Refracted Selfhood in Breast Cancer Autofiction: A Research-Creation Essay

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Ink:

The needles whir, burrowing into my skin. I look up into brown eyes that do not see me. The tattoo artist is engraving roses. They will surge upwards out of the blank space of my nipple towards my shoulder, seeking the light.

"Can we break the frame?" she had asked. "Do you want people to see?"

I had watched her apply a press-on rose to my right breast, and then another to my shoulder. We turned to the mirror as she sketched the contours of leaves up and around the vine, adapting to the curves of my body.

Prints decorate her walls. Images of inked bodies flow through an electronic frame, an uncanny succession of artful tattoos across time. Faceless torsos, legs, arms, backs, appear in flashes.

I am on the table, my breasts upwards.

A soft blanket warms my lower body.

A rack of mysterious tools blurs to my right.

The ceiling is white.

Tremors rise, as she works. She presses firmly on my shoulder. Our eyes meet. "Okay?" she asks.

"It's not you", I say. "It's my body. It remembers".

She pauses until I am ready to continue.

The vibrating eases me into a trance.

I drift in and out, suspended in a capsule, like that of a plant bud ready to burst through its confines.

Time performs its magic.

Her brown eyes disappear.

I stand up, shaky and proud, and turn to the mirror.

A black rose blossoms out of the nipple space of my reconstructed breast, joined by a second, smaller, rose reaching for the sky.

I feel energy rise, as the force of vegetation spreads.

I look into the brown eyes with gratitude. I catch a glimpse of suffering beyond lashes and eyelids. Her mother died of breast cancer.

She steps back with stiff compassion. She must inflict pain to repair, reconstruct, transform within the framework of wounded flesh.

She connects to the history of her canvas.

She watches me watch myself, measuring the reception of her *oeuvre.*

We stand in silence.

Nervous agitation. Time to go.

I slip on a black tank top, and she says, "Ha ha. It goes beyond the frame".

I laugh at the uncanny echo of my story "I am a Tree".

I return home and admire my inky vegetation in the bathroom mirror. The tattoo is sealed under a plastic wrap bandage through which the faint outlines of petals can be seen. I take a selfie. The edge of a rose ventures out from the border of my top.

I find myself returning to the mirror to admire my secret garden. I commission my daughter to take pictures, and I grow braver, sending my inky images across WhatsApp to intimate friends, framed in a close-up that hides the shape of the breast.

My roses bloom on quietly under my t-shirt, drawing energy from the depths, ready to reach past the frame.

I sit down to begin writing.

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1. In June 2016, a rush of memory fragments coalesced into a *montage* in my mind, as if I were viewing my dysfunctional marriage through the lens of social media. A force welled up from unknown depths in an uncanny resurgence of the women's writing I had studied over twenty years as a university professor in France. I found myself enacting the stories I had researched. And then I found the lump in my breast. My breast took over the story of my life, as the framework of family and career dissolved, gradually making space for new narratives. I have captured this period in a collection of thirteen stories, *Blue Breast*. While writing, I found myself alternating between third and first person, between past and present tense, as I navigated the tropes of my own mortality and questions of vulnerability. Only two of the thirteen stories were written during my illness. As I gradually emerged into the period of remission, my writing was a means by which to express the shifts in perception that had occurred before and during illness, often through the lens of memory. It is as if I was observing ongoing life cycles of "pictorial thirds" in my imagination, memories shaped and restructured by years of reading, research, and exposure to art. Fiction and life blur as I navigate the spaces between I and she in stories that map out the treatment of a body and the disintegration of a family life, ending with the blank space of an unknown future:

1. Time (First person, present tense)
2. Entering the Funhouse (Third person, past tense)
3. Cars and Carnivals (Third person, past tense)
4. Blue Breast (Third person, past tense)
5. Floating (First person, present tense)
6. Hair (Third person, past tense)
7. My Body, My Self: A Bathtub Meditation (First person, present tense)
8. Hum (First person, past tense)
9. I am a Tree (First person, present tense)
10. Paths (Third person, past tense)
11. Stitches (Third person, past tense)
12. Help my son (Third person, past tense)
13. (P)ink (First person, present tense)

2. The stories focus on specific memories, moments in breast cancer treatment that intersect with the slippery notions of time, dreams, experienced through a body that had taken control. The deconstructed body finds an echo in fragments of narrative that compose what might be labeled as autofiction or as a "memoir in stories". The force of my collection stems in part from its ability to mobilize the formal potentialities of the short story cycle as a system, allowing the reader to move in and out of perspectives to piece together the narrative of a body fragmented by illness. As briefly explained in my afterword to "(P)ink", published in *Polysèmes* (2023), Forrest Ingram defines the short story cycle as a collection of short stories "so linked to each other […] that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts" (Ingram qtd in Gill and Kläger, Introduction 2). Cycles foster patterns of connection both within and between stories in a collection. The short story cycle/ memoir in stories allows me to express intersecting moments from varying points of view and temporal positions, crisscrossing events within the framework of illness, intergenerational family abuse, and the consequences of cancer on an evolving family structure. Ingram's definition highlights the importance of context, as each story resonates differently when read outside the

collection.

