

Affective politics is negotiated throughout breast cancer diagnosis and treatment and has the potential to be performed and narrated queerly. Deploying S. Lochlann Jain's conception of "elegiac politics," this essay explores the queer affective terrain of breast cancer via Catherine Lord's *The Summer of Her Baldness* and the television drama *The L Word*.

## Queering Breast Cancer's Affective Narratives: *The Summer of Her Baldness* and *The L Word*

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EMILIA NIELSEN

In "Cancer Butch," an essay that critiques both breast cancer's normative cultural politics and a lack of effective cancer prevention strategies, Sarah Lochlann Jain asserts that she is not calling for a war on cancer and its terrors "to the extent that anthropologists get to make such calls." Instead, "the activist desire," she says, "is to proliferate the possible identities of illness." Here, Jain stresses that queer analysis of breast cancer can do more than make space for, or somehow make visible, queer subjectivities within dominant discourse. She believes it offers more than simply highlighting how, in the United States, lesbians still might be the most medically underserved group in society. Overwhelmingly, Jain argues for queering breast cancer because it "provides a radical intervention into the ways in which gender is constituted and inhabited." Here, Jain references Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conception of how gender is constituted by breast cancer when she considers how the "relentless

hyper- and heterosexualization of the disease results in something of a recursive process through which gender is produced and policed.” Jain suggests that querying the social constructions of gender and, by extension, sexuality in relation to breast cancer may prove somewhat less daunting than insisting on a discussion of mortality in relation to the disease, but that does not mean queering breast cancer is not a necessary theoretical intervention. In her disruptive breast cancer narrative, Jain creates a context where cancer can come out of the closet (506).

I name Jain’s narrative a “disruptive” one because it does not narrate or espouse “the standard story of breast cancer,” a narrative type, as Judy Segal rightly argues, with easily recognizable features that has come to dominate public discourse of the disease. The standard story most often begins with the discovery of a breast lump and typically concludes with the breast cancer survivor sharing what lessons cancer has imparted (4). Notably, social critic Barbara Ehrenreich first publicly resisted the standard story of breast cancer when she wrote “Welcome to Cancerland,” a personal account of the disease published in *Harper’s Magazine*. Here, she questions the publicly acceptable feelings a cancer patient can express, observing that “so pervasive is the perkiness of the breast-cancer world that unhappiness requires a kind of apology” (48). Yet cancer is not an intrinsically ennobling disease and Ehrenreich describes how a cancer diagnosis did not make her more courageous or hopeful; instead, it only made her more “deeply angry” (53). Moreover, Diane Price Herndl takes issue with breast cancer narratives that claim women do not have to die from breast cancer because, in truth, nearly a quarter of all women diagnosed die from the disease (238). Even worse, “to present the disease as an issue of will and of one’s recovery as a matter of attitude is to indirectly claim that those who do die from the disease just had the wrong attitude” (236). Certainly, as Herndl argues, it is much easier to have a “good attitude” toward cancer when you have the financial means and the necessary support systems in place to not only treat the disease but also recover from debilitating cancer treatments (238). Rather than attempt to normalize breast cancer, then, Jain calls for a consideration of the complexity of what it means to live with—and potentially die from—cancer because this is what we must contend with in the current historical moment. As she says, “The point is not simply to eradicate the shame that has for centuries accompanied the disease, but also to acknowledge the ugliness of the disease and of the suffering it causes and to let that suffering be okay, not because it is okay but because this is what we have” (“Cancer” 506).

For good reason, then, Jain proposes a public consideration of elegiac politics in relation to mainstream breast cancer culture and the standardized stories that emerge from it: “Instead of focusing on hope, cure, and the survivor figure, elegiac politics

years to account for loss, grief, betrayal, and the connections between economic profits, disease, and death in a culture that is affronted by mortality” (“Living” 90). Elegiac politics intrinsically requires a confrontation with mortality and a serious consideration of how to make space for—and make visible—not only suffering but the reality of dying from cancer. Thus, elegiac politics also advocates for a further proliferation of illness identities. Negative affects can be understood as integral to elegiac politics, as the affective economy of anger, suffering, and mourning—what could be considered private emotions—are brought into the public sphere. Jain argues: “An elegiac politics argues for pushing the private face of cancer cultures—grief, anger, death, and loss into the public cultures of cancer—perhaps even if only alongside of LiveStrong, or sipping, driving, and walking for the cure—with the recognition of the enormous economic profits and gains that parallel these losses” (89). To be sure, in “Cancer Butch,” Jain also illustrates that queering breast cancer remains central to her project of expanding illness identities, arguing that Audre Lorde’s formidable text *The Cancer Journals*, from 1980, cannot stand as the final word on the lesbian cancer experience. Although there is a small canon of lesbian breast cancer narratives,<sup>1</sup> a theoretical call to queer cancer involves a differently nuanced orientation.

