

Zillah Eisenstein

Manmade Breast Cancers

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"A thick intersection of multiple tangents creating a messy knot" (65). Zillah Eisenstein defines this as a node; it is a useful image for theorizing breast cancer. Not only does the image of a "messy knot" evoke the abject materiality of a cancerous tumor but it also conveys the complexity of breast cancer as it "operates within a patriarchal, capitalist, racist, and consumerist society" (71). Continuing her description of nodes as "messy knots," Eisenstein adds that they "can be unwound but most often not neatly" (65). Nonetheless, that unwinding is the project of *Manmade Breast Cancers*; it is as neat an unwinding of breast cancer nodes as one could hope for.

Emerging from both personal experience and thoughtful scholarship, Eisenstein's narrative blends traditionally separate and differently valued methods of knowledge construction. More than rhetorical strategy or feminist praxis, this allows her to define the breast as both a personal and a political site of "place-consciousness": a location from which she is able to theorize the body and the body politic in order to "live differently with and against disease" (4). Early in the book Eisenstein writes, "Feminism's brilliance is found in [the] recognition that the body is not simply personal, that there is a politics to sex, that personal and political life are intermeshed" (3). The brilliance of *Manmade Breast Cancers* is its recognition of breast cancer within that same matrix. Beginning with the breast, Eisenstein articulates a feminism of the body. This is not an example of strategic essentialism—a (re)vision of the reduction of women to their objectified breasts—but rather a way of thinking about the body that considers the many social, political, and historical contexts that construct individual subjectivity.

As Eisenstein works toward a theorization of female materiality she argues that we must return to the "really real" body—the actual flesh in which we live out our lives. Gender and race combine with economic status and sexual preference in the breast cancer maze of flesh, power, privilege, and profit to determine who bears the greatest burden of toxic waste, who receives and does not receive medical care, and what kind of medical care that will be. These markers carry with them life and death consequences and they are imprinted on our bodies. Avoided in many feminisms because of the oppressive use of biologic essentialism by patriarchal power structures, this type of theorization reclaims the female body as a site of political resistance, a material location from which to conceive a critical theory of how meanings and bodies get made. For Eisenstein this theory emerges from personal experience and engaged intellectual development. As a result *Manmade Breast Cancers* is both feminist theory and personal narrative and as such, a piece of breast cancer literature.

Breast cancer literature tends to fall into one of two categories: “personal narratives of illness written by survivors of breast cancer and self-help manuals written largely by medical professionals” (Leopold, 2000). Although Eisenstein is a survivor of breast cancer and her book is part personal narrative it does not belong in the former category. Instead *Manmade Breast Cancers* emerges as a political memoir, a critique of dominant breast cancer narratives as they are constructed in scientific, medical, and popular discourse. The book’s cultural work places it in a small but significant category, following in the tradition of Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals*. The importance of this way of writing about breast cancer is that it represents a way of thinking about breast cancer that does not exist in dominant breast cancer narratives, a paradigm in which narratives of single causality permeate and from which most breast cancer knowledge is constructed. Like Lorde’s *Cancer Journals*, Eisenstein’s *Manmade Breast Cancers* reveals a much more complicated (and complete) narrative of breast cancer.

While most scientific and medical research and literature focuses on a single cause, Eisenstein rigorously examines the “plural environments [that] set the context of breast health. The environments of nature, of the political economy, of culture, of racism and sexism intersect with each other, creating devastating combinations” (86). Whether discussing “diet, or environmental carcinogens, or radiation, or genes, or fat, or estrogen” dominant narratives of breast cancer “smother the complexity of the multifactors at play” (74). Given this context, *Manmade Breast Cancers* has a great deal to add to our understanding of breast cancer.

Like much feminist scholarship, Eisenstein’s rhetorical strategy emphasizes the political goal. The weaving of the personal and the political becomes a model for interrogating epistemologies and constructing new knowledge. Arguably, it is the willingness to look at breast cancer in all its contexts that is the missing link in dominant narratives of breast cancer; its absence is clearly a factor in the limited progress in breast cancer treatment and prevention. “The breast cancer establishment—which houses the different institutions that do research, study detection, initiate treatment, and provide advocacy . . . often finds itself beholden to chemical and pharmaceutical companies as well as pesticide manufacturers for funding. . . . [This] level of vested interest compromises scientific paradigms and limits the possibility of an interactional biogenic/environmental science” (101–102). In this setting bodies combine and blur with subject positions alongside the interests of power structures that interpellate them, and profit triumphs over public health.

In the final section of the book, Eisenstein places breast cancer in a global context by recognizing the empowering potential of the breast as a site for a more inclusive political resistance. She uses breast cancer to move into a consideration of the health of all bodies. In the same way that the breast can be both a personal and political site of knowledge construction, so too can breast cancer serve as a specific site to engage with the wider context of public health. “By seeing and naming the environments that construct cancer more complexly and inclusively, we can shape a politics demanding the health of all our bodies” (106). The nodes that cohere in breast cancer are the nodes that cohere in environmental health and the health of all entities. Constructed by a masculinist, capitalist ideology, breast cancer becomes a lens through which to view the power structures that inform our world in both its material and abstract manifestations—a location from which to create transnational, or what Eisenstein calls “polyversal,” feminisms that can truly serve as a model for continued change.

Manmade Breast Cancers belongs on the shelves of feminists, breast cancer advocates, and environmental justice activists. It belongs in the curriculums of women's studies, environmental studies, political science, sociology, and public health. It belongs on the reading lists of thoughtful social justice reading groups (scheduled perhaps in October to balance the well-disseminated narrative of corporate-sponsored Breast Cancer Awareness Month). Eisenstein's argument is complex, but adeptly reasoned—her subject challenging, but her writing accessible. *Manmade Breast Cancers* lays the foundation for a breast cancer metanarrative capable of creating social change through a theorization of the body that is local and global, personal and political.

Tina Richardson is currently completing her master's degree in English at the University of Oregon. Her thesis, *(In)Scribing the Body: Feminist Environmental Literature*, explores the significance of an embodied female perspective in American nature writing. In addition to this book review for *Hypatia*, Tina has written book reviews for *ISLE* and *Breast Cancer Action*. She has written and published articles on *Terry Tempest Williams' Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* and Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*.