3. Shifting pronouns are essential to the dynamic of a collection of autofictional stories that are conceived of as a "cycle". Throughout my career, I had studied "pronominal postures" and play with authorial transparency. For example, in Ali Smith's writing in "Authorial Transparency and Pronominal Postures in Ali Smith's *The First Person and Other Stories*" (2013), I comment on how Smith creates spaces for reflection about authorship in the slippage between the Ali Smith on the cover of the book, and the "Ali" in conjunction with a first person narration in "True Short Story". This story incorporates metatextual reflections about authorship into a text about breast cancer. This connection is further emphasized by the insertion of Kasia Boddy's name into the narrative, a short story critic and friend of Ali Smith who actually did have breast cancer. I was able to discuss the story with Kasia Boddy when I attended a 2017 conference on short fiction in Mainz Germany, confirming my perception of the porousness between life and fiction that informs what has become an iconic short story. I develop this reflection about pronouns and the effects of authorial transparency in the work of other authors, such as Helen Simpson, in an article published the following year, "'Am I that Name?': Authorial Identity in Writing by Contemporary British Women Authors" (2014). The struggle between "she" and "I" that I had studied in Carter's "Flesh and the Mirror" early in my career (Ryan-Sautour 2007) seemed to resonate with the short fiction of other women writers. I later began to perform my own pronominal postures, as my research bled into my own life.

4. In the synthesis written for my Research-Creation *Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches* (2025), I study how the thirteen stories in *Blue Breast* propose a conceptual and formal movement that follows the logic of "haunting". Formative readings, works of art, social context, and a career of research on women short story writers are connected to stories that explore the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction. In my synthesis, the usual temporality of practice-led research is disrupted. A traditional doctoral thesis validated in 2000, *Le jeu didactique et l'effet sur le lecteur dans* The Passion of New Eve *(1977) et* Nights at the Circus *(1984) d'Angela Carter* (*Didactic Games and the Effect on the Reader in Angela Carter's* The Passion of New Eve *(1977) and* Nights at the Circus *(1984)*) is the starting point of a career focused on 20th and 21st century short fiction written by women authors. The movement towards creative practice more than fifteen years later is a shift, or what might be seen as a *rupture*, in my research posture brought on by a tsunami in my personal life. Creative writing at first appeared as an opportunity to carve out a new posture within my teaching and research practices that was more coherent with my personal development. However,

this turn to creativity gradually developed into a critical-creative research perspective. What first began as a personal and creative transformation gradually revealed itself to be a new research focus.

5. Liliane Louvel's "Pictorial Third" takes on particular relevance in this critical-creative approach, as an "event" in reading that allows for the coexistence of affect and concept (*Pictorial Third* 2), while engaging with somatic experience: "Pictorial reading includes synaesthesia, and the implication of the body in this reading process cannot be ignored; a sensible approach has its own resonances and rationale, and the eye sometimes sees double" (*Pictorial Third* 2). Louvel studies the influence of image-saturated texts on the reader's inner screen, or "mind's eye" (*Pictorial Third* 2). Studying my writing through the lens of my career involves engaging with the temporality of the "pictorial third" in my memory as a reader who has turned to writing. This aligns with Catherine Bernard's study of *présences spectrales* and *hantologie* (138-153) in *Matière à réflexion : Du corps politique dans la littérature et les arts visuels britanniques contemporains* (2018). Haunting in short fiction was also the guiding concept of a conference I co-organized in 2015 with Ailsa Cox and Elke D'hoker. The temporalities of synchronicity and haunting form the central conceptual thread of a synthesis that seeks to reconcile literary creation with "cognition" by tracing formative events in my career path. This approach allows me to demonstrate the nature of haunting as a dynamic layering of affective, formal, conceptual and corporeal experiences.

6. Bernard has demonstrated, in reference to Rosi Braidotti, the idea of a "*politique des affects*" that allows for a movement beyond cognition to open up to the ethical experience of different modes of subjectivation and other forms of "*corporéalités*" (Bernard 138). A volume of short stories about breast cancer engages with the idea of an ethics of fiction as a tool to mediate forms and sensibilities. My synthesis, in its structure and methodology, underlines the idea that cognition and "affectivity" are not contradictory (Bernard 138). Louvel similarly uses the terms of "movement," "energy" and "performance" to describe aesthetic experience, thus proposing a nuanced approach to intermedial experience, a key aspect of my writing:

> The dynamics of the pictorial third is put into play in these 'obscure machines' as movement, a kind of energy bringing about perturbation, a surplus of meaning and affect, a dream that dances between the two. Neither one nor the other, it is both one *and* the other, as the image turns and returns; it is an operation and also a *performance*. (*Pictorial Third* 188)