Recently, Mary K. Bryson and Jackie Stacey also called for queering understandings of breast cancer and thus to “represent a relationship to health and embodiment that is predicated, not on normalcy, but predicated on troubling norms” (197). Here, health knowledge can be informed by the complexity queer narration of cancer illuminates “across the seemingly incommensurable idioms of biomedical knowledge and embodied experience” (209). More broadly, an exploration of how breast cancer patienthood is performed in breast cancer culture—and within a subcultural queer realm—provides an opportunity to examine how these performances are situated in embodied, experiential, and affective politics. Furthermore, Stacey and Bryson argue that as much as cancer warps, or queers, time in particular ways, it also “warps the temporality of the body” by twisting “our temporal perceptions of our own bodies, which, however illusory, anchored the modern subject in anxious desire for certainty and predictability” (7). Thus, with an expansive conception of elegiac politics in mind, and buoyed by the critical utility queer theoretical insight might provide in relation to breast cancer narratives, I turn to the possibilities and problematics of queering breast cancer via Catherine Lord’s book-length work *The Summer of Her Baldness* and the lesbian television drama *The L Word*.

**A**t the outset, I suggest that in Lord’s *The Summer of Her Baldness* the performance of baldness can be read in relation to an activist imperative of performing illness,

embedded in a conception of elegiac politics. Baldness, it becomes clear, also functions to illustrate how gender and sexuality become unwittingly complicated by breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. Moreover, undertaking to examine the implications of embodying baldness points to the violence that compulsory, normative conceptions of gender and sexuality impose on women and, specifically, those diagnosed with breast cancer. When visual artist Catherine Lord loses her hair during chemotherapy she creates an online persona in response, “Her Baldness,” who sends out email missives to a select listserv. Her Baldness reports that chemotherapy is like “mainlining weed killer, which is what, to invoke the perversely feminized metaphor oncologists prefer, my particular ‘recipe’ sounds like. Adriamycin and Cytoxan: they fit right in on the pesticide shelf” (48). When Lord’s breast cancer support group asks what her greatest fear is she answers, without hesitation, losing her hair. “Dying?” Her Baldness reports, “way down on the list, way below amputation, which is in turn way below my second fear, that when bald I will discover rolls of fat on the back of my neck” (36-37). “There are none,” she adds in mock-relief (37). Obviously, part of Her Baldness’s performative act is to employ sardonic humour.

Her Baldness also spends much time ruminating on what it means to be bald for a woman, in midlife and a lesbian with breast cancer. She is a larger-than-life character who speaks frankly of suffering through breast cancer treatments and the accompanying depression, shame, fear, loss of control, and isolation this diagnosis engenders. Notably, she also spends much time thinking about female baldness. *The Summer of Her Baldness* not only transgresses breast cancer’s normative cultural ethos by engaging with negative affects, but also blurs the lines between autobiography and fiction. The narrative text remains purposefully fragmentary and imagistic: Lord includes not only the sent emails of Her Baldness but unsent emails, musings, photographs, and the email responses of friends and loved ones. At base, Lord’s disruptive breast cancer narrative is an improvisation vividly illustrating how the diagnosis of breast cancer propels one woman into an unwilling, unplanned performance piece. In this performance of illness, Her Baldness returns again and again to ponder how to embody breast cancer and the transgressive aspects of female baldness.

When Her Baldness is newly bald and negotiating how to perform baldness in public she says, “I have not grown accustomed to my pate, but in an odd and tentative dance, we are becoming acquainted.” “In order to walk down the street or into a restaurant or into a store,” she says, “I must both remember my pate and forget that I have it” (40). Recently accessorized with a plethora of different head coverings and hats, Her Baldness comes to understand that the revealing of her bald head will be performed for an audience of only a privileged few. “I do not remove my hat in any

of the doctor's offices, especially not the shrink's" (37), she says. "It is a new relationship, we are not there" (37). In truth, Her Baldness does not perform baldness loud and proud in the ways she had first hoped to. Instead, she remarks on what she perceives as her freakish visibility: "*I feel like a freak [ . . . ] I have no style. I have no dignity. I'm marked. I'm a target.*" Her psychologist replies, carefully, that she does not look like any of those things; rather, she looks remarkably in control. Her Baldness replies: "*It's fake [ . . . ] It's a performance. Don't you get it? Can't you see? Are you blind?*" (38, *emph. Lord's*). "The performance," Her Baldness says, "will be thick enough to see me through. Collect the stares and use them later" (40). When her psychologist enquires about focusing on baldness and how to best perform it, she admits "OF COURSE I'm displacing my anxiety about death [ . . . ] but I'm not dead. I'm bald. Bald is all that's accessible" (37). She explains: "When you face your worst fear you crack and when you wake up you find out you're not dead, you're bald" (40).

