which she titles “**how to become a nuclear family with no prior history (left breast 2002)**” (Katan’s emphasis, 63). Here Katan writes of her parents’ acrimonious divorce, an event from her childhood which haunts her in adulthood to complicate her diagnosis and subsequent treatment regimen.

Although she knows that both parents love her and want to support her while she is ill, she also realizes that “maybe having [her] entire family together, under [her] father’s 875-square-foot roof is not the best way to fight cancer” (75). The contrast between Brinker’s *Promise Me* and the two sick-lit memoirs discussed in this chapter is emphasized in what follows to show why the ideology which underpins Brinker’s pink-ribbon fundraisers is rife with disparities and, further, to show how some women use life writing to address these problems.

Tania Katan: Sick Lit and Double Talk

Memoirist and playwright-performer Tania Katan was initially diagnosed with breast cancer when she was twenty-one years old. Ten years later, she had to undergo a second mastectomy and round of invasive treatment after she was diagnosed with cancer in her remaining breast. When asked why she wrote *My One Night Stand with Cancer (One Night)*, she responded that her motivation stemmed from the fact that she could not locate a life narrative about breast cancer composed by any author to whom she could relate. Katan, who self identifies as “Jewish, a breast cancer survivor, a runner, [and] queer,” explains in an interview entitled “Finding the Humour in Mastectomy” that she wrote her memoir because she felt that women with backgrounds similar to her own are underrepresented in the mainstream conversation taking place around breast cancer:

When I was diagnosed [a second time], I took a field trip to a bookstore. It was October, Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and there was a little pink

table set up with all of the breast cancer offerings. This is a shocker, but there was nothing about a topless runner who was under the age of 35 who had cancer twice and who was Jewish and who was rocking the world. I realized, 'My story's not there on that table.' ("Finding the Humor")³⁴

As Katan's comment suggests, *One Night* is its author's attempt to add an additional perspective to the existing body of breast cancer narratives available for purchase in mass culture. Beyond this, Katan's work as a life narrator is significant because she is the only author to explicitly position herself as "adamantly" opposed to "reconstruction" ("The Creation of Stages" 229). In her work as a public speaker, she often seeks to motivate college students to reconsider their views on the normative body because she believes that young women tend to be "disconnected from their bodies and hate their bodies and struggle with body image" (Volin 54). Katan, who views herself as carrying forward the "breast cancer baton" for the late Audre Lorde ("The Cancer Journals," Katan 271), is perhaps the only sick-lit author in this study who explicitly claims to be an activist.³⁵ During this time of postfeminism when mainstream culture is discouraging women from being activists or from drawing attention to gender inequality, Katan's irreverent humour is her vehicle to promoting social change. Her explicit identification with Audre Lorde suggests, also, that Katan is not interested in repudiating feminism.

³⁴ The link to this website is no longer active.

³⁵ Katan's website is titled *Tania Katan. Writer, Humorist. Activist* at <http://taniakatan.com/About.html>.

As with the other sick-lit narratives already discussed, Katan's text can be tied to mass culture through its paratexts which connect it to chick culture, a space Katan ultimately subverts. On *One Night's* blue paperback cover, the author's name is superimposed onto a photograph of a cupcake decorated with neon-red icing. As at least one editorialist has pointed out, for some time "the cupcake [along with] the high-heeled shoe [have been] the reigning chick-lit cover cliché" (Anderson). Chick-lit titles such as Jennie Colgan's *Meet Me at the Cupcake Cafe* (2011) and Kate Rockland's *150 Pounds* (2012) feature cupcakes on their covers and are examples of chick-lit texts which use this symbol in what are primarily heterosexual romantic narratives (See Fig. 31 and Fig 32). The cupcake's status as a commodity product which belongs to chick culture can be linked, yet again, to *Sex and the City*. Critics Kim Akass and Janet McCabe observe how after *SATC* filmed a scene at New York City's Magnolia Bakery in 2000, the bakery and its cupcakes became a popular stop on the official *Sex and the City* fan tour (*Reading Sex and the City* 235).³⁶ These critics are referring to the third-season episode of *SATC* entitled "No Ifs, Ands, or Butts" where Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) eats a cupcake as she confesses to Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) that she has a "crush" on a man named Aidan Shaw (John Corbett) (22:13) (see Fig. 33). The two women are seated in front of Magnolia Bakery as they have this conversation. According to

³⁶ At the time of this writing in 2013, the "Sex and the City Hotspots" tour offered by On Location Tours continues to run twice daily in New York City. An advertised highlight of the tour is a stop for "cupcakes like Carrie and Miranda" (On Location Tours brochure).

Andrea Adleman who interviewed the bakery's co-owner Steve Abrams, "sales surged following the bakery's 2000 cameo appearance in HBO's *Sex and the City*." The small bakery which is located on Bleeker Street in the West Village continues to display a photograph of Parker and Nixon in its storefront window (see Fig. 34). While the cupcake has been popular for a long time, its exposure on *SATC* has certainly contributed to its status as a trendy food item.

Katan's 2005 memoir with its cupcake cover reflects what ultimately becomes a trend in chick publishing. Here it is important to clarify, however, that Katan's book displays a symbol which is ambiguous. While a writer for the food blog *Bravado Cooking* writes a post about children and cupcakes called "The Cupcake: Definitely an American Classic," elsewhere Amy Cavanaugh "links the little cakes to sexuality" (29). Cavanaugh cites Rachel Kramer Bussel co-author of a popular food blog *Cupcakes Take the Cake* regarding what cupcakes can signify (29). Bussel who is bisexual explains that the cupcake might at times symbolize resistance to the heteronormative social order by the GLBT community:

There's a segment of my blog readership that comes from the indie-craft world, and I see an overlap between people who go to craft fairs, and who are lesbian or bisexual. . . . We're taking back some of those traditionally feminine skills by doing them in a feminist kind of way . . . [and] it's kitschy cool. Even though cupcakes are very mainstream, if we make Pride cupcakes and bring them to the parade, then there's a reclaiming of

that as something valid for women without it capitulating that idea that women have to cook. (qtd. in Cavanaugh 29)

Thus the cupcake on the cover of Katan's memoir is a chick symbol that can also hail readers who seek an alternative to a heterosexual narrative of breast cancer.

The cupcake's status as a symbol with double resonances raises a couple of possibilities regarding Katan's role as a sick-lit author and the relationship she has with her publisher. One possibility is that Katan and her publisher may have worked collaboratively to devise a cover which can register with culture broadly as a gendered object with ties to consumer culture, domesticity, and the heteronormative romance, but which Katan can also use to celebrate her sexuality while subverting heteronormativity and, by extension, the corporatization of breast cancer. *One Night* is, in fact, published by Alyson Books formerly Alyson Publications, a publisher of LGBT literature founded in 1980 by Sasha Alyson (Howell 32). As at least one commentator has remarked, Alyson, from its inception, published "GLBT authors, often when no other publisher would dare sign them on" (McDonald 25). Consequently, Alyson might well be viewed as a type of "oppositional" or "dissident press" (Danky 269). If Alyson is the party responsible for facilitating the design of *One Night's* cover, it may be that the publisher of this work also has subversion in mind. However, Danky also points out that the oppositional press will invariably need to deal with the tensions produced in a marketplace driven by "the mainstream print media" (269). This appears to have happened with Alyson when it was acquired by LPI Media in 1995 at which point it is said to have begun to pay "increased attention [to]

elevating editorial and design work to professional standards . . . [to] reach . . . into a broader market” (Dahlin 29). With Alyson seeking to increase its reach into the mass marketplace, it may be the case that it has aimed to incorporate design features with broad commercial appeal and this may also be the reason for the text’s cover. Whichever the case, Katan uses the cupcake symbol strategically to surmount socially-imposed constraints which she experiences as a woman with breast cancer.

When discussing the ways such identity politics play themselves out in autobiography, Brian Loftus has noted authors who self identify as queer can attempt to rewrite a “mimetic anchor to signify differently” through constructions of doubleness (30). The hoped for outcome is that “no text, trope, or even single term can be read in one way . . . [so as to] disallow a ‘straight’ reading” (Loftus 29-30). Katan achieves precisely this outcome when she makes the cupcake a trademark which signifies her work. If the cupcake has come to stand for a hyperfeminized commodity item, then Katan uses this symbol to queer those capitalist, heteronormative institutions for which it stands and by extension, as I will discuss shortly, those pink-ribbon fundraisers which are also tied to consumption and underpinned by heteronormative ideologies.

The intent of Katan’s intended subversion becomes apparent in a series of photographs used in an article written by Scott Andrews to promote *Saving Tania’s Privates*—Katan’s one-woman play “adapted from her award-winning memoir” (Andrews). The photographs, taken under the artistic direction of Katan’s girlfriend Angela Ellsworth, depict a satisfied-looking Katan posed on a

hospital gurney. Katan is staring directly into the camera while surrounded by a group of young women, all of whom are costumed as stereotypical naughty nurses (see Fig. 35). Nude from the waist up, Katan's mastectomy scars are covered by two red-frosted cupcakes. The image is indicative of the playfulness one finds throughout *One Night* where, for instance, Katan confesses that imagining herself "on the set of a hot new lesbo porno" with the head nurse as "fluff" girl helped her to survive a difficult medical procedure (7). The cupcake as a symbol in Katan's work can always mean more than one thing. Readers may see it as a relatively conventional symbol one associates with consumer and chick cultures. However, the paratextual trail associated with Katan's work can also be followed to expose the red-iced cupcake as signifying Katan's rejection of the passive, overly feminized identity Brinker associates with the color pink and breast cancer. Whatever way the cupcake reads on Katan's book cover, the photographs in this series show that Katan intends to subvert traditions which privilege the great man (aka normate and heteronormativity), particularly since, as Andrews explains, the images are reworkings of Rembrandt's canonical "The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp." This canonical painting depicts only men, a group of physicians, surrounding a corpse (also male). According to Andrews, Katan and Ellsworth refigure the classic image of someone who has already died to make it into one where "Death [only] looms as a possibility in the future" (14). Thus Katan's recreation of an iconic image allows her to reimagine herself as apart from and having control over patriarchy, death, and heterosexism.

Queering the Romantic Breast Cancer Narrative

The cupcake is a symbol from chick culture which gets attached to Katan's memoir and the body of work she prepares to go along with it; beyond this, there are numerous narrative conventions in her memoir which remind readers of chick fiction as well. There is, for instance, the representation of a comedic and ever-so-slightly annoying maternal figure: Katan's mother Joelle is figured in the memoir by her daughter as a French-born, forty-two-year-old woman with "a love for American pop culture that borders on, and sometimes teeters over into, obsession" (99). "One would think," remarks Katan, "[that] my mother, who has lived in America for twenty-nine years, would be interested in filling out the paperwork needed to become an American citizen, but that would cut into her television-watching and *People* magazine-reading time" (99). Likewise, a man whom she refers to in the memoir as "Alexander Billingford III, my best gay boyfriend" (9), also fulfills a stereotypical role in the text as "BFF" and confidante. However, the most notable interplay one finds between Katan's work and other chick texts is the depiction of a series of romantic debacles which occur prior to her meeting the perfect mate. While *One Night* ends with Katan and Angela living together happily ever after, her memoir is mostly about of a series of disastrous and humorously depicted romantic relationships with various women she dated before meeting Ellsworth, a few of whom she explicitly describes as "toxic" (16). There is a predictable repetition of narrative convention at work in this memoir with Katan representing herself as someone who must, through a series of relationship mistakes, claim the self-respect required for her to

be in a “healthy” relationship (274). While the texts one associates with chick culture predominantly represent heterosexual romances, the conventions used by Katan to narrate the story of her love life are similar to those which readers of chick texts have come to expect.

Some critics have pointed to examples of chick lit and the chick flick which focus on the lives of women who are queer to argue that chick culture is a site of social progress. In the essay collection *Chick Flicks* edited by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, Lisa Henderson analyzes the film *Go Fish* (1994) which she describes “a much awaited lesbian romantic comedy” (132) with all the “narrative hallmarks” belonging to the heterosexual chick flick (139). In her view, the film makes a number of “progressive appropriations” from mainstream popular narratives (135) which in turn reinforce the characters’ “social and cultural legitimacy as lesbians” (139). This approach does of course implicate the “queer subject” in debates over whether or not she can only speak in ways that reify the same power relations that might otherwise be said to constrain her (Loftus 31). In other words, while some critics have been optimistic that these narratives represent a shift to a textual culture that might be more inclusive—and that they represent chick culture’s flexibility to mutate in ways that overwrite or expand the boundaries of heteronormativity—the question that is invariably raised is whether or not such narratives “offer a true ‘queer’ alternative to the heterosexual romance or merely shape lesbian desire to fit a heterosexual romantic model” (*Chick Flicks*, Ferriss and Young 11). One could make the argument that the doubleness in Katan’s narrative is problematic for this reason,

particularly since her memoir replicates several conventions from texts that belong to chick culture and from the breast cancer memoir broadly. That Katan be held accountable to represent the perspectives of all women with breast cancer who self identify as queer is, however, an expectation which, in and of itself, is problematic and one which she clearly resists.