Even if a fixation on baldness functions to displace a consideration of mortality, it is a visible mark of living with cancer and performs a strategic utility for Lord. Indeed it is Her Baldness who comes to realize she wants to be "marked by baldness as a woman with cancer undergoing chemo, as a woman confronting her mortality." "In fact, before I noticed that the decision had arrived in me I was already marked. Something knifed inside me, and I do not want to lose the external sign of that wound" (44). Cancer is a wounding and baldness is a mark of that injury. As Jain reminds us, "cancer injuries harbor ghosts: baldness recalls criminality and the holocaust as much as the subsequent performances (commonly read as codes of aggression) of punk rockers and lesbians" ("Cancer" 509). Thus, while baldness is not always read through breast cancer or even its many ghosts, it is a mark and a wounding even when it is not recognized as such.

Her Baldness discovers this on a flight from New York to Los Angeles, when she hands her jacket to the flight attendant in business class and receives her first deferential "sir." Lord notes, "Her Baldness has previously encountered gender misidentification" and "adopts the pedagogical strategy of nonconfrontation" (117). Thus, Her Baldness prolongs her exchanges with the flight attendant whose name tag reads "BETH" and lingers over the available in-flight snacks and beverages: "She is so anxious to give the flight attendant an opportunity to reflect on gender possibilities that she asks for tomato juice in addition to club soda. The flight attendant is amicable, cooperative and patient. Her Baldness congratulates herself on her maturity in using details such as the temperature of a warmed cashew to give the flight attendant an opportunity to reconsider the social construction of gender without provocation or direct criticism." Lord reflects that "perhaps, after all, cancer has been a transformative

experience for Her Baldness” (118). Yet Lord’s girlfriend, Kim, is becoming increasingly exasperated by the flight attendant. Rather than directly correcting her, she instead says loudly and repeatedly “Catherine” whenever referring to her companion. Still, Beth does not make the connection. Here, Lord understands that Kim is “trying to shield Her Baldness from gender insult,” but asks that Kim refrain from correcting Beth. For Her Baldness notes, “I WANT to be sir for five hours and twenty minutes. I’d rather be a bald white guy with bracelets than a sick white woman” (122). Besides, Her Baldness decides she is actually flattered to be called “sir.” In fact, she has been “sir” since that first moment she handed over her leather jacket on Flight 19 and nothing will change the way her gender presentation is read. “But,” she asks rhetorically, “isn’t Her Baldness a VERY smooth shaven guy? Or does the flight attendant think she’s a depilatory minded fag? Or an F2M?” (119).

Her Baldness realizes that her involuntary gender nonconformity via breast cancer, chemotherapy, and female baldness has found an uneasy and troubling solution: render the bald woman invisible. “If bald isn’t female, bald is fine. If bald isn’t female, bald isn’t grotesque.” The whole problematic of breast cancer, female baldness, even the reality of her relationship with Kim, has found an uneasy solution when she is read as a man: “Out there among the clueless heteros, it’s easier to see a straight couple than a queer one. The luscious lipstick lesbian, blonde, good haircut, loaded with the signifiers of femme (an identity Kim emphatically rejects) is disappeared into straight woman. The skinny tortured pale butch (an identity to which I, on the other hand, aspire), is disappeared into straight man” (118). Finally, Her Baldness questions what the flight attendant finds so confusing: “What is it that BETH can’t spell. L.E.S.B.I.A.N or C.H.E.M.O?” (122) “Presumably,” she surmises, “the flight attendant would rather serve a guy who wears bracelets than Her Baldness” (119), a woman undergoing treatment for breast cancer.

Conversely, when Sedgwick was first diagnosed with breast cancer, her initial reaction was: “Shit, now I guess I really must be a woman” (262). She understands that it is breast cancer—not her female body (with which she already had an ambivalent, complicated relationship)—that will come to define her as a woman. Indeed, Sedgwick’s personal essay, “White Glasses,” is an elegy for her friend Michael Lynch, who died of HIV/AIDS, as well as an exploration of her own multifarious identifications as feminist, queer, fat, gay, and a newly initiated sick person. With a pair of coveted white-framed glasses—just like Lynch’s, which she deemed “the coolest thing I had ever seen” (252)—Sedgwick attempts to have her self-described gay male identity recognized. After all, she declares: “Dare I, after this half-decade call it with all a fat *woman’s* defiance, my identity?—as a gay man” (256, *emph.* Sedgwick’s). But she soon

learns that instead of a “flaming signifier” the pastel of white glasses on a white woman “sinks banally and invisibly into the camouflage of femininity” (255). As Sedgwick claims, the colour white performs differently on a woman than it does on a man. Rather than the gay man she envisions herself to be performing, by wearing white glasses, Sedgwick is further inscribed into the constrictive femininity of white womanhood.

The ordinariness of Sedgwick wearing white glasses belies how this act has elegiac overtones, pointing to the fragility of both Lynch’s and her own health and wellness. Sedgwick’s attempt to perform gayness, even if illegible, serves to expose the faulty stability of identity categories, even as breast cancer attempts to inscribe her back into the seemingly unproblematic designation of “woman.” In fact, during chemotherapy Sedgwick declares: “I have never felt less stability in my gender, age, and racial identities,” adding, “nor, anxious and full of the shreds of dread, shame, and mourning as this process is, have I ever felt more of a mind to explore and exploit every possibility” (263–64). That Sedgwick speaks to the categorical instability of sexuality, gender, age, and race, as well as the affective dimensions of dread, shame, and mourning vis-à-vis breast cancer, is of particular importance, as is her intention to explore and exploit every possibility her breast cancer experience unwittingly provokes. I revisit Sedgwick’s evocative description of how gender is inscribed through a diagnosis of breast cancer—rather than the other way around—to remind us how prevalent normative assumptions of gender and sexuality, not to mention class and race, are in breast cancer culture, as well as to note Sedgwick’s resistance to categorical understandings of performing identity. In fact, she too ruminated on how to perform baldness in the public sphere, and in response to breast cancer culture.

Early on in chemotherapy, Her Baldness decides against a wig and refuses to cover her bald head with what she considers a substitute, a fake, and an incomplete replacement: “I have crossed it off my list the possibility of a substitute, a fling, a replacement, a temporary solution that would imply a temporary problem. Not even a red nylon Cher mane. No hirsute dildos for Miss Natural. Somewhere back there, right after the lesbian haircut, wig went out, wig landed in the garbage, wig no longer tweaked the tender buttons, wig stayed on the store shelves. Wig looked wig, and cost plenty” (43). As she recalls, when she first opted for a short haircut it gave temporary delight. Her Baldness reports, “it took me about five minutes to get with the program: outrageously mannish invert butchly LESBIAN haircut, the first one of my entire lesbian life” (34). But when her short hair slowly but surely begins to fall out as chemotherapy treatments progress, Her Baldness decides it is time for her head to be shaved. She reflects: “This is my life. It has changed irrevocably but it is the only life I have. I need to make it a normal life” (37). Actually, in attempting to make her life

normal Her Baldness refuses a wig and attempts to embrace, and truly perform, female baldness.

In the process, she discovers how hair, unlike any other signifier, is directly tied to both conceptions of health and wellbeing and to performing a certain kind of femininity: “Like color, which does not exist in isolation but is entirely determined by the adjacent colors, the neck, which lies between breasts and head, is entirely changed by the deletion of hair and the addition of pate. Minus accessories, pate pretty much fills the entire visual field. No accessories means minimal going on victim. On a woman of my age pate spells invalid. InVALid” (39). Without accessories—and without hair—Her Baldness speculates that she is publicly read as an “invalid.” Here, “invalid” signifies being read both as unwell, as someone living with cancer, and also as not acceptable and not fully registering as a woman. Strangely, in acquiring a pate—in living with cancer and a shaved head—Her Baldness discovers that this performance requires another kind of maintenance, a meticulous kind of grooming not unlike that associated with high femininity. A pate is not as trouble-free as Her Baldness had hoped it might be. It actually requires the kind of grooming she finds troublesome, inconvenient, not to mention somewhat distressing. Her Baldness, ever ironic, asks: “Is there something worse than cancer for a middle-aged dyke?” She adds, “Could I have male-pattern baldness? Is pateness—stubble-free and silky—something I will have to WORK to maintain for the next five or six months?” (40). Here, in what could be read as a comment on performing masculinity—perhaps female masculinity—baldness comes to symbolize the performance of a different set of gendered expectations rather than a public release from performing “coherent” gender.