By replicating conventions found in chick lit and blending them with ones found in more mainstream breast cancer memoirs, Katan's repetition of narrative convention becomes a powerful statement for inclusion which she makes on her own terms. If, for instance, Katan's irreverent use of the cupcake in and around her memoir serves a dual purpose by enabling her to critique mainstream culture from within, then her irreverent treatment of the conventional narrative formulae which usually makes up more traditional or conservative breast cancer narratives fulfills a similar role. G. Thomas Couser, who lists many of the breast cancer narrative's conventions in *Recovering Bodies*, points out that "A number of . . . scenes appear in nearly every narrative, generally in the same order" (42). These include the "discovery by the author of a suspicious lump in her breast" as well as information about the diagnosis, surgery, treatment, and eventual restoration (*RB* 42). What I would emphasize is that the tropes which make up the breast cancer narrative are often shaped around heteronormativity and the heterosexual romance such as when Betty Rollin depicts her husband as the one to notice her breast lump during a "routine sexual feel" (*First, You Cry* 11). Even if discovery of the lump occurs in another way, there tends to be some obligatory discussion over the ways in which the breast cancer diagnosis impacts a woman's sex life, often

precisely because her loss of a breast may impact her ability to please a man sexually. Thus Cathy Bueti's *Breastless in the City* includes several descriptions of failed sexual encounters until she meets Lou who, through his acceptance of her, brings about her redemption. Geralyn Lucas also shares her husband's first response to her body after breast cancer surgery.³⁷ The idea that husbands and boyfriends receive this much attention in the mainstream cultural conversation about breast cancer—as much sometimes as the woman herself—is a factor which irritated Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Sedgwick was annoyed when she was made to sit through a “hospital-organized breast cancer support group” where the assumption seemed to be that “[women's] unceasing function is to present, heterosexually, the spectacle of the place [meaning breasts] where men may disavow their own mortality” (*Tendencies* 262). As Sedgwick points out, many women regardless of sexual orientation find this deeply embedded ideology to be constraining and outright irritating; however, mass culture's privileging of heterosexuality can prove especially alienating for women with breast cancer who are not straight and who are thus made to feel as outsiders within the very institutions which they depend on to treat them.

³⁷ In *WIWL*, Geralyn Lucas writes that that it was her husband Tyler who removed her bandages after her mastectomy and that he immediately became interested in sex after seeing her scar (65). Lucas finds her husband's desire for her to be affirming in the memoir. Likewise, in *Breastless*, Bueti states she felt “like the luckiest girl in the whole world” after Lou's positive response to her body (220).

It is through its replication of conventions found in chick fiction that Katan's *One Night* achieves a particular force as an explicitly polemical text: it is a text which undermines heteronormativity while always just adhering to social rules sanctioned by capitalism which have declared that irreverent women and women with breast cancer are a marketable commodity. What is important here is that when it comes to discussions about sex and sexuality specifically, chick culture is textual space that permits women to "talk about sex . . . [and] emerge as confident agents and narrators [as they do so]" (Attwood 11). Along these lines, Henderson has, importantly, suggested that chick texts dealing with sexual orientation can revise literary conventions in ways that enable narrators to avoid recapitulating the "coming-out story," as well as the "excruciating drama of recognition and loss" which are mandatory tropes in other types of confessional writing (134). Katan achieves precisely this effect. The opening paragraph to her memoir demonstrates how she is aware of the sorts of confessions she is supposed to make when talking about her breast cancer. She writes: "It started with a lump. It always starts with a lump" (Katan 1). From here, she makes what one might consider an obligatory confession of her sexual orientation: "No, actually it started with a girlfriend who found the lump" (1). However, what follows this statement is also important: "Wait," she writes, "it started before the lump, before the idea of having girlfriends even entered my mind; it started five years earlier when I was sixteen years old" (1). In what follows, Katan explains that her "oncologist told [her] that by the time cancer [is found,] it usually has been growing for five years" (1). This paragraph which begins *One Night* is important

for the way in immediately allows Katan to show her awareness of—and irreverence toward—what she knows the typical breast cancer narrative is supposed to say. Her point seems to be that women with breast cancer are obliged to disclose information about their sexualities and sexual activities. But more important, she suggests that the culture’s preoccupation with sex and sexuality should perhaps be secondary to other questions readers should be asking, such as why breast cancer is so difficult to detect and why mass culture’s response to the disease is so narrow. In this way, she reminds her reader that her identity and her memoir are about more than her sexuality. Katan uses sick lit to expose and challenge social strictures which culture imposes on women with breast cancer who self identify as queer or lesbian. Examples of such social strictures are cited in an article by the Lesbians and Breast Cancer Project Team titled “Silent No More: Coming out about Lesbians and Cancer” which discusses the findings of a qualitative study done with twenty-six women from this demographic. Those participating in and facilitating the study felt it was important to debunk a set of specific “rules for lesbians with breast cancer” which get constructed both within and outside that community (40). For example, one such misperception encountered by some woman interviewed by the team was that “breast loss isn’t so hard for lesbians because lesbians reject society’s ideas about what women should look like, and because women partners are more accepting” (40). Katan’s narrative often intervenes in these sorts of essentializing views such as when she describes how difficult it was for her to show her mastectomy scars to Angela for the first time:

So there I was, standing in front of this woman I desperately wanted to impress, about to take off my shirt and reveal a very fresh scar. I felt a bit nervous, a little clammy. I felt small and unusual. What if she thought she wanted to see the scar, until she actually saw it? (206)

Here Katan both firmly adheres to and revises another convention of the breast cancer narrative—the moment where a woman scarred by breast cancer is redeemed by the person whom she loves. While this is, in many ways, a highly conventional scene played frequently in breast cancer narratives, its performance within the context of a narrative about a woman who is not heterosexual takes on added significance for its refusal to privilege heterosexual desire.

To fully appreciate why Katan's memoir is so significant, one can return briefly to Brinker's *Promise Me*. While Brinker includes one anecdote about a gay man who came out to his family after his sister died of breast cancer (*Promise Me* 186), she barely mentions the perspectives of women who are not heterosexual. In one instance she comments that the former *Sex and the City* star Cynthia Nixon attended one of her Komen celebrity fundraises to “deliver a beautifully straightforward message . . . to the lesbian community” (*Promise Me* 255); however, Brinker does not qualify that Nixon herself identifies as a lesbian, activist, and a breast cancer survivor (Yuan 30). The mention of Brinker's *Promise Me* returns this analysis of *One Night* back to the matter of the corporatization of breast cancer and back to Katan's irreverent subversion of the cupcake. In *One Night*, it is while recounting the events associated with her second breast cancer diagnosis that Katan includes an anecdote about consuming

a pink-frosted cupcake. On the day in question, she and her mother have stopped at a cafe where they share mochas before proceeding to a medical appointment with Katan's surgeon. At her anxious mother's prodding, a frustrated Katan accepts five dollars to purchase "a fancy looking cupcake" which she admits turns out to be so "amazing . . . [that] when [she] lick[ed] the fluffy pink frosting, it lick[ed] [her] back" (59). Elsewhere, Katan clarifies that the cupcake is a source of pleasure with negative ramifications: "The cupcake is the perfect metaphor for a one-night stand; it's alluring, sexy, ephemeral- then you bite into it and realize that the frosting stains your lips, and there are all those empty calories, and much like a one-night stand, you should only have one, but you keep coming back for more!" ("Cupcake Interview"). As a guest blogger for *The Phoenix New Times*, Katan has observed in a post she titled "Why Tania Katan Would Rather Lick Lance Armstrong's Sweat than Eat a Handful of Pink M&Ms" that "the mascots of Breast Cancer Awareness Month [are] cupcakes, cookies and dancing candy-coated chocolates." As Katan points out, "there's tons of scientific evidence that shows the link between sugar and increased cancer risk": she thus determines it is a problem that "Suzy G. [meaning Susan G. Komen], among other cancer orgs" endorse these harmful products as part of their cause-related marketing initiatives. Therefore, it would seem that within *One Night*, it is no coincidence that the cupcake's dangerously seductive icing turns out to be pink. The ubiquitous pink ribbon works in a similar way insofar as cause-related marketing entices the public with activities which are, on the surface, unthreatening but which, under

close examination, are underpinned by ideologies which perpetuate consumption and have harmful consequences.

To end this discussion of Katan, I want to turn to the conclusion of her memoir which culminates with her critique of a “pink” breast cancer fundraiser. In *My One Nights Stand with Cancer*, Tania Katan irreverently ridicules cause-related marketing for the way it perpetuates mass culture’s narrow views over what constitutes a beautiful body. In her direct address to the reader of *One Night*, Katan writes: “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but at every breast cancer conference, fund-raiser, or 10K, women are given copious amounts of cosmetic products” (270). Upon making this comment, Katan asks: “Are women who are dealing with cancer supposed to feel healthier if their eye shadow matches their baseball cap?” (270). For such reasons, Katan opts to run a “topless 10 K” (269). Her decision to participate in the pink-ribbon event, but on her own terms, is a final example of how Katan simultaneously breaks and follows generic rules. In other words, her narrative follows the pattern of those popular narratives discussed in chapter two where women are ultimately depicted as redeemed by their participation in a breast cancer charity event. Clearly Katan is behaving as a good and responsible citizen when she runs the race topless to show other women “a healthy body in a different form” (270). However, the fact that she is well aware that the sight of her bare torso seems to “stun several cub scouts” who are “the official helpers of [the] event” (272) shows her intent to undermine the rules which dictate who gets to be an American citizen and under what terms, particularly since the scouts are an institution founded upon traditions of

patriarchy, consumerism, heteronormativity, and the nuclear family: in short, cub scouts are normates in the making and Katan takes pleasure in unsettling them. Here, again, Katan follows the rules we expect in the breast cancer narrative, but also breaks them.

Sick Lit and Expanding the Parameters of Authenticity

Near the beginning of *Lopsided: How having breast cancer can be really distracting. A Memoir*, Meredith Norton includes an “Author’s Note” which chastises the reader who expects her text to be an entirely authentic version of what having breast cancer entails:

My sister has called me a liar at nearly every meal we’ve shared since I started talking in 1972. . . . I am not a liar. However, I am a storyteller. (Although a storyteller with a good lawyer changes names, and identifying characteristics and details to protect herself and the privacy of her characters, as I have done.) This book is my attempt to communicate an experience as I perceived it. It is not an affidavit. Try to enjoy it for what it is worth. (n.p.)

This disclaimer is important for the way it signals Norton’s intention to break with the truth when narrating her illness story. While such disclaimers are common and even obligatory to some extent in the world of mass-produced memoir, what they ultimately signify, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out, is just “how complex questions of the authenticity of experience and the integrity of identity can become, [and] how critical they are to the central notion

of the relationship between life writer and reader” (*Reading Autobiography* 37). Smith and Watson are discussing various life narratives which serve as examples of “charges of autobiographical bad faith or hoaxing” including, most famously, James Frey’s partially fabricated addiction memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (*Reading Autobiography* 37).³⁸ Frey, as is well known, was publicly humiliated by Oprah Winfrey when she endorsed his memoir only to discover, after the fact, that portions of his narrative were blatantly untrue.

When lying happen in life narratives about trauma, it should prompt us to ask whether or not it is possible for narrators to find ways of articulating *truthfully* certain terrible events which defy expression in language. While Norton’s disclaimer absolves her from accusations that her work is written in bad faith or is a hoax, it is still important to consider those factors which make it possible for her to tell her life story using hyperbole in what is an irreverent tone. This is because, ultimately, a life narrative is deemed as authentic only if its audience is willing to perceive it as such. To be acknowledged and accepted, the narrator of a breast cancer memoir must tell her story in ways an audience is willing to accept while still appeasing the readers’ anxieties regarding changes to physical appearance, loss of autonomy, and mortality. As I have been showing, mainstream America has been conditioned to favour those narrators who demonstrate that they have learned something from having experienced this disease (the confession) which they can now, through public service, use to the good of others. Chick culture is a

³⁸ For further details about this hoax and others, see G. Thomas Couser’s *Memoir* and Julie Rak’s *Boom*.

space where women can follow these narrative conventions, but also play with them in ways which allow them to achieve autonomy, establish powerful identities, and, in the case of Katan, and now Norton, create effective political commentaries. Lucas and Bueti write sick lit which allows them to claim positions of authority and prestige in certain communities. Much of the political work that takes place with relation to their texts happens in the works' paratexts. This is also true of Katan and Norton: however, in the case of their works, these authors manage to embed in their narratives some very polemical moments which unsettle normative culture. These authors do so while still writing in a narrative voice which is consistent with the one that is often found in chick culture.

As a woman diagnosed with "stage III inflammatory breast cancer," Norton is writing about a type of cancer which only has a "forty percent survival rate" (*Lopsided* 56). Thus Norton's position as a life writer is particularly difficult if she wants to achieve commercial success: to do so, she has to deliver a narrative about a health crisis of the most serious sort in ways that might be therapeutic for herself and her reader. Norton clearly wants to achieve these objectives without calling upon tropes which situate her as overly sentimental or as a victim. In *Lopsided*, Norton shares that speaking with friends and family about her diagnosis has been exceedingly difficult: "[after awhile] my delivery was implausible [and,] after the tenth time of telling the same story it was hard to avoid abridging, or even to sound sincere" (56). When Norton attempts "in all honesty" (57) to reassure acquaintances that she can cope with what is happening to her, she finds that friends and family cannot accept her response. "Well," Norton recalls in

Lopsided, “the truth was that I was doing great, until I saw their funereal fucking faces” (58). Norton is irreverent about the ways others treat her because she wants to show her readers how she resents being defined by others as a cancer patient: as she speaks irreverently about the responses of family and friends, she regains some sense of agency as she copes with traumatic circumstances and the difficulties that come with trying to articulate her situation to other people.