In the context of breast cancer, female baldness can be read as a bodily performance situated within an elegiac politics. Her Baldness can be read to perform elegiac politics as she incorporates grief, loss, fear, and anger into the act of mourning her lost hair. Baldness can be read as an injury, a wounding which makes the problematic of breast cancer, and those who suffer through its treatments, necessarily visible. It can also be read as a space of mourning as it connects cancer to the reality of suffering, and even death. Her Baldness illustrates that cancer can wound in ways that feel impossible to articulate only in words; therefore, she inherently performs a manner of elegiac politics when she says:

Baldness is a scar. I want my scar [. . .]. I don’t want to shop to cover my scar, which will at any rate fade and heal, just as the ones on my breast and under my right arm are doing. I do not want to pass. I do not want to go gently back into the world of people who are afraid of looking into the eyes of someone whose chances of dying in the near future are better than theirs by a long shot, or so they need to believe. Baldness becomes me, in a literal sort of way, a hell of a lot better than a pink ribbon. (44)

Baldness, then, deviates from a normative breast cancer performance where, as one of cancer's many injuries, it is covered by a wig, an approximation of the hair lost to cancer. Her Baldness attempts to embrace a non-normative gender performance and also to embrace a counter-narrative to the one embedded in pink ribbon culture, where baldness is not a viable way to live as a woman with cancer. Importantly, Her Baldness does not provide a prescription for others on how to live with cancer; instead, her performance is an improvisation, a queer gesture toward making visible, and making space for, alternate possibilities of performing illness. Because the third season of *The L Word* insists on making explicit a connection between a character undergoing diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer, and a character transitioning from female to male, and how both characters grapple with the concept of surgery, I want to explore next what this juxtaposition might say about how gender and sexuality are formed, not only in relation to breast cancer, but a for-profit medical system. Thus, *The L Word* also engages with elegiac politics.

Showtime's cable television drama *The L Word*, produced by Ilene Chaiken, in Season 3 endeavours to engage the particularities of a breast cancer diagnosis in the lesbian world of West Hollywood, Los Angeles. This storyline centres on professional tennis player Dana Fairbanks and extends to Moira Sweeny, who begins transitioning from female to male while Dana undergoes treatment for breast cancer, and then rather quickly dies from complications. By positioning these characters in relation to each other, *The L Word* seems intent not only on attempting to queer breast cancer, but to reframe identifications and alliances around cancer. I would like to examine whether *The L Word*, in taking on such a controversial breast cancer narrative, is attempting to provide a manner of social commentary on the way gender and sexuality are constituted in relation to breast cancer, in the explicit terms used by Jain, Sedgwick, and Lord.

**A**t first glance, *The L Word* undertakes to tell an unconventional breast cancer narrative by explicitly rejecting a hopeful, happy storyline whereby breast cancer provides a vehicle for Dana's progression toward greater spirituality, strength, and/or sexiness. The very fact that Dana's youth and athletic prowess are not enough to conquer cancer, since she dies before the season even comes to a close, is at odds with a breast cancer cultural narrative of positive triumphalism. Interestingly, this clash of expectations does not play out in overt terms within the narrative, but is revealed in the emotional interactions between, especially, Dana and girlfriend Lara. Simply put, the fact that Dana dies from breast cancer, in the context of the often melodramatic world of *The L Word*, is certainly not enough to constitute this narrative as a disruptive one. What is disruptive is the scripting of Dana's character when facing breast cancer, and of how this storyline

performs in relation to Moira/Max's narrative. Read together, these two storylines form a breast cancer narrative that lends itself to being discussed in disruptive terms. The way gender is constituted in relation to breast cancer, and in particular in relation to a for-profit medical system and the suffering this invokes, situates *The L Word* well within a more focused discussion of one aspect of elegiac politics. Indeed, Jain argues that "rather than a call to action, an elegiac politics recognizes the basic human costs of U.S.-style capitalism." Thus, she reminds us that "elegiac politics" involves a "retrieval of affect and death and illness in the context of profit" ("Cancer" 506).

It is not my goal to argue that the fictional world of *The L Word* is somehow liberatory, or even progressive, in its themes or characterizations. On the other hand, to read it as another example of a "gay show" constructed for a heterosexual viewing audience would function to ignore any queer cultural and affective world-making the show might also accomplish. The for-profit medical system, the suffering it imparts, and death in relation to breast cancer are decidedly unhappy topics, and certainly not easy to engage with or sell/consume in the realm of popular television. *The L Word* daringly wants to make a connection between breast cancer and transsexuality explicit, especially by focusing on mastectomy and top surgery, in a narrative performed through the bodies of Dana and Moira/Max. At first, this narrative seems forced, contrived, a poorly thought-out plot line, and a problematic pairing of identifications around illness and embodiment. Indeed, this juxtaposition could be read as deeply problematic, and one could make the argument that *The L Word* problematically figures transsexuality as an "illness" that must be "cured" via biomedical means in much the same way that breast cancer is framed in this television drama. Despite this, there may be a more generative way to read this storyline and the explicitness with which these characters are brought into proximity with each other.

From the outset, Moira is portrayed as allied with Dana, somehow connected to her beyond the fact that she is a fan and watches all of her matches on TV. Conversely, when Moira is introduced to Jenny's LA housemates, a lack of connection is immediately apparent. Shane and Carmen are puzzled by Moira's butch and somewhat swaggering masculine gender presentation. In turn, it is readily apparent that Moira is uncomfortable in the company of Jenny's lesbian friends. This becomes apparent when the group assembles at a high-end seafood restaurant to celebrate Jenny's return from the Midwest. Here, the previously sensitive yet confident Moira withers in high-femme company. This scene highlights that her supposed gender nonconformity constructs her as an outsider, but the new-to-town and currently unemployed Moira is also an outsider socially and economically. Moira scans the menu, zeroing in on forty- and fifty-dollar entrees, and instead orders a salad and fries. When the food arrives,

she appears distinctly uncomfortable with the highly stylized presentation of the entrees. Moira assures the group she enjoys lobster, and this is not why she has neglected to order it. Instead, seated at the head of the table, Moira asks if anyone knows why a lid does not have to be used when female lobsters are cooked in a pot. She explains that with male lobsters, as soon as they realize they are in boiling water and are being cooked alive, they begin to make ladders and bridges with their bodies in order to help each other out of the pot. But when female lobsters realize they are being cooked alive they begin to claw and drag each other further into the boiling water, toward death. Female lobsters would rather they all die than let even one escape the pot. "It's a real shame, isn't it?" Moira asks.

Clearly, this is not simply a curious story about male and female lobsters. It takes on metaphoric overtones when told by Moira, and it is obviously not the subtlest of parables. If Moira sensed she was out of place and not entirely accepted by Jenny's friends, as soon as she and Jenny are out of earshot the conversation switches to her gender presentation. Bette pronounces Moira a butch woman, a historical throwback, explaining to the others that where Moira comes from this is the only kind of visual language she has to express herself. Alice asks the others if they understand the language of those "shit-kicking boots" and "lumber jack walk." Tina surmises that Jenny must have been really lonely back in Skokie, Illinois, because this is the only way she could have ended up with someone "so wrong" for her, wondering why she would want to "role play" with Moira. Carmen suggests that perhaps Moira is Jenny's type, while Alice dismisses the idea that a "stone butch" could be anyone's type. Shane questions whether "stone butch" is the best way to describe Moira, proclaiming labels irrelevant, especially butch and femme. Finally, Carmen denies that anyone could believe female lobsters are vindictive and aggressive while male lobsters are cooperative and helpful; Moira's story must be wrong.

After the disastrous night out, Moira takes to the Hollywood Hills. An introduction to lesbian life in West Hollywood seems to have been both overwhelming and profoundly disappointing for Moira. Crouched beside her pickup truck set against the starlit night sky, Moira appears to be deep in thought, replaying what has transpired over dinner. Then she performs emotional distress, angrily slamming both hands against the side of her truck. She flings open the door forcefully, climbs into the cab and buries her face in her hands, sobbing. In this scene, Moira first displays the simultaneous and conflicting emotions of sorrow and fury embedded in elegiac politics and terrorized gender rage as discussed by trans theorist Kate Bornstein: "We don't deserve the ridicule, the stares, the fist in our bellies. We are entitled to our anger in response to this oppression: our anger is a message to ourselves that we need to get

active and change something in order to survive” (81). Bornstein adds: “I do believe that anger is healthy, that it can lead to a recognition of the *need* for action, but activism itself is best accomplished by level heads who can help steer others’ anger toward correct targets” (emph. Bornstein’s). A correct target for this anger is the gender system itself, Bornstein believes, yet vulnerable gender-nonconforming individuals are effectively unable to attack this system until they are somehow free of the need to participate in it (83): “For a while, I thought that it would be fun to call what I do in life *gender terrorism*. Seemed right at first—I and so many folks like me were terrorizing the structure of gender itself. But I’ve come to see it a bit differently now—gender terrorists are not the drag queens, the butch dykes, the men on roller skates dressed as nuns. Gender terrorists are not the female to male transsexual who’s learning to look people in the eye while he walks down the street.” The “gender defenders,” Bornstein argues, are the actual “terrorists”; they are loaded with normative conceptions of what is “real” or “natural” and they publicly terrorize others via the very gender system in which nonconforming individuals are forced to participate (72). Trans rage, then, or the rage of any gender-nonconforming individual, as Bornstein suggests, is engendered by being subjugated by a gender system not of their own construction. Overwhelmingly, the constraint, rage, and sorrow a binary gender system engenders is something with which Moira is altogether familiar, as she negotiates life first as a masculine-identified woman, and then as a transgendered and/or transsexual man.