One of the reasons that Norton can speak this way and get away with it is because a portion of the mainstream readership is prepared to embrace the “lippy, lovable” narrator—this is the same sort of narrators some readers will associate with chick fiction—described on her book’s cover (blurb). Although Norton does not identify her work as belonging to chick culture, there is some evidence to support that others interpret her this way. A book review by Lisa Davis-Craig entitled “Reality Chicks Pen Juicy Memoirs” indicates that a number of contemporary women’s memoirs, Norton’s among them, deal with “the same topics” as those found within “*Bridget Jones’s Diary*, the novel which “set the genre of chick lit firmly on the path to success” (98). Davis-Craig, who tells readers that “not all chicks[just] write fiction,” describes Norton as the “sharp and unsentimental” author of a breast cancer narrative who manages to deliver a “surprisingly funny memoir of survival” (98). Davis-Craig’s review begins to demonstrate how it is that Norton’s self representation corresponds with an image of a type of woman who is currently a marketable commodity because her work can be associated with chick texts.

Like the cover of *My One Night Stand with Cancer*, *Lopsided's* cover is a maze of intertextual references, all of which work to blur distinctions between fictional chick lit and non-fiction memoir. The dust jacket to the American edition of *Lopsided* features a black female figure superimposed on a starkly-white background. Cheryl Graham refers to the image on this cover as a type of “vector artwork” commonly used on book jackets and characterized by graphic silhouettes “striking in their simplicity” and inexpensive to produce (“Inspiration”). When discussing *Lopsided's* cover specifically, Graham makes the point that “A universal pictogram [has been] altered in an unexpected way to convey the humor in this memoir” (“Inspiration”). Beyond this, *Lopsided's* cover image bears a strong resemblance to a set of images used to promote a chick flick entitled *The Ugly Truth* (2009) (see Fig. 36 and Fig. 37). Moreover, the publisher’s blurb on the dust jacket emphasizes Norton’s experiences as an American girl living in Paris. This latter feature can also register as subtly chick, particularly since the final season of *SATC* depicts Carrie Bradshaw’s failed attempt as an “American Girl” to begin a new life in Paris. Even the publisher’s description of Norton as a “masterful social observer,” prompts recollection of the city-dwelling flaneuse which elsewhere I have identified as part of chick culture. Finally, the fact that the female figure on Norton’s text is depicted with a detached head is also important. Chick-lit covers which feature images of women either without heads or discernible facial characteristics are a key signifier which marks the genre and include “Terry McMillan’s faceless, statuesque women [on the cover of *Waiting to Exhale*], and the rear-view [of the woman pictured] on Melissa Bank’s 1999

novel *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*" (Attenburg) (see Fig. 38 and Fig. 39).

To add to those visual and rhetorical elements of style which invite the reader to recall foundational texts from chick culture, Norton's memoir is also marketed with a conspicuous endorsement by Laurie Notaro. Notaro is the author of a collection of several books of personal reflections including the one mentioned on Norton's cover entitled *The Idiot Girls' Action-Adventure Club*. In the blurb composed by Notaro, the writer defines the experience of reading Norton's memoir as discovering a new "best friend." Here Notaro uses a gendered chick phrase—chick lit and the chick flick are rife with individuals who fulfill the role of "BFF"—to confirm that Norton is an author with whom readers will be able to relate. Notaro's *The Idiot Girls' Action-Adventure Club* (see Fig. 40) echoes the title belonging to Melissa Bank's iconic chick text *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* which has been described as "an icon of chick lit" (Knowlton 86). At the same time, the publisher's information on *Lopsided*'s dust jacket flap also compares Norton to David Sedaris and Augusten Burroughs, both of whom are popular and well-established serial life writers. Thus the material book reflects the publisher's aim to make the book appeal to as many readers as possible by blurring the distinction between categories of women's life writing and popular fiction, in part by using chick signifiers. The fact that Norton uses her irreverent persona to write what is ultimately a commercially successful narrative—*Lopsided* is published by Penguin in hardcover, paperback, and audio formats and remains in print four years after its 2009 publication—are signals that

a significant percentage of the public can and will perceive the irreverent chick narrator's representation of breast cancer as an authentic one.

Meredith Norton on Race and Authenticity

Perhaps Norton's most important accomplishment with *Lopsided* is the manner in which she shows how African American women can experience added pressures due to class and race. As an African American, some of the regulative dynamics related to authenticity which Norton encounters when she is diagnosed relate, especially, to class and race. In feminist and academic conversations about breast cancer, issues related to racial inequity are subjects of much concern. Some studies indicate that African American women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer experience tensions over class in different ways that do some other women from other ethnic backgrounds. For example, there is evidence which suggests that an African American woman with breast cancer can face a different set of socially-imposed constraints than a Caucasian woman as she seeks treatment and support. A somewhat startling anecdote is found in data collected by Emily Abel and Saskia Subramanian who, in a qualitative study, interviewed an African American woman who stated that, when diagnosed with breast cancer, "she joined a support group for white women and well as one for blacks" (12). The reason she gave for doing so was that she felt "white women [have] unique access to the most up-to-date information [about care and treatment of this disease]" (12). There are a number of equally disturbing claims related to the intersection of socio-economic status and ethnic background elsewhere; for

instance, Jennifer Fishman cites research which shows “that people of colour are disproportionately exposed to greater environmental risks in both community and occupational settings” and that this may account for increased instances of breast cancer within African American communities (186). These examples help to explain why feminist scholars continue to regard Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals*—a narrative which aims to address class and race-based inequity—as such an important contribution to conversations about breast cancer.

Norton’s narrative addresses intersectional politics related to race and class in a different way, and one which makes sense in a postfeminist milieu where capitalist institutions take every opportunity to hail women as consumers. As much of her narrative makes clear, her socio-economic status is privileged and, further, she has no difficulty accessing health information or fine medical care. Norton, in fact, emphasizes in *Lopsided* that her father is a successful and affluent physician. However, this raises a different set of issues for Norton: as Cherise A. Harris and Nikki Khanna suggest, some African American women link “authenticity . . . to [social] class,” and that “members of the middle- and upper-classes may have trouble being perceived as authentically black by other blacks” (644). When commenting on how this mindset can further complicate African American women’s experiences with breast cancer, Gayle Sulik cites the work of LaShaune Johnson who points out that “‘classyness’ and sophistication in breast cancer programs and organizations run by African American women [are important to its members]” because in part these activities are ways for some participants to acquire cultural capital within powerful “social and cultural

institutions” (qtd. in *Pink Ribbon Blues* 42). Research supports that some African American women who have breast cancer want to use their class status to distance themselves from stereotypes which present them as oppressed and disadvantaged. Additionally, Sulik points to another problem which is that affluent African American women with breast cancer can find themselves expected to perform as representative role models in cancer fundraisers. In *Pink Ribbon Blues*, Sulik recounts an anecdote about a fifty-one-year-old African American woman named “Melinda” who had survived breast cancer and wished to share her story in the service of other women. Although Melinda was initially “committed to increasing awareness among African American women,” the number of organizers of breast cancer fundraisers who asked her to speak was so large that “her voluntarism started to impede her efforts to find balance in her life” (Sulik 308). Melinda later shared with Sulik that she felt one of the reasons her story was in such great demand was because it benefited breast cancer organizations “trying to increase diversity” (309). In other words, as an African American woman she felt objectified as a token representative. The tangled dynamics I have outlined here suggest that for some women there is no correct way to narrate the experience of breast cancer. Women can be objectified on the basis of their racial identities by both those within and outside their ethnic peer group.

However, chick culture has proven itself to be a site where women writers of colour engage with and attempt to address gender’s intersection with race, class, and sexuality. Terry McMillan’s *Waiting To Exhale*, a novel which Lisa A. Guerrero lists with *Bridget Jones’s Diary* as a foundational chick-lit text, is

described as “[marking] a major shift in the ways in which the lives of women were portrayed in popular culture” (90). According to Guerrero who refers to novels such as this one as “sistah lit,” chick lit by and about African American women plays an important role in addressing “the space of black women in America . . . normalized as belonging within the limited boundaries of servant and/or sex object from the time of slavery” (89). Sistah lit which makes use of similar images, themes, and stereotypes to those found in *Sex and the City* can do something productive when it represents “a population of black women who are upper class, couture wearing, trendsetting and powerful” (Guerrero 101). Along these lines, Ferriss and Young point to work by Tia Williams, an African American author of chick fiction who wants to counter views held by “many people [who] still think you need to be downtrodden to be truly black” (qtd. in *Chick Lit*, Ferris and Young 8). According to Williams, it is important to make clear that “black girls can [do more than try to] keep up with the Joneses” (qtd. in Ogunnaike). In her view, it is a moment of pride to be able to convey that “black girls . . . **are** the Joneses” (qtd. in Ogunnaike, emphasis added). This is a point which Norton also makes when she reminds her reader that she, along with her parents and siblings, “embrace” the “WASP spirit” (40) and that, while growing up, she felt secure in the safety of her “Cosby cocoon” (132). By stating that her family is like the Cosbys, she is able to honour her parents’ accomplishments and own sense of heritage while also mocking the privilege she knows her family enjoys: she does this in a way that pokes fun at white, middle-class America. To do this work, Norton “performs the autobiographical ‘role’ of narcissistic female”

(Isaak 54) by speaking “irreverently” in ways which make it abundantly clear that she does not want to be objectified or victimized based on her ethnicity, but that she also wants to critique normative American culture for its privileging of whiteness and for its obsessive consumptive practices.³⁹

Norton’s use of chick-style irreverence to produce a double discourse is what enables her to resist objectification on the basis of her gender, racial, ethnic, and socio-economic background while still simultaneously drawing attention to the existence of race-based disparity. This is an accomplishment during postfeminism where such critiques are not easy to make. In the case of life-writing, as Sidonie Smith suggests, “when people assigned in varying ways to the cultural position of ‘other’ speak as autobiographical subjects, they consciously and/or unconsciously negotiate the laws of genre that work to construct them as culturally recognizable subjects” (404). By tracing Norton’s comments about gender, race, and class, it becomes possible to see how irreverent humour allows her to vacillate between her acknowledgement of racism while disidentifying with

³⁹ Meredith Norton was born in 1970 and would thus have grown up with NBC’s *The Cosby Show* which was in production from 1984-1992. The popular sitcom focussed on the lives of the Huxtables, an affluent African American family. It was produced by Bill Cosby who also starred in the role of Cliff Huxtable, a father and physician. The program sparked controversy. Those who saw it as valuable claimed the program’s depiction of a wealthy African American family avoided “racial stereotyping” (“Critiquing,” Smith 393). Detractors accused the program’s creators of merely “showcasing a Black family in White face [and for failing to] address racial and social issues” (Smith 394).

its effects on her personally and thereby disallowing her reader to identify her as a victim or, alternatively, as someone who is too militant. In a moment which does not repudiate feminism, Norton recounts how, when in 1975 her kindergarten teacher charged the class with the responsibility of caring for two pet rats, she changed the pets' names from "Cheesy and Fuzzy" to "Panther and Plague" (111). As Norton confirms, Panther was duly named in honour of the Black Panthers and she points out wryly that her insistence that the rodents be referred to as such made the "white teacher in a fairly multicultural school in the early 70s" anxious (111). Norton goes so far as to say that she found it justifiable to usurp the teacher's authority because "black power militant big kids" deserved more respect than they otherwise seemed destined to receive (112). Elsewhere, Norton claims to have experienced only "one undisputable personal case of racism [herself]" (64) which took place while she was on a "middle-school" ski trip with a "nutty, crunchy" church group known as "Oldham Hall" (64). When recalling this anecdote, Norton explains how the chaperones falsely accused her of stealing the pocket money belonging to a white classmate. Norton claims the accusations were motivated by race and with great indignation, recalls that when the money which had merely been misplaced was later found, the "pious Oldman Hall bastards" did not apologize or admit their mistake (65). At this juncture, Norton points out that her father was, ironically, much wealthier than the father of the child—Norton calls this man a "mediocre real estate agent" (65)—whom the church officials accused her of robbing.

The source of the disagreement over race is, as Norton sees it, due to mainstream culture's privileging of the "Oldman" (65): in *Lopsided*, this social arrangement which privileges the normate is the cause of divisiveness between members of subordinated groups. Norton makes this point as she recalls how her friendship with another young woman ends over a disagreement regarding race. In this example, Norton reflects upon how she and her best friend from college separate over Norton's apparent lack of interest in debates over racial injustices occurring in the United States. As Norton explains, her "close as sisters" friend Andrea (66) "called [her] an Uncle Tom . . . and wrote [her] off because [Norton] refused to join her militant war against 'The Man'" (63). As Norton explains it, in Andrea's view, she belonged to "a list of 'educated' black women who'd been successfully brainwashed by white society" (66). On the one hand, the brand of sarcastic humour Norton uses to recount this anecdote can be read as a type of backlash against what ultimately are feminist politics. Before drawing this conclusion, though, it seems important to note that Norton also, in a rare moment of seriousness, admits that Andrea's "words [had been] painful [to her]" (66): After she admits this, she documents their eventual reconciliation. As Norton puts it, "Nothing wipes a slate clean faster than being diagnosed with a terminal disease. This was one of the best things about cancer" (*Lopsided* 67). Thus her way of resolving this issue is to return momentarily to the tropes one would associate with any standard illness narrative, namely that sickness motivates those who are ill to improve themselves. By doing so, she fluctuates between generic conventions to deliver a message which is simultaneously safe and subversive.