When Jenny holds a top surgery benefit for Moira, now known as Max, he is dismayed at how little money they raise. The morning after, Max informs Jenny they have raised exactly \$3,452; Jenny is pleased to hear this. “It’s crap money,” Max exclaims, “it won’t even pay for one tit! Where were all your rich friends last night?” “Where were all my rich friends?” Jenny repeats back incredulously. “Helena Peabody could pay for my entire transition in what she pisses away in like a day!” Max exclaims. Angrily, he swipes the money off the table, bills cascading to the floor. Increasingly, Max is portrayed as angry, unreasonably angry, even. This aggressive gesture prompts Jenny to proclaim, “I don’t know you. You’re becoming a completely different person.” Max retorts “You don’t understand!” To be sure, Jenny misunderstands, or refuses to acknowledge, the source and complexity of Max’s anger, blaming it on his use of black market testosterone. Max is also rather inarticulate about his own anger and the source and depth of it. At several points, he too blames his rage on testosterone, a perhaps legitimate yet underexplored aspect of the storyline. Jenny implores Max to consider, “When you get the body you need, who’s going to live inside of it? Is it going to be that sweet, kind, compassionate, gentle person I met,” she asks, “or is it going to be this motherfucking monster?!”

Susan Stryker addresses the intersections of monstrosity, transsexuality, and rage in her influential essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage.” Stryker argues that in Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, Frankenstein’s monster is able to resist, at least partially, the reductive category of monstrosity by learning human language: “Transsexual monstrosity, however, along with its affect, transgender rage, can never claim quite so secure a means of resistance because of the inability of language to represent the transgendered subject’s movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure. Our situation effectively reverses the one encountered by Frankenstein’s monster. Unlike the monster, we often successfully cite the culture’s visual norms of gendered embodiment. This citation becomes a subversive resistance when, through a provisional use of language, we verbally desire the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy” (200). In particular, transgender rage, even if it does not provide a stable means of resistance, is both necessary and, as Stryker further articulates, inevitable, given that gender is necessarily performed in relation to dominant culture. Writing from the perspective of a trans person and scholar resisting normative gender and sexual politics, practices, and performances, Stryker says: “Like the monster, the longer I live in these conditions, the more rage I harbor. Rage colors me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart. It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival” (203). Here, transgender rage is born of living in a social world that refuses to validate one’s existence, yet this rage not only becomes necessary for survival, it engenders the means with which to survive. For Stryker, “Transgender rage is a queer fury, an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one’s own continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one’s exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject” (209). Throughout this essay, Stryker endeavours to articulate a transgender politic that speaks to personal and collective resistance to normative formations of gender and sexuality, but also one that engages critically with the affective dimension of resistance itself. Thus, it is through the process of performing rage that stigma is transformed and becomes the source of power with enormous transformative potential.

Problematically, Jenny does not understand Max’s anger as the manifestation of a complex kind of suffering. Max’s rage could be explored within the context of a restrictive, binary gender system—a deeply normative conception of gender performance—and one that may have brought him to the decision to transition. The problem is that now he must find a way to pay for a “legible” gender, and body, while those who could

help him financially do not see or understand the depth of his suffering. Read from this perspective, it would be possible to rearticulate his suffering as similar to other kinds of bodily suffering, specifically the type of suffering cancer can impart, which cannot be considered apart from a for-profit medical system. Interestingly, throughout Season 3 of *The L Word*, Max's pre-operative body displaying changes via male hormones is articulated as "monstrous," while Dana's body clearly displaying the ravages of cancer is silently mourned. At Max's top surgery benefit, Dana compares scars with a shirtless trans man, reflecting that her breasts were once "really nice," making explicit what she has lost. That Dana's body has been surgically and chemically altered is an open secret, but the current cultural formation of breast cancer does not allow her space to discuss freely what these changes mean or if they have affected her sense of gendered embodiment or sexuality. What becomes clear is that Dana is expected to function and perform as if she were the same as before and that she should refuse to publicly acknowledge that cancer has permanently altered her body and/or her sense of embodiment.