Norton's commentary is subversive because it draws attention to a social hierarchy founded on principles which privilege Goffman's normate. While Norton never claims to agree with Andrea's view that "the whole world had conspired to keep black people down" (63), she also starkly states that "White men, as an institution, have been willing to trample on and exploit their own women and any other race that interferes with their progress" (64). This is a bold claim for a woman to make during the time of postfeminism: here again, she performs a characteristic slip between militant critique and foolishness when she irreverently notes that she came to this "conclusion . . . years ago," but that she has "probably spent all of forty minutes thinking about [the matter] since" (64). Yet Norton does sustain her critique of white male normativity here and elsewhere in *Lopsided*: nowhere is this more apparent than when Norton remarks that her own breast cancer experiences are made more difficult due to the public's admiration for cancer-icon Lance Armstrong. Armstrong's remarkable and unexpected recovery from advanced testicular cancer which metastasized to his brain is well known in Europe and North America and particularly in the United States where the former champion cyclist established the charity Livestrong in 1997 and, where, for a number of years preceding his recently confirmed involvement in a drug scandal, he was revered by many as a celebrity.⁴⁰ When

⁴⁰ Lance Armstrong won the Tour de France for seven consecutive years until his final victory 2005. He stepped down as chairman and then as a board member of Livestrong in November, 2012, after allegations that he had taken performance-enhancing drugs were

Norton's friends and family members give her multiple copies of Armstrong's memoirs as gifts, supposedly to inspire her to face her cancer in the same way Armstrong professed to have faced his, Norton felt annoyed. In the first place, she observes that Armstrong's memoirs are written by a ghostwriter "or *nègre*, as the French call them" (129). Here her critique of Armstrong extends to a rather cryptic observation regarding racial politics in the United States where, in her view, it is "typical to call the person who does all the labor, like building America, but gets none of the credit, a black" (129). She is also uninspired by Armstrong's bravado and surmises that she would be far more touched by the life story belonging to "a fat slob on welfare who . . . manages to pull himself together, go macrobiotic, and beat cancer" (133). What Norton seems to question here, and with remarkable foresight given the scandal involving Armstrong, is the normate's authenticity. Armstrong is, after all, the quintessential normate who, at the height of his popularity, seems to embody almost every one of the characteristics Goffmann includes in his definition of the term. What Norton believes when she is writing *Lopsided* is that, although people have been inspired by Armstrong, what he represents is harmful because it is based on a "story [which] does not represent the average person" (Garrison n.p.). Norton rightly shows that the values which the culture upholds which make it possible for him to be regarded as a hero are ones which undermine many people with cancer. Indeed, one of the reasons Norton resents Armstrong is because "Nobody would

verified (Macur 14). Armstrong's Tour victories were stripped from him as an outcome to the drug scandal.

describe him as a kid” (131). According to Norton, Armstrong can easily construct a self-representation of himself which others will readily accept as one belonging to an “adult” when she cannot (*Lopsided* 131). Ironically, there is a tension in *Lopsided* which suggests that Norton believes the existing social order has made it difficult for her to speak and to be taken seriously. Ultimately, she questions culture’s demand for life stories by people with cancer who are, in some way, remarkable as opposed to ones by people who have lead marginal or even merely ordinary existences prior to, and during, their diagnoses.

Meredith Norton never mentions pink ribbons in her memoir; however, since pink cause-related marketing fundraisers are, as I have suggested, often founded upon social rules which pay the majority of their attention to those who fit within the definition of normate, her critique of Armstrong is a questioning of those same values which get articulated in organizations such as SGK. Although Brinker writes that Komen welcomes diversity and reminds readers that “a woman diagnosed with breast cancer in predominantly African American Cook county, Illinois, is far more likely to die than her white counterpart in Peoria” (*Promise Me* 101), she tends to gloss quickly over identity politics related to ethnicity and race. Of course, she opposes racism and she verbalizes her concern for “rural women, poor women, Native American women, and many women of color who [are] underserved” (*Promise Me* 315-316). Even so, it is clear that within the narrative constructed by these institutions, a racial and certainly class-based hierarchy exists. This hierarchy is a flaw in the dominant culture which Katan and Norton work to protest in their respective memoirs.

On this note, it is fascinating that Norton rewrites the popular social script which suggests that the woman with breast cancer must become a model citizen, as evidenced by her participation in some form of charitable giving or corporate citizenship. Indeed, Norton's final accomplishment in writing *Lopsided* is that she unsettles the trope of the comic closure. While Norton understands that many of her readers will expect her to tell them that her "cancer was the miracle, the catalyst that would pull [her] out of mediocrity and into distinction" (207), she explains that this outcome was not the case for her. Rather, she confesses that, as her cancer treatments drew to a close, she and her family retained "the same annoying habits and bad manners [and were as] ungrateful, pessimistic, undisciplined, and bored [as before]" (203). Her refusal to follow the conventions commonly associated with breast cancer narratives is significant. When Couser began to study breast cancer narratives in the late 1980s, he found the majority of narrators "claim[ed] to be better off at the end [of their memoir] than at the beginning" (RB 39). As Couser points out, such comic endings "mislead" the reader because they convey the false sense that cancer has been cured: in Couser's view, this is a problem because breast cancer is "considered a systemic rather than a localized disease" (RB 40). When Norton ends *Lopsided* on a wry and pessimistic note, stating that while "nothing else has happened, it will . . . [since] none of us gets out of here alive" (210), she acknowledges that the remission she currently enjoys may not last. Along such lines, Norton claims to "know [she] should be more actively grateful, maybe volunteer, see Al Gore's movie, send Girl Scout cookies to the soldiers in Iraq, something" (211). Norton pokes fun at

these activities and thereby questions the assumed authority of figures who say it is her job to perform such tasks on behalf of Americans. At the same time, Norton is still obeying rules which say she should serve through the act of life writing itself: elsewhere, she states, in the publisher's "Reading Guide" which can be downloaded on the website titled *Welcome to the Penguin Book Club*, that writing *Lopsided* has allowed her to "contribute to society in a meaningful way" ("Reading Guide," Norton 3). Taken in combination, these quotations show that Norton accepts the possibility that she may become ill again, but achieves some mastery over this depressing knowledge using irreverence—a gift to herself and to her reader—to make her seem brave about this possibility and to lend humour to an otherwise grim reality. The approach works because the audience can assume that Norton is lying about her lack of motivation to serve the public: in other words, since Norton is being funny, she can be forgiven for disregarding a well-established social rule. Norton's choice to focus on motherhood at the close of *Lopsided* seems to return her to a traditional role; moreover, she does at the end confess to imperfections. However, she ultimately pokes fun at the comic closure when she confesses, but then chooses to remain exactly the same flawed person as she was before. She is performing double talk which enables her to break some generic rules while still seeming to adhere to them. Katan does something similar with the ending of *One Night*. The ending to her memoir is conventional in the sense that she concludes with the happily-ever-after romance and with a confession that she is a more self aware person because has learned to "hug" her family "all the time" (*One Night* 274). However, Katan also stresses that the

lesson about love which breast cancer has taught her is that she is worthy of a relationship with an emotionally healthy woman, and by doing so she also effectively queers the comic ending which often celebrates heteronormativity (*One Night* 274).

Norton's and Katan's texts do important work by providing readers and others who may be living with breast cancer with life stories by women who have found alternatives to mere polite conformity with hegemonic social expectations. The success of these narratives signifies that at least part of mainstream culture is questioning capitalism's hailing of the woman with breast cancer to participate in philanthropy dependent on cause marketing. Brinker's *Promise Me*, written in the wake of criticisms that breast cancer has become too commercialized, is a response to those who oppose the values SGK represents. Somewhat tellingly, Brinker comments in *Promise Me* that some members of the public are becoming "cynical" about her organization (*Promise Me* 100), and thus makes it clear that her reason for composing her memoir is to respond to persons who are skeptical of pink-ribbon events and what takes place at them. This group of three memoirs demonstrates how life writing is a site of social struggle as well as a space from which women who are ill with breast cancer can speak for themselves as opposed to being spoken about. The fact that Brinker's memoir appears after Norton's and Katan's is in its own way evidence of this claim. I am not arguing that Brinker writes in response to Norton and Katan specifically; however, Brinker's *Promise Me* does aim to deal with some of the criticisms being made of SGK and the values which uphold it: this shows that Norton's and Katan's views on

normativity and the corporatization of breast cancer are held by many other women. Life writing which ties itself to chick culture can become a vehicle for dissent during the time of postfeminism when there are active attempts being made to dissuade women from making explicit criticisms of the established social order. Whether or not sick lit as a subgenre of life writing is, in its own way, a socially-imposed constraint which diminishes women is a problem I consider in the conclusion.

Conclusion

Sick Lit + Beyond

In 2010, the second of two *Sex and the City* movie sequels to the HBO television series aired to the eager anticipation and subsequent disappointment of many fans. The films, especially *SATC 2* which reunites the four protagonists while they are on a trip to Abu Dhabi, received at best mediocre reviews. While the public criticized the movie for many reasons—not the least of which was for its “patronizing take on foreign cultures” (Pols 57) — women with breast cancer had a particular concern. Some of these fans claimed disappointment with the way the sequel failed to depict Samantha Jones as having been emotionally and physically affected by her breast cancer diagnosis in some permanent or significant way. Such fans expressed dismay over the fact that *SATC 2* depicts Samantha using Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) to prevent the hot flashes associated with menopause. Among these viewers was Cathy Bueti who found this plot development implausible because women who have had breast cancer are generally advised by their doctors not to use HRT because it can increase the odds of recurrence. Thus Bueti posted to her blog that she “[felt] [the film] let down breast cancer survivors, [herself] included” (“Sex and the City 2”). In her view, those involved in the movie’s creation were obliged to “address the life after cancer that so many [survivors] deal with” (“Sex and the City 2”). As Bueti makes clear—both in *Breastless in the City* and on her blog—a breast cancer diagnosis is a traumatic event which can have a lasting impact on one’s emotional wellbeing. Some nine years after finishing her treatments, Bueti continues to

deeply fear a recurrence (“Sex and the City 2”) and, for that reason, she believes that the *SATC* movie sequels ought to have depicted Samantha as living with a similar anxiety. When moviemakers seemed to forget that Samantha had had breast cancer, Bueti felt cast aside by the media representations on which she had come to depend.

Bueti’s disappointment with *SATC 2* has much to tell us about the importance of mass media representation to some female survivors of breast cancer who either consume sick lit or produce it. In the first place, Bueti’s initial positive reaction to the HBO television program affirms what Jackie Stacey observes in her research regarding female audience members’ interests in iconic film actresses: Stacey argues that many viewers find it pleasurable to engage in a process of “imaginary [self] identification with . . . [an] ideal subject [from popular culture] effected through the fantasy of consumption” (197). In Bueti’s case especially, establishing a point of identification with Samantha helped her to counter some of the anxiety that her breast cancer has caused her. For Bueti, this point of identification extends beyond her mere enjoyment of the program at the time she first watched it while being treated for cancer herself. Bueti identified with the program so much that she titled her life narrative—a narrative she intended to bring into the public sphere—after it. After doing so, she went on to fashion a public persona which in its own way resembles the *SATC* characters’ identities on the program. From here, she established herself as a spokesperson and expert and enjoyed a certain amount of prestige in the process. This example helps to illustrate why sick-lit authors may be drawn to the genre and why they

sometimes pattern their life narratives after ones modelled in popular chick culture. While Bueti's life writing has a particularly strong connection to a specific chick narrative, each of the authors in this study has respectively replicated chick conventions and used them to her advantage in some way. Each author has entered into a relationship with publishers who present her as a chick through marketing paratexts and, sometimes, these authors have personally claimed their relationships to chick culture as well.

The reason I begin this final section with an example that points to Bueti's eventual disillusionment with *SATC* is because, in concluding this dissertation, it is important to consider the risks these sick-lit narrators may be undertaking as they write in this genre. Certainly, I have shown that *SATC* provides a base from which Bueti can create and publish her own text, and re-imagine the terms of her own illness through appropriating chick signifiers: these include the title of her memoir, certain rhetoric, and iconography found on the book's cover. As a subject of postfeminism, the sick-lit author devises a genre of life writing which allows her to sell her cancer story to others: as such, she reclaims her agency after breast cancer. Yet here we also arrive at a problem. As I have noted elsewhere, Bueti claims to have titled her memoir after *SATC* because she felt it "portrayed a realistic view of issues such as hair loss and chemo induced menopause" ("Sex and the City 2"). When Bueti titles her memoir, she links it to a media franchise which ultimately misrepresents women with the disease. Critics who study postfeminism and popular culture and who are "concerned with the dichotomy between the 'constituted' and 'constituting' self'" might well view Bueti as an

example of someone who is harmed by postfeminism (Genz and Brabon 27).

While Bueti's appropriation of the *SATC* title allows her to position herself as a leader within a particular group of mainstream consumers, it is now possible that her work will also be seen as less credible due to its association with a popular text which, in the course of its own evolution as a product of consumerism, comes to treat women with the disease dismissively. Although Bueti tries to deal with this issue by critiquing the movie on her blog, there is no guarantee that readers of the book will also see the post.

Additionally, it is important to realize that Bueti's irritation with *SATC 2* does not change her view that fashion and beauty products help women deal with illness. Although she wants the movie to present Samantha as changed by her breast cancer experience, she also reifies the fantasy which Samantha represents, and to which Bueti objects. This means she does not critique *SATC* for perpetuating the unattainable normative standard of beauty, even though she admits that as she watched the program she "envied all the girls and the fabulous outfits that were draped over their perfect bodies" ("FASHIONISTA"). Although the program causes Bueti to experience envy, she reinforces a negative stereotype of the envious woman. She does so while arguing that the individual consumer is the one solely responsible to manage consumptive desire in ways that allow her to responsibly deal with breast cancer. In this way, although Bueti does criticize harmful consumer practices at points, she also remains loyal to those hegemonic forces which objectify her. Samantha's breast cancer story is a fantasy underpinned by ideologies of consumption, particularly since one of the ways

HBO makes breast cancer less frightening for audiences is by depicting the protagonist who suffers the side effects of chemotherapy as able to maintain conventional beauty norms through buying clothes, wigs, and cosmetics, while all the while continuing to be desired by her mate. Bueti believes in this fantasy and reminds others who follow her work to do the same. In 2012, Bueti continues to perpetuate the view that consumer culture can help women when, as a guest contributor to a cancer blog, she remarks that fashionable clothes allowed her to “deal with her morphing body image” during cancer treatment (“FASHIONISTA”). She even goes so far as to admit that during treatment, she had weekly manicures, even though doing so put her at risk for infection (“FASHIONISTA”). Bueti notes that she had to be careful to avoid infections by ensuring that her “cuticles weren’t cut due to the loss of lymph nodes under [her] arm” (“FASHIONISTA”). Although Samantha Jones may take a more substantive risk when she takes HRT, there is an irony here: if one presumes Samantha’s HRT regimen is undertaken to maintain the youthfulness which makes her desirable within mainstream culture, then Bueti’s own consumption of the weekly manicure—also consumed to help her look a particular way—is done for similar reasons. The irony is that it has been speculated that the chemicals found in nailcare products might place “nail technicians at higher risk of breast cancer (“Nail Salon Exposure”). However, Bueti also publishes blogs which criticize the consumption one associates with the corporatization of breast cancer. As she

points to such examples, she shows media which indicates that some beauty products which bear the pink ribbon contain carcinogens (“Raise a Stink”).⁴¹

The disparity between what Bueti does and what she advocates others do is one of the complex aspects of postfeminism’s sick-lit narratives and the culture of cancer treatment in which such authors participate. Such gaps and contradictions in sick-lit discourse are common. These contradictions show how breast cancer survivors who write sick lit both take on and resist postfeminist ideas about gender, power and consumption. A reason for these inconsistencies can be posited by citing what Angela McRobbie refers to as postfeminism’s “illegible rage” (*Aftermath* 95). The contradictions across Bueti’s work—and across any of these sick-lit texts I have analyzed—are examples of this phenomenon and are thus understood in the context of what McRobbie describes as postfeminism’s “new sexual contract [which] rests on economic and cultural activity and consumer citizenship at the expense of a newly defined feminist politics” (*Aftermath* 9). Popular media is one of the major places the rules which govern this contract are enforced and where women who break them are disciplined by violent means. When commenting on how hegemonic institutions target women during postfeminism, McRobbie refers to the fashion industry which she claims “pull[s] [a woman] into the web of glamorous consumption . . .

⁴¹ Bueti’s October 1, 2011 post entitled “Raise a Stink...Komen Strikes Again” includes a link to an audiovisual clip prepared by Breast Cancer Action which states that Susan G. Komen’s signature perfume named Promise Me contains carcinogens. Komen markets the perfume as “A Fragrance to Benefit Susan G. Komen for the Cure ©.”

by having her enact in fantasy, an indifference to her lack” but further warns that “this licence is inevitably threatening and can only be tolerated within certain limits” (*Aftermath* 104). As McRobbie clarifies, “the concept of subjectivity and the means by which cultural forms and interpellations (or dominant social processes) call women into being . . . means that it is a problematic ‘she’ [who emerges]” (*Aftermath* 13). The contradictions one finds in all the works of sick lit I have discussed are an outcome of the particular crisis contemporary women face as they work to make sense of multiple competing discourses in popular culture which simultaneously hail them as empowered subjects while objectifying them. In the case of sick-lit breast cancer narratives and other chick texts, moments of illegible rage manifest as narrative chaos always just as the narrators begin to express their dissatisfaction with the social order, but then confess to their own shortcomings instead. By confessing that she has lacked self confidence or self awareness, and by then claiming her empowerment, the sick-lit narrator delivers a narrative that allows her to be affirmed, but does not allow her to overtly critique the established social order. Even Katan and Norton who do criticize the commoditization of breast cancer in their narratives in subversive ways fit into this model. These women use self-deprecating humour which gives their reader permission not to take them too seriously. Indeed, if McRobbie is correct that “the melancholic person will publicly self-berate” (*Aftermath* 116), then *Lopsided* and *My One Night Stand With Cancer* are perhaps the strongest examples of illegible rage examined in this project. This is not to suggest that any of these sick-lit authors are victims or unaware of how mass culture works: indeed, I am stating

the very opposite. Still, it is clear that these sick-lit narrators want to comment on important social issues and, whatever productive work they do as authors in their own lives or in the lives of other women with breast cancer, the fact that they make it easy for people to laugh at them suggests that their responses to the commercialization of breast cancer are not wholly successful.

Arguably it can be tempting to critique or be dismissive of this kind of postfeminist life writing for such reasons, and particularly because these narrators often seem eager to draw attention to their own privileged class status. However, as McRobbie points out, feminist criticism must also strive to acknowledge the “traumatic injuries” sustained by women who “seem [to] inhabit this position [of normativity]” (*Aftermath* 112). The fact remains that the women who write sick-lit are ill, and many of them (including some of the authors in my study) are no longer living. Those who are living cope with the knowledge that, at any point, the disease may recur. As subjects who have experienced breast cancer during postfeminism, they are hailed by institutions which charge them to acknowledge their privilege—this is the gender equity they must, through their silence on matters such as sexism, imply that they have achieved—while assuming responsibility for their health and the health of other women through their public service. Consequently, the memoirs they have written and the online writing they have done are part of the legacies they create for themselves as they respond to this call. The questions for me are ethical ones which feminist critics must continue to work to answer: is the consumer-based foundation upon which sick lit (and other postfeminist narratives) is built capable of allowing these authors’

narratives to survive, even if the authors themselves do not? If these authors do achieve a legacy through life writing, what kind of legacy is it, and what should we make of it? These questions are very difficult ones to answer because sick lit's single most important defining feature is its over-obvious dependence on the ideologies which justify conspicuous consumption, a factor made apparent not only by sick lit's content, but by its paratext which also connects it to institutions which entice consumption to survive.

Chicks as Vulnerable Subjects of Autobiography

It is in consideration of such questions that I want to conclude, first by suggesting that autobiography scholars working with postfeminist texts should expand the notion of vulnerable subjectivities in autobiographical discourse, and then secondly by showing why it is important to do so by looking at a sick-lit narrative co-written by women who do not survive. Sick lit is written by women who in some way signal their awareness that they belong to a social order which is made up of contradictions, but continue to desire to be a part of it nonetheless. If the creators of such texts want to challenge the status quo, it can be difficult to tell: women who write or participate in the creation of sick lit are deeply dependent on forces within consumer culture for dissemination of their work. For such reasons, some sick-lit authors might be thought of as vulnerable subjects of autobiography. G. Thomas Couser uses this phrase when referring to autobiographical projects involving two or more parties where one party presumes the right to speak for the other: in such instances Couser says vulnerable subjects

are “persons who are liable to exposure by someone with whom they are involved in an intimate or trust-based relationship but are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else” (VS xii). Specifically, Couser is concerned about what happens when auto/biographers write about others. He explains that certain “conditions render subjects vulnerable [such as] age-related (extreme youth or age) and the physiological (illnesses and impairments, physical or mental) to membership in socially or culturally disadvantaged minorities” (VS xii). In other words, Couser worries about persons who, for whatever reason, are represented in life narratives, but who cannot speak or write on their own behalves.

In a postfeminist context, however, the notion of vulnerability takes on a different sort of resonance, particularly surrounding women’s health narratives. Tasha Dubriwny considers that there are hegemonies at work which simultaneously construct women as both empowered and vulnerable. Such discourses of postfeminism teach that a woman has “some agency and power to shape her own life” and subsequently health outcomes (*Vulnerable*, Dubriwny 9). However, these discourses of empowerment place “the responsibility (and the moral judgements that come with this responsibility) for health solely on women’s shoulders” (*Vulnerable*, Dubriwny 10). The ideology which produces these discourses subtly implies that women are at fault when health outcomes do not turn out a particular way: women who face illness are also repeatedly asked to choose the right moral pathway to achieving good health and to honouring their recoveries. However, to be seen as having made the right choices, women seem

to need to return to “the most traditional of gender roles” (*Vulnerable*, Dubriwny 24). This tension is the one encountered time and time again by sick-lit authors. By confessing that they have lacked self confidence or self awareness, and by then claiming their empowerment through a return to the traditional, these authors deliver narratives which allow for their social affirmation in the popular sphere. This narrative formula, as we have seen, creates popular sick-lit books and it is what drove the popularity of the *SATC* series and other popular culture narratives I have examined.

Katan and Norton are examples of chick authors who do work to sidestep or expand the parameters of what it is women with breast cancer are allowed to say; however, the trope of the woman who returns to tradition is deeply embedded in postfeminist mass culture, and it is thus difficult to rewrite this script particularly when the paratexts which are used to market these works also work to reinforce these beliefs. The authority a woman claims which enables her to write and publish an autobiographical narrative for mass consumption is hers only because she plays by certain rules dictated by the mainstream. Couser’s use of the term comes into play here because, in effect, the postfeminist woman is being asked to remain silent and to enter into a “trust-based relationship” (VS, Couser xii) with hegemonic institutions underpinned by capitalism such as the fashion industry, the profit-oriented medical system, fundraising organizations and even publishing corporations. Such institutions are adept at constructing master narratives which reify the heteronormative social order which ultimately does not protect women’s rights or gender equity. We might examine the history of *SATC*

for evidence to support this claim: what the media's depiction of Samantha Jones reveals over time is a perverse ageism that is directed toward women in particular: as *SATC*'s Samantha ages, her life as a female libertine is depicted as more of a joke than as evidence of her empowerment. A correlation between *SATC 2*'s fictitious depiction of Samantha's hot flashes and what happens to Cattrall's career can also be observed. Cattrall has of late commented on how American mass media disregards most actresses as they age. Although she believes that she has become a better performer with age, she is no longer being offered roles. Ironically, it is here that Cattrall yearns for a return to feminism when she states that women are currently suffering from "post-feminist goop" as evidenced by the fact that women do not have "equal pay [or] . . . equal rights" (McKay). Along these lines, Cattrall calls for a return to the "60s and 70s" when such issues were being addressed (McKay). The source I am referencing here also presents Cattrall as dismayed over reports that a *SATC* prequel starring younger actresses "to bring to life Carrie Bradshaw's younger years" is in the works (McKay). This example can be used to illustrate one reason why women autobiographers who belong to chick culture are vulnerable subjects: such women depend on consumerism to be seen and heard. By doing so, these women join forces with a system which will readily discard them when they are no longer marketable.

Wrapping it Up: Sick lit and Mortality

While the discussion of Bueti's *Breastless* begins to show that consumer culture is not a stable platform from which to articulate their narratives, *Nordie's*

At Noon: The Personal Stories of Four Women 'too young' for Breast Cancer raises the stakes. As its title affirms, *Nordie's* is a collaborative work. Its authors—Patti Balwanz, Kim Carlos, Jennifer Johnson, and Jana Peters—supported one another through treatment for breast cancer and later decided to join forces to write about their experiences. Regrettably, a factor which distinguishes their work of sick lit is that two of this life narrative's four authors have not survived their cancer. As the *Nordie's at Noon* website explains in a section entitled "The Authors," Balwanz died in March 2003 prior to *Nordie's* completion, while Jana Peters passed away the year the book was published in 2006. The two remaining authors have continued to promote the book and to do public speaking about breast cancer. This dynamic raises some questions about the politics of representation, especially in the case of Balwanz whose family wrote portions of her contribution to *Nordie's* for her when she became too ill to continue. Although these circumstances makes her a vulnerable subject in the way that Couser originally uses the phrase, how she is represented by loved ones posthumously is not what I want to talk about primarily. Rather, I want to talk about her as vulnerable because, through the process of writing and publishing *Nordie's*, its deceased authors become yoked to consumer institutions which, at the present, are becoming more and more discredited. The first of these are the publishers of chick lit who saturate the markets, while the second are those who lead pink-ribbon cause marketing campaigns.

Like the other primary texts discussed, *Nordie's* status as sick lit stems from the work's complex relationship to consumer culture. The text's preface

entitled “Bosom Buddies” confirms what the reader already expects which is that the memoir’s title reference pertains to “the trendy [American] cafe in the Nordstrom department store” (xv). This location is where the four women met for lunch each week during cancer treatments. This motif of female friends supporting one another while lunching in upscale restaurants is appropriated from the media franchise *SATC*. As one of *Nordie*’s narrators points out within the text, “we did act a bit like the *SATC* characters of Carrie (Patti), Miranda (Jana), Charlotte (Jen), and Samantha (Kim) when we gathered around the table with our lipstick-stained glasses and bantered about why men like us or not [and] about what everyone thinks about breasts” (156). This citation is well suited to *Nordie*’s cover which is also similar to ones commonly featured on chick texts published at that time and which are reminiscent of *SATC*. On *Nordie*’s cover, the torsos belonging to four female friends are pictured around a cafe table. One of the figures holds a shopping bag, while the others are seated and holding lattes. Each of the slim torsos is elegantly and fashionably dressed. Each torso is symmetrical, and while it is not possible to see the women’s faces, it is possible to observe that three of the four images have medium to long hair (see Fig. 4). Thus the cover reinforces normative beauty standards, although it is a book about breast cancer.