In fact, Samantha Cromptvoets calls for a critical discourse to challenge the normative assumptions made of women with breast cancer and to engage instead with the complex relationships women have with their bodies and breasts during and after cancer treatments and surgery. She suggests that the near-total absence of critical writing which might reframe the post-mastectomy body in positive terms may impede a full recovery from breast cancer. Cromptvoets stresses that the way the post-surgical body is understood within breast cancer culture does not allow women to conceive of their own bodies as feminine, even whole, without a breast or breasts, because the mastectomized body is constructed as a problem that must be fixed (4). Breast restoration via surgical reconstruction or prosthesis presents the most viable option for women to be publicly understood as healthy again and thus able to negotiate new understandings of body and self in life after cancer treatments.

For this reason, it remains vitally important to explore the particularities of experiential knowledge while also taking into account the particular ways in which one is gendered and comes to embody this performance in the social world and through breast cancer narratives such as the one included in *The L Word*. For, as Cromptvoets poignantly articulates, "breast cancer and the post-surgical body are not something we *have* and talk *about*, rather they are *performed*" (emph. Cromptvoets's). She argues: "The post-surgical body is done in particular ways and is therefore not a singular entity but multiple. Through a performative lens, the post-surgical body can be seen as existing not as one, but many; as performed in a variety of ways" (21). Therefore, focusing critical attention on the post-surgical body provides another instance of paying careful

attention to how breast cancer knowledge is produced and how identities are renegotiated during, and after, breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. Importantly, as Cromptvoets stresses, we are left to consider, critique, and explicate what remains unsaid about the post-surgical body in the public discourse of breast cancer (16). *The L Word*, in this instance, contributes to a collective knowledge-creation project whereby the normative cultural politics of breast cancer are disrupted, a young lesbian dies from breast cancer, and queer affective politics are put to the fore.

Jain argues that read from a certain vantage point the entire cancer complex is about mourning, about absencing and presencing in ways that make it “hard and emotional and profitable”: “I don’t believe that cancer, or suffering more generally, can be understood cleanly through a politics that tries to disavow death (as the survivor politics does), or cheer it up (as the pink-ribbon rhetoric does), or deny or defer cancer suffering (as does the ‘drive for the cure’)” (“Living” 89). Instead, Jain asks for a consideration not only of the suffering cancer imparts but also the obfuscation of a cultural politics that strives to bright-side this very suffering, or even disavow this suffering, not to mention the reality of death and dying. The staggering ubiquity of breast cancer belies that the disease need not be inevitable, even while its threat is disavowed through promises of “the cure.” Even when cancer is “cured,” women’s bodies are permanently altered through biomedical treatments, and the mourning, absencing, and presencing of breasts, as symbolic and material, needs to be further re-conceptualized and queered within breast cancer culture, as *The L Word* attempts to illustrate.

That cancer pain and trans rage are brought together in *The L Word* is not insignificant, and delving into this affective terrain it becomes apparent that suffering and rage are explicitly interconnected. *The L Word* is embedded with performances of elegiac politics and, ultimately, asks for a consideration of the terror of both the cultural politics of breast cancer and a gender politics that espouses, and attempts to uphold, the gender binary. That there is little public space to express that breast cancer can be the source of much suffering, anger, and rage functions as a kind of terrorizing constraint. As sites of complex suffering, then, gender norms and breast cancer both produce elegiac politics that become not only symptoms of that suffering but sites of strange—and perhaps even transformative—power and empowerment. In both *The Summer of Her Baldness* and *The L Word*, breast cancer and normative conceptions of gender can be read as sites of intense suffering, to which an elegiac politics calls attention, while attempting to articulate the true cost of industrial capitalism. In such a negotiation of feelings, negative emotions become a kind of currency with which subjectivities attempt to perform agency and control, in an otherwise cheerful affective economy complete with a prescriptive politics of how best to live.

## NOTES

1/ See Victoria Brownworth's (ed.) *Coming Out of Cancer: Writings from the Lesbian Cancer Epidemic* (San Francisco: Seal, 2000. Print); Marilyn Hacker's "Journal Entries" in *Living on the Margins: Women Writers on Breast Cancer* (Ed. Hilda Raz. New York: Persea, 1999. 201-41. Print); and Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum's *Cancer in Two Voices* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1991. Print).

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EMILIA NIELSEN is a Teaching Fellow at Quest University Canada. Her writing has appeared, or is forthcoming, in scholarly journals such as *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Performance Research*, *Canadian Woman Studies*, *Re-public: Re-imagining Democracy*, *English Studies in Canada*, as well as in literary journals across Canada. She is the author of the poetry collection *Surge Narrows*, which was a finalist for the League of Canadian Poets' Gerald Lampert Memorial Award.