Although the authors initially seem enthusiastic about their book’s cover, *Nordie’s at Noon* is a monograph which is strangely at odds with its paratext. Disparate responses to the work’s chick signifiers suggest that the memoir’s reception is certainly impacted by ongoing debates in the literary community over the value of chick lit. As the surviving authors explain on their website in an

edition of their “newsletter” dated June 2006, the original and most likely self-published version of *Nordie’s* was “picked up” by “Da Capo Lifelong Books” (Peters, Johnson, and Carlos “Updates”). Here the authors explain that the publisher planned to use “a new cover design” on the new hardback edition (“Updates”). While the authors and publisher are initially pleased about the new publication and promotion of *Nordie’s*, they later assemble a PDF document which, in typical postfeminist fashion, is contradictory in how it presents the text. This PDF document, entitled “What People Are Saying About *Nordie’s at Noon*,” is posted on the *Nordie’s at Noon* website and it lists excerpts from several reviews of the monograph. Of the many reviews included, four make reference to the book’s chickness. A writer for Lifetimetv.com reassures readers that *Nordie’s* goes beyond what is “standard chick-lit fare” while a reviewer for Beyond Live and Thrive comments that “[the] cheerful book jacket [makes *Nordie’s*] look like another *Sex and the City* ‘chick lit’ knockoff- except the book’s four authors were diagnosed with breast cancer during their 20s or early 30s.” While such reviews hint that *Nordie’s* is superior to and different from chick lit, a third reviewer for the Chesterfield County Virginia Public Library reassures readers that *Nordie’s* is “An insightful ‘chicklit’ view of breast cancer” while, last, Heather Hibshman, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Breast Cancer Coalition describes *Nordie’s* ambiguously as “real, hopeful, scary and uplifting all at once, kind of like *Sex and the City* in book form.” These excerpts which make up the PDF file posted on the authors’ website are strategically arranged by the memoir’s authors

and/or publisher. The document is telling for the way it discusses *Nordie's* chick signifiers in disparate ways.

Had those involved in promoting *Nordie's* felt wholly confident that its chick paratext would not draw its credibility into question, the inclusion of excerpts in a promotional brochure which reassure the reader that *Nordie's* is better than chick lit would not be necessary. Part of this eventual hesitance may be that chick culture's cheery signifiers are ultimately not well suited to narratives by authors who do not survive. Yet, other factors are also at work. Elsewhere, I have shown that chick culture is popular and marketable to a particular demographic, but I have not argued that it is widely respected. Some writers view publishers' ready use of chick signifiers as a capitalist imposition. Author Jami Attenberg is one of them. She holds publishers accountable, writing that "the pink, italic font and sexpot photo on *Sex and the City* has been reprised enough to turn the power of being a young single woman in urban America into a dull cliché" ("The Girl's Guide to Writing and Publishing"). In Attenberg's opinion, "The publishing industry loves to put its products into neat marketing boxes [and she hopes]... chick-lit authors will learn how to punch their way out" ("The Girl's Guide to Writing and Publishing"). If what Attenberg is saying is accurate, it seems clear that a percentage of readers will reject a book because it has chick paratexts: this reader may misread the cues on the book's cover because she is wary of chick culture and what she believes it must necessarily stand for. At least one reader of Katan's memoir claims that, while she now loves *My One Night Stand with Cancer*, she was, initially, "put off by the cupcake on the cover"

(*american amazon.com*). Elsewhere, L.V. Anderson complains that the cupcake cover, which she or he claims “evokes *Sex and the City*,” marks “a ludicrously infantilizing trend” in publishing circles (*Slate.com*). Due to such criticisms, authors who have published memoirs with chick paratexts face the worry that chickness will (or has) become obsolete. Stephanie Harzewski suggest that following the decade of postfeminism, chick-lit authors have been working to adapt their plotlines to comment upon serious matters like “the global financial crisis” (*Chick Lit 22*). Despite this, she acknowledges that during more recent times “chick lit as a label [has become] unpopular with publishers because of market saturation” (*Chick Lit 22*). While it may be no more than mere coincidence, it seems important to point out that at some point in 2011, *amazon.com* began to list Bueti’s *Breastless* as only available from used booksellers. While it remains to be seen which chick-lit texts (if any) will be republished with new non-chick paratexts, those such as Bueti’s *Breastless* which include pointed references to a chick franchise now tied to excess may be at a greater risk of becoming obsolete.

The recent controversy surrounding Susan G. Komen for the Cure® (SGK) places the *Nordie’s* authors at a particular risk. *Nordie’s at Noon* is replete with references to pink-ribbon corporate philanthropy both in its content and paratext. The conspicuous presence of the pink ribbon on the book’s cover and on the authors’ website suggests that, in addition to its chick cover, the readership for this book will come from supporters of pink-ribbon fundraisers. Both Carlos and Johnson—the two surviving authors—are, at the time of publishing *Nordie’s*,

actively involved in pink-ribbon event planning, particularly Carlos who is “President of the board for the Greater Kansas City Affiliate” (*Nordie’s* 275) and who claims to have become involved with “The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation (Komen) founded by Nancy Brinker” (*Nordie’s* 12) while in college. The late Balwanz also writes about her role in such causes. Confronted with the reality that she would probably die of breast cancer, she writes near the end of *Nordie’s* that she chose “to ‘make a difference’” (*Nordie’s* 227). Part of the way she hoped to do so was with her service to “Ribbons of Pink Foundation” (*Nordie’s* 228). In this way, she and her family hoped to inscribe for her a legacy where she would be remembered as a member of the community who, despite a premature death, makes a valued contribution to America. As “vulnerable subjects” the *Nordie’s* authors have, like those parties of whom Couser speaks, based their narrative upon a “trust-based relationship” (*VS*, Couser xii), though in this instance with a cancer foundation. While it is too soon to determine how the pink ribbon and women who supported it will ultimately be remembered, women who write narratives which support pink-ribbon cause marketing are certainly at risk given the controversies that exist. Leigh Gilmore writes that “Trauma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories” (31). While Gilmore is speaking of a different trauma in a different context, it does seem that when the life writer provides a permanent record of her affiliation with institutions which are found to lack credibility, she becomes either a victim or perpetrator of crime: neither of these identities is a particularly desirable one.

Of course, one might argue that the women can revise their narrative in ways which takes recent fiascos within fundraising institutions into account. Bueti, for instance, does this when she continues to rewrite her views on consumption and breast cancer survivorship on her weblog. Additionally, if a sick-lit author can be discredited for her association with an institution, she may also gain some respect when she does critique one. Norton's criticism of Lance Armstrong and Katan's mockery of pink give their works added authority in the wake of figureheads like Armstrong and Brinker being discredited. Their texts in particular show that women who write sick lit can intervene in social problems. Balwanz and Peters cannot, however, revise their stories or reposition themselves in relation to ongoing events as they unfold. In the case of *Nordie's*, the sick-lit writers' decisions to accept the terms of the postfeminist sexual contract may well result some permanent harm to their reputations because two of these women are no longer alive to defend or revise their life stories.

The point I am making here is that prominent institutions influence social memory. Publishers who overuse chick semiotics to market texts and corporate philanthropists who are now being exposed as unethical have made it more difficult for women life writers and women with breast cancer to be taken seriously in the long term. High-profile cancer role models like Nancy Brinker or Lance Armstrong who head fundraising institutions may, in particular, dishonour the memories of those who support their charities in life writing, either by making those supporters to appear as though they have been duped, or by causing them to appear complicit in social wrongs. Sick-lit writers are complicit in perpetuating

social ills precisely because their work is ambiguous in ways which make it difficult to clearly understand what it is that these writers want to say about the social order to which they belong. As such, their works are not exempt from criticism which points this factor out; nonetheless, criticism should consider that the life writer has had to make concessions if she wants to publish her work. Postfeminism's sexual contract does provide sick-lit authors with opportunities to work with institutions in ways which enable them, through life writing, to inscribe their identities after cancer and to reclaim some measure of agency. These writers do this work by fashioning themselves as speakers and experts for which they charge a fee and for which they gain a certain amount of prestige within their communities. However, these women are also part of an arrangement where they are called to self identify as flawed so as to soften any critique of dominant American culture which they might otherwise make. Any frustration a sick-lit writer feels over circumstances brought about by the contract must be rendered in illegible ways because if she explicitly argues for equality or states she has experienced gender discrimination, she will be dismissed or upbraided.

Given my study's close proximity in terms of time to the postfeminist decade and to the publication dates of the works under analysis, it is too soon to know how these texts will be received over time. It is premature to state that any sick-lit narrative has effected social change or perpetuated harm. It is also difficult to say with any degree of certainty that women who have written sick lit regret the decision to have done so. And while reader-response studies to sick lit would prove very useful, such an approach is not one I have been able to take to the

study of these popular memoirs at this point in time. My study of these texts has remained focussed on the authors themselves and how the process of writing enables them to cope with breast cancer. However, I believe that sick lit will continue to evolve—and to perhaps do so in ways that effectively speak back to the dominant capitalist culture’s attack on feminism, women, and women with breast cancer. Thus it is timely for critics to assemble an archive of such works and to monitor this subgenre over time. It is particularly vital to study popular texts and paratexts *as they are being produced*, given that much of the paratext surrounding these works exists in unstable online environments. The paratexts in particular frequently change or are amended and thus need to be tracked as they are being created and maintained in order to properly understand how sick lit—and other kinds of popular memoir—engage with social issues. Moreover, as these sick lit writers age—many of them are now nearing or in their forties—it will be important to observe what sort of writing opportunities are open to them and whether chick culture will evolve to accommodate women who are in their fifties and sixties or older. Alternatively, it will be important to observe what sort of life writing opportunities women in this latter age demographic will use, and whether or not any sick-lit writers will be the ones to further expand generic boundaries. In particular, I would recommend that sick lit and its paratextual pathways be monitored with a goal of observing how these narratives travel through the public over time.

Although sick-lit writers are certainly not victims, they are subjects of postfeminism’s ambiguous sexual contract. This means they have entered into

relationships with capitalist institutions in exchange for the right to have their stories heard. The sick-lit author's connection to chick culture through her publisher leaves her vulnerable, at least if one considers that she may be harmed when a capitalist-orientated social order determines that her story is no longer worth following up on. This latter observation matters to the life narrator who looks to memoir writing as an outlet of expression for the pain and anxiety caused by breast cancer. As Gilmore explains, "Trauma" is that which "lacks an other who will return the story without violence to the speaker by listening to it carefully" (31). It matters if readers perceive superficialities in these works to the extent that they cannot notice the sick-lit writers' frustrations and difficulties in dealing with the contradictions which characterize postfeminist discourse. More than anything else, what the sick-lit memoir says through its contradictions is that women are coping with an aggressive consumer culture. Within each of these memoirs, the author's frustration over not being able to achieve what consumer culture tells her she needs to achieve is tacit. The women who have written these sick-lit memoirs have been hailed by hegemonic discourse which obliges them to use their disease to the service of others. The genre thus shows how many women have internalized a popular script which shows them that to be good breast cancer survivors they must consume whatever is needed for them to (re)acquire normativity—everything from Lance Armstrong's memoirs to lipstick—and that they should serve others through some association with institutions, a few of which are now being exposed as fraudulent, self interested, or simply harmful. It is a serious problem that women facing a life-threatening illness cannot find

respite from a consumer culture which bombards them with messages telling them they are insignificant unless they consume their way to valid citizenship. In a postfeminist milieu comprised of institutions which work to deny that women experience gender disparity or other forms of oppression, sick lit emerges as evidence that such violent circumstances do in fact exist: for this reason alone, this subgenre of contemporary life writing demands ongoing attention because it justifies a need for feminism.

In short, sick lit can tell us a great deal about how some women can and do experience illness as subjects of a mainstream social order where the normativity one can acquire through participating in consumer practices is considered the strongest evidence of female success. Feminist literary criticism can be written to show that sick-lit authors make important, if at times controversial, contributions to conversations about breast cancer, the status of feminism, postfeminism, and gender. At this final juncture, it seems important to pause to recall that while working to understand sick lit in these contexts, for the women who write it, sick lit is about a great deal more. In *Lopsided*, Meredith Norton recalls “the worst thing anybody said to [her] [after being diagnosed]” (92). According to Norton, her therapist told her “that children orphaned before eight years old can’t remember their parents” (92). The therapist advised Norton to make a video for her son so that he would have a memory of her in the event she died: while Norton appreciated her therapist’s “frankness” (92), she decided not to make a video at that point because she did not want her son to remember her as “hairless and dressed in the future’s equivalent of a leisure suit, giving him

advice that had probably long since been proven wrong” (92). Although she recounts what is one of her greatest fears using irreverent humour, it is clear that she saw writing the self in *Lopsided*, in the way she chose to do so, as a means of achieving the legacy of which she could be proud. During an interview with her publisher, Norton had the following to say about what writing *Lopsided* meant to her:

I cannot explain the impact of this book on my life. Even though my skin looks great and I still fit into the clothes I wore at eighteen, I couldn't have gone to my high school or college reunions without *Lopsided*. I'm a good person, but I really felt unsuccessful, and more disappointing, like I hadn't contributed to society in a meaningful way. Now I have an answer to the question *what do you do for a living?* And I actually get mail from people thanking me for helping them or their loved ones through one of the most difficult periods of their lives. It is profoundly satisfying. (“Reading Guide” 3)

Figures

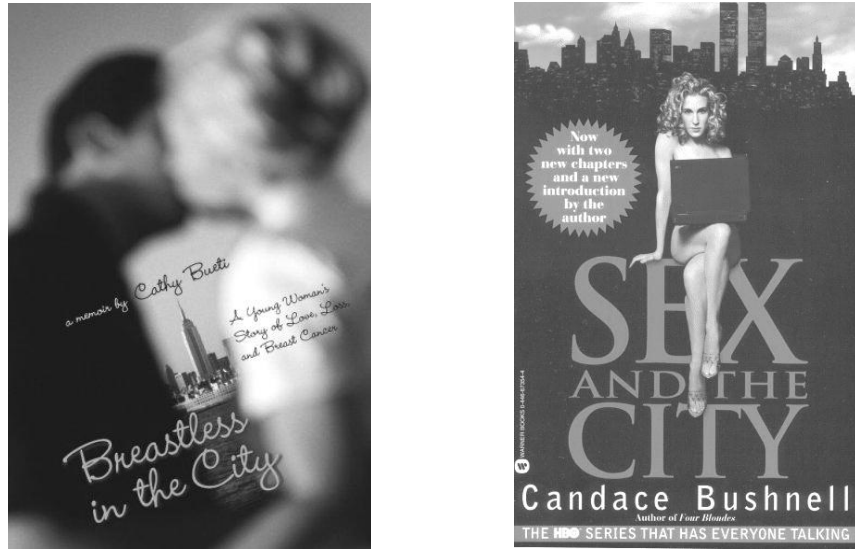


Fig. 1 (Left Above): Cover of *Breastless in the City* (2006) published by Cleveland Press.

Fig. 2 (Right Above): Cover of an edition of *Sex and the City* (1997). The intertextual relationship between chick fiction and non-fiction genres is apparent through such juxtapositions of paratext where images and themes related to romance, fashion, and life in the metropolis emerge in similar ways across both types of works.

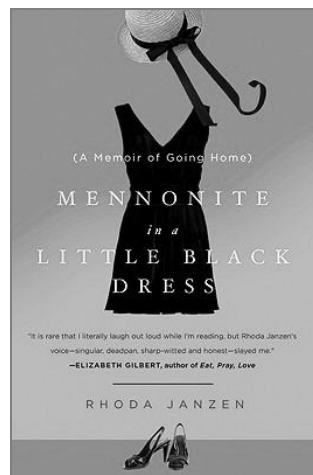


Fig. 3 (Above): Cover of *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress* (2010) published by St. Martin's. The publishers of Rhoda Janzen's memoir use "chick" iconography on this edition's cover.

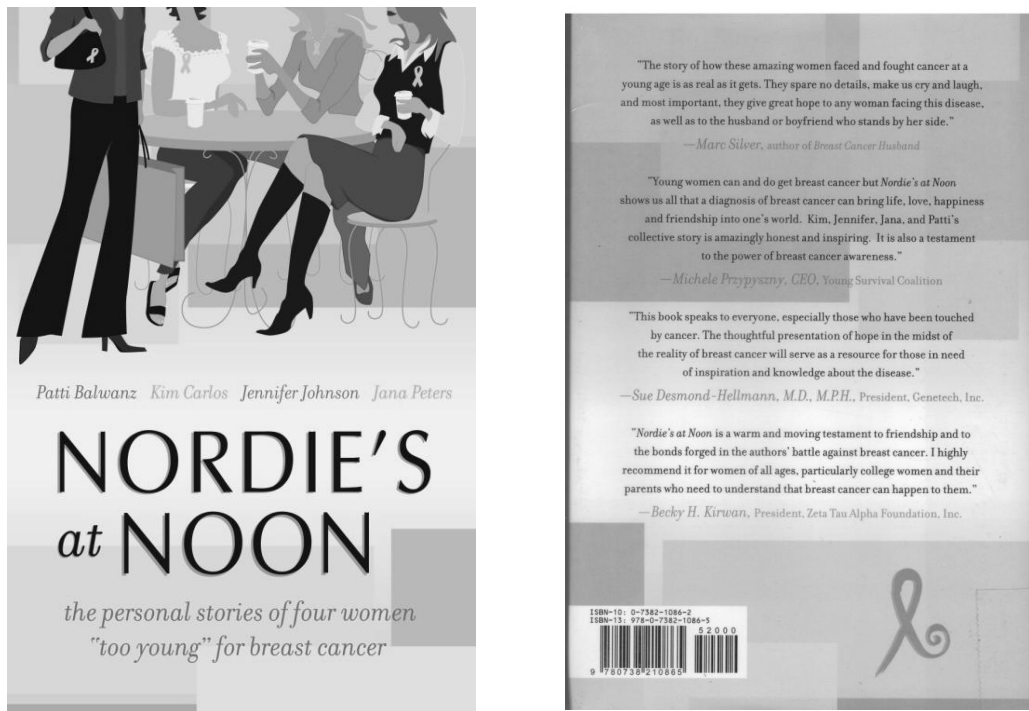


Fig. 4: Front and Back Cover of *Nordie's at Noon: The Personal Stories of Four Women 'Too Young' for Breast Cancer* (2007) published by Da Capo Press. The chick-style cover of *Nordie's* links these authors' co-authored sick lit to conspicuous consumption. The women pictured in this caricature are wearing pink ribbons. As the back cover shows, the book itself is a pink-ribbon product.

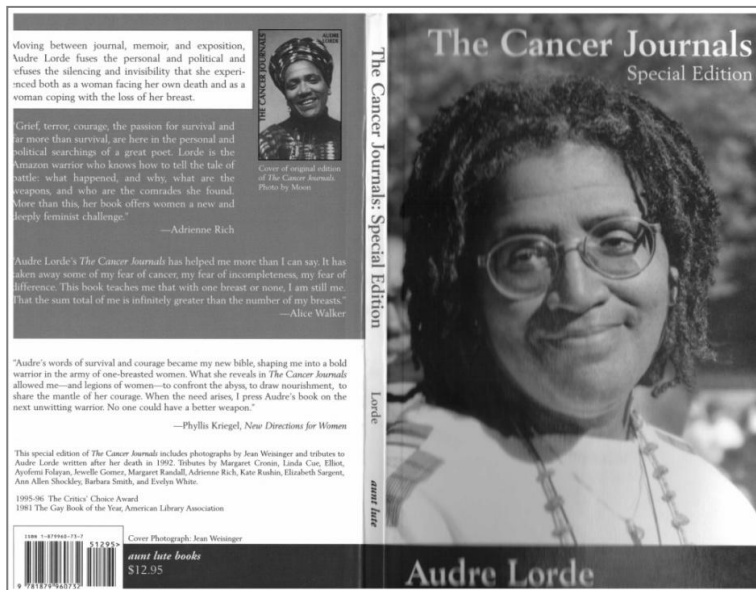
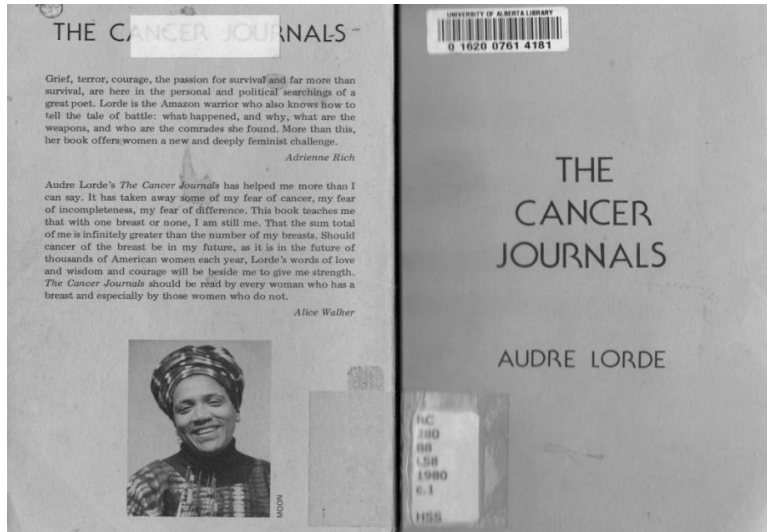


Fig. 5 (Top): Original Cover, *The Cancer Journals* (1980) published by Spinsters Ink.

Fig. 6 (Bottom): Front and Back Cover to the special edition of *The Cancer Journals* (2006) published by Aunt Lute. The reissued version retains much of its early paratext including the photo from the “original edition.” It is, however, glossier and achieves a different aesthetic than that of the earlier edition which is designed to remain at a distance from mainstream publishing.



Fig. 7 (Left Above): Cover of the August 15, 1993 edition of the *New York Times* magazine. Matuschka in “Beauty out of Damage.”

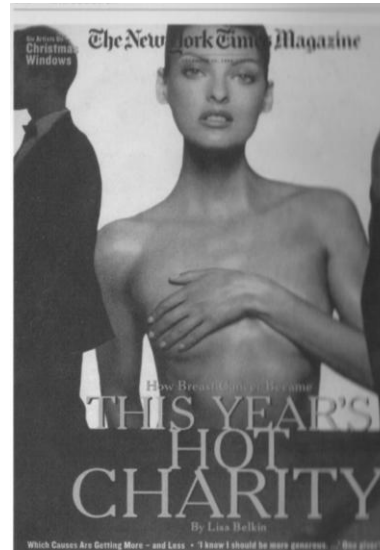


Fig. 8 (Right Above): Cover of the December 22, 1996 edition of the *New York Times* magazine. Supermodel Linda Evangelista poses for charity.



Fig. 9 (Above): Wonderbra Advertisement: Eva Herzigova in a Wonderbra advertising campaign which appeared in the U.K. during the mid-1990s. Angela McRobbie views this image as the quintessential pop culture example of the repudiation of feminism (*Aftermath of Feminism*).

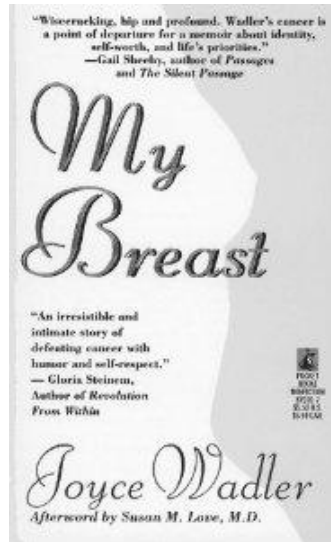


Fig. 10 (Above): Front and Back Cover of *My Breast* (1994) published by Pocket Books.

My Breast has been reissued multiple times, including in editions for e-readers and audio.

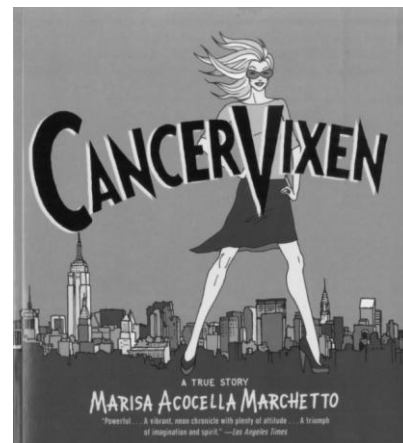


Fig. 11 (Left Above): Front Cover of the hardback first edition of *Cancer Vixen* (2006) published by Knopf.

Fig. 12 (Right Above): Front Cover of the paperback edition of *Cancer Vixen* (2009) published by Pantheon. This later edition shows a more passive Vixen on its cover than is seen on the first edition.

rethink
breast cancer

SHOW YOUR BREASTS SOME
TLC ♥ **TOUCH
LOOK
CHECK**

TOUCH. LOOK. CHECK.
SHOW YOUR BREASTS SOME TLC

MOST BREAST CANCERS ARE
DETECTED BY WOMEN WHO
REPORT UNUSUAL CHANGES
TO THEIR DOCTOR.

This highlights the importance of being **breast aware**. Breast awareness means knowing what your breasts look and feel like normally, so you can be **aware of any changes** and check them out with your doctor as soon as possible. If cancer is diagnosed, **prompt treatment** offers the best chance of a successful outcome.

So the message from Rethink Breast Cancer is simple:
SHOW YOUR BREASTS SOME TLC

RETHINK BREAST CANCER
IS GENEROUSLY SPONSORED BY
AVON

TOUCH
your breasts.
Feel for anything unusual.

LOOK
for changes. Be aware of
their shape and texture.

CHECK
anything unusual with your
doctor. Chat with your
friends if you are worried.

CHANGES TO LOOK FOR INCLUDE:

- **SIZE OR SHAPE** - e.g. one breast might become larger or lower than the other
- **SKIN TEXTURE** - such as puckering or dimpling of the skin
- **APPEARANCE OR DIRECTION OF NIPPLE** - e.g. one nipple might become inverted (turned-in)
- **DISCHARGE** - one or both nipples might discharge a blood-stained liquid
- **RASH OR CRUSTING** of the nipple or surrounding area
- **LUMP** in the breast or armpit
- **LUMPY AREA** or unusual thickening of breast tissue that doesn't go away after a woman's period
- **PAIN** in part of the breast or armpit that is unrelated to periods

There is no need to follow a fancy routine for examining your breasts, just be familiar with how they look and feel so that you notice changes. You can do this by looking and feeling in any way that makes you feel comfortable - **in the bath or shower, when dressing, standing or lying down.** If you find anything unusual or are worried, you should talk to your GP.

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toll free: 1.866.RETHINK
rethinkbreastcancer.com

Rethink Breast Cancer is a bold charity that helps young people affected by and concerned about breast cancer through innovative education, research and support programs.

The TLC Campaign and logo were devised by Breakthrough Breast Cancer, a charity registered in England & Wales (No. 1052636) and Scotland (No. SC039058), and are used by Rethink under licence.

Fig. 13 (Above): Avon Flyer (c. 2008). This educational flyer educating women about the symptoms of breast cancer was attached to a small pink-ribbon teddy bear distributed by Avon. The caricatures resemble those found on a number of chick fiction texts.



Fig. 14 (Above): Still from “Catch-38.” Samantha Jones’s (Kim Cattrall) ever-deepening romantic feelings for Smith Jerrod (Jason Lewis) feature prominently in the *SATC* cancer storyline.



Fig. 15 (Above): Still from “An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux” (2004). This still is from the television series’ final moments depicting Samantha and Smith together.



Fig. 16 (Above): Still from “Late Comer” (2006). *The L Word* depicts cancer in more graphic terms than did *SATC*. Here Dana Fairbanks (Erin Daniels) exposes her scar to Alice (Leisha Hailey).



Fig. 17 (Above): Still from “Lead, Follow, or Get out of the Way” (2006). Dr. Susan Love makes a cameo appearance on *The L Word*. Dana’s decision to work with Love’s foundation enables her to re-establish herself as a productive citizen after she is diagnosed with breast cancer.



Fig. 18 (Above): Still from “Lead, Follow, or Get out of the Way” (2006). Dana and Alice shop for designer fashions on the way to their lunch with Dr. Susan Love. In this way, Dana’s public service is linked to conspicuous consumption.

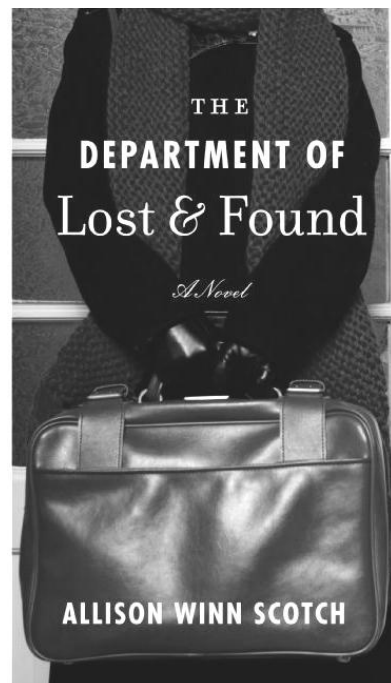


Fig. 19 (Left): Still from Oprah Winfrey’s Interview with Elizabeth Edwards (2009). Winfrey spoke with Edwards about her breast cancer and her husband’s infidelity in Edwards’ expensively furnished home.



Fig. 20 (Above): Still from the *What Not To Wear* episode entitled “Sara” (2010). After her fashion and beauty makeover on *What Not To Wear*, an emotional Sara Jordan (center) examines a reflection of her new self. Jordan is pictured with *WNTW* hosts Clinton Kelly (right) and Stacy London (left).

Fig. 21 (Right): Cover of the first edition of *The Department of Lost and Found* (2007) published by William Morrow. The handbag and woman’s torso pictured on the novel make it quintessentially chick in appearance.



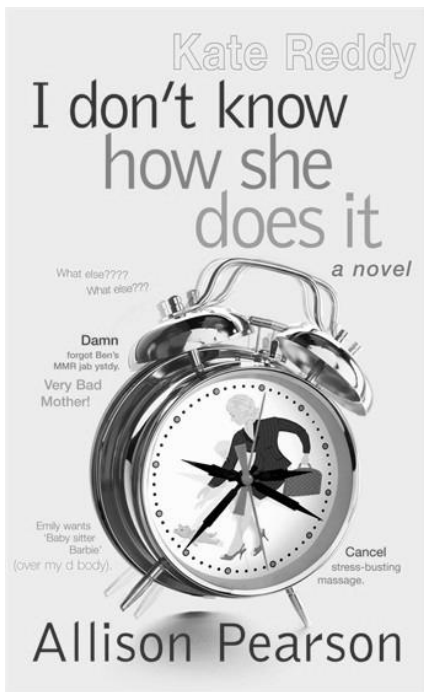


Fig. 22 (Left Above): Cover of *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002) published by Chatto and Windus.

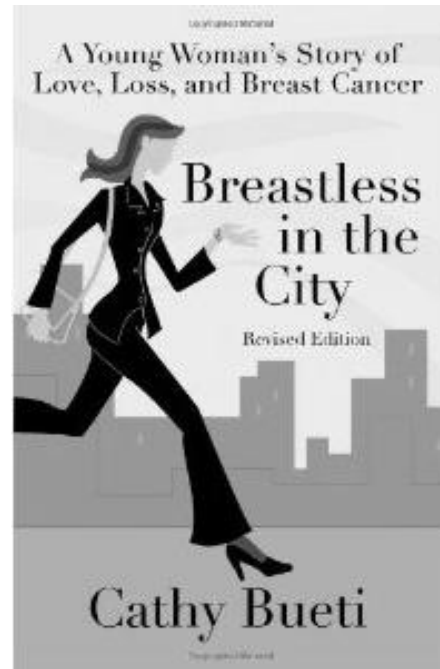


Fig. 23 (Above Right): Cover of the revised edition of *Breastless in the City* (2009) published by Kaplan Press

Fig. 24 (Right): Cover of *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2011) published by Anchor, a division of Random House. This “movie-tie-in edition” features Sarah Jessica Parker as Kate Reddy on its cover.





Fig. 25 (Above): Cathy Bueti Signs Copies of her Book at a promotional event. The photo is from Bueti's blog post dated Monday, June 1, 2009, entitled "Anniversaries, Cancerversaries, and Inspiration." In the post, Bueti tells what it was like for her to be the main attraction at the "fabulous" book signing for her memoir in "NYC at the B&N Greenwich Village." Bueti explains that at the event she spoke about "being a 25-year-old widow . . . diagnosed with cancer at 31 [,] and how [she] found love again."

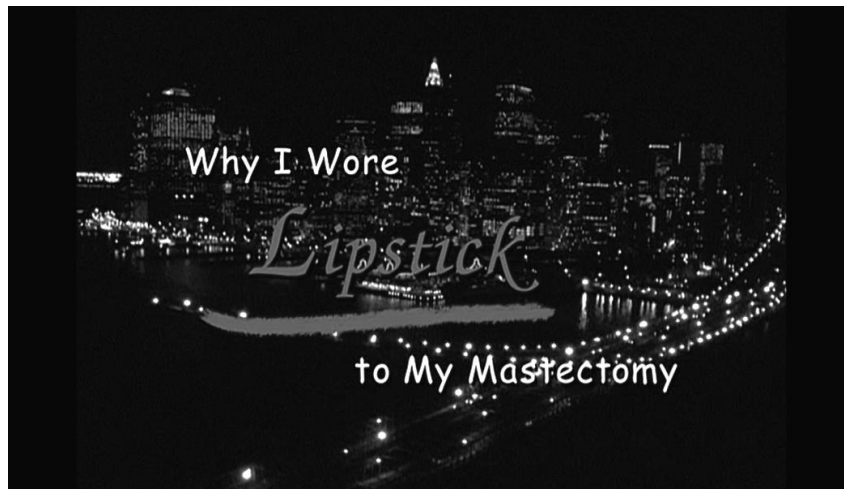


Fig. 26 (Above): Still from Lifetime Television's *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* (2006). The adaptation of *WIWL* into a television movie is co-produced by Lucas. Scenes of New York City feature prominently in the film, similar to those seen in *SATC*.

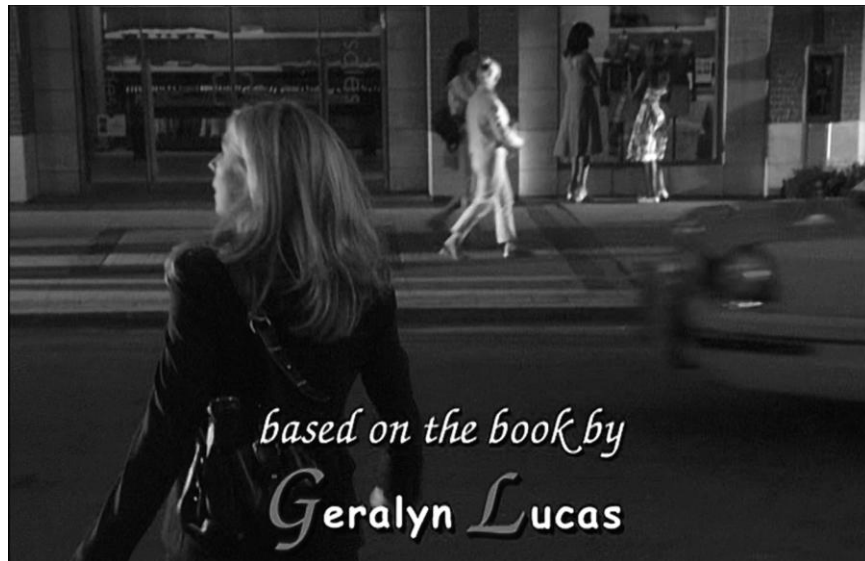


Fig. 27 (Above): Still from Lifetime Television's *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* (2006). The actor with her back to the viewer is Sarah Chalke who plays GERALYN LUCAS in the film.

Fig: 28 (Right): The cover of GERALYN LUCAS's *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy* (2005) published by St. Martin's Press. The t-shirt Lucas is wearing was specifically designed for the launch of the memoir by designer Betsey Johnson.

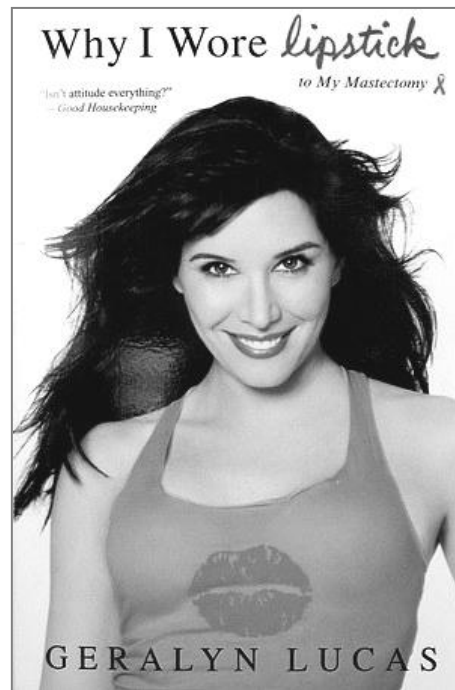




Fig. 29 (Above): Still from GERALYN LUCAS'S "OUCH/Take the 'I Am' Pledge" (2010). This audiovisual text is the primary feature of Lucas's website WHY I WORE LIPSTICK.com. Lucas is depicted as she walks the streets of New York City to promote mammography as the best way to detect breast cancer.



Fig. 30(Above): Still from "OUCH/Take the 'I Am' Pledge" (2010). The women dressed in pink boas and tiaras are identified as attendees at a Susan G. Komen Survivor Party (8:11). Each is holding a copy of GERALYN LUCAS'S memoir, *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy*.

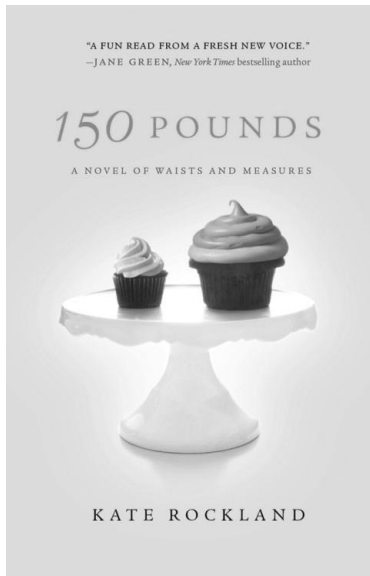


Fig. 31 (Above Left): Cover of *150 Pounds: A Novel of Waists and Measures* (2012) published by Thomas Dunne Books.

Fig. 32 (Above Right) Cover of Tania Katan's *My One Night Stand with Cancer* (2005) published by Alyson Books.



Fig 33: (Below): Still from “No Ifs, Ands, or Butts” (2000). In what has become an iconic scene from *SATC*'s third season, Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) converse over cupcakes.



Fig. 34 (Above): Magnolia Bakery Storefront in New York City (2013). A photograph of Carrie and Miranda remains on display in the window of Magnolia Bakery on Bleecker Street in New York City. Author's photo.

Fig 35 (Below): Photograph of Tania Katan which appeared in Scott Andrews' article, "Tania Katan: Random Acts of Subversion." Artistic Director, Angela Ellsworth.



Fig. 36 (Right): Cover of *Lopsided* (2009) published by Penguin Books.



Fig. 37 (Below): Promotional material for motion picture *The Ugly Truth* (2009) featuring Katherine Heigl and Gerard Butler.



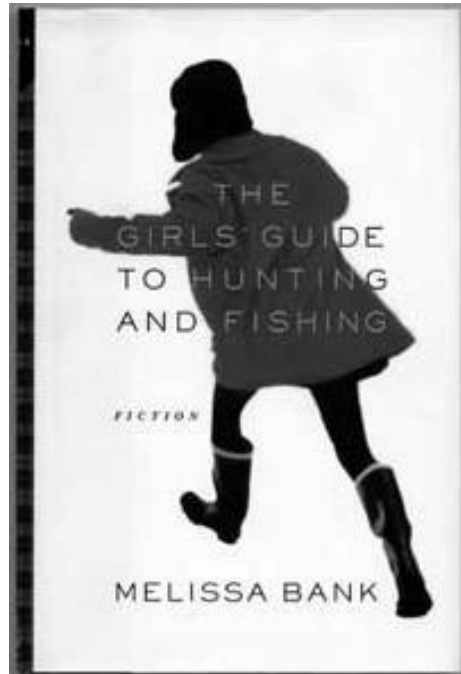


Fig. 38 (Above Left): Cover of first edition of Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) published by Viking Press.

Fig. 39 (Above Right): Cover of Melissa Banks *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999) published by Viking Press. Covers which depict faceless (or headless) women are a staple of chick fiction.

Fig. 40 (Right): Cover of Laurie Notaro's *The Idiot Girls' Action-Adventure Club* (2002) published by Villard Press. Notaro has written a series of personal reflections and the paratexts surrounding some of her work engages with "chickness" playfully.



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