It is this sense of corporeal, affective, cognitive haunting that underlies my approach to creation. As I progressed in my research, I realized I was not writing so much from a perspective of a *rupture*, as writing in continuity with a long career of studying short fiction by women authors. I had indeed

been immersed in short fiction writing through my activities as director/co-director of the short story section of the CIRPaLL research group, and as director of the *European Network for Short Fiction Research.* I realized I was inadvertently echoing the structures I had engaged with critically, while bringing the figures of women authors and their works to inform my understanding of my personal life. The result is an ethical loop where life becomes fiction and fiction becomes life, resulting in short forms of hybrid life-writing that are critically and creatively porous.

7. Alongside my writing, I enrolled in a two-year artistic mediation program, using concepts and techniques borrowed from Gestalt Therapy. The premise of forms/*Gestalts* emerging from a person's background in response to an environment is central (Masquelier and Masquelier 2019). The program leads participants to engage with different media: clay, painting, drawing, dancing, walking, collage, voice (singing, rapping, speaking). For one workshop, Marie Motais, director of *Alluna Danse*, proposed an introduction to American choreographer, Anna Halprin's "Life-Art Process", an approach to dance based on coherency between life and movement. Anna Halprin developed a ritualistic approach to dance after being diagnosed with cancer. She eventually recovered, and her subsequent work reflects a more process oriented approach, often with a focus on community, involving a variety of participants, and even engaging aging bodies. At the age of 83 she was staging self performances in nature, rolling in waves for days, or immersing herself in twigs and vegetation in the woods, her body painted and decorated. The Anna Halprin digital archive, along with her papers, is housed by the Museum of Performance and Design, whose mission is to "collect, preserve, and make accessible material on performance and theater design to support learning, appreciation, and creativity within a world-wide community of artists, researchers, and the general public". The website explains how Halprin also worked with Gestalt therapists Fritz Perls and John Rinn to create dance techniques that would contribute to processes of healing (Anna Halprin Archive). Halprin's husband was an architect and had been developing a RSVP Cycles model to involve people "living and working in urban and rural areas in the planning process" (Schorn "The Life/Art Process, 2015, 79-80). RSVP stands for Resources, Scores, Valuaction and Performance, four steps of the creative process that involves the collective creation of "scores," plans for coordinated movement. Halprin's approach to art and therapy was later developed by her daughter Daria Halprin and has greatly contributed to new approaches to art therapy.

8. Anna Halprin's work is intimately intertwined with my own creative process, as I am also engaging with the collective, drawing upon my years of experience with short forms and a community of researchers, while also bringing this experience to bear upon the personal and shared

experience of breast cancer. I am often asked if it was "therapeutic" to write my collection of stories, a question to which I am reluctant to respond. I feel that a limited focus on therapy obscures the potential for short narrative forms to mediate personal experience in a manner that reaches beyond the scope of the individual experience. I indeed find myself at the boundary of art and therapy, where the act of writing points to potential for therapy, yet the transformational potential of art and the value of rigour and form also remain present. This intermediary position is particularly relevant in a university environment, as the objective in teaching and research supervision is not a therapeutic one. However, teaching and guidance can be informed by an understanding of person-centered processes in creative writing and creative conceptualization. In a volume of essays dedicated to Anna Halprin, Ursula Schorn comments on this in-between position, when asked by Gabriele Wittmann if art would eventually become a question of therapy:

> I see a quite specific quality in Life/Art Process that Anna Halprin created, which moves in the border zone between artistic and therapeutic work. In this border zone dualistic thinking disappears—whether it's artistic or therapeutic. For it's precisely in artistic forms of expression that the meaning of a life issue appears to someone who's looking for healing. Finding the meaning of an illness—cancer, for example—can release healing potential. What determines the evaluation of an artistic expression, however, is not an aesthetic standard that's been set externally, but the search for the inner locus of evaluation; also the search for a congruent expression of emotion and motion, feeling and movement. (Schorn 2015, 111)

As an academic, I am functioning within this border zone, where a process of writing informed by an imagination shaped by short forms is brought to resonate with an "inner locus" of personal feelings and experiences.

9. At the artistic mediation workshop with Marie Motais, we improvised dance movements in the Broceliande Forest, inserting self-portraits drawn over a period of three days into a natural setting, and then performing forms of self-representation, often in small, intimate groups. I found myself working with a tree split in two, its trunk covered in a thick moss. My portrait was placed at the base of the tree. The figure in my painting was sketched as if life force was emerging from a deep root system; it reached upwards towards the light beyond the tree branches. My story "I am a Tree" came to mind as I danced my performance for my partners. In this story, the narrator is undergoing radiation treatment. Fragments of pink tree branches etched into the ceiling panels of the radiation room imprint themselves upon her mind, leading to a fusion of plastic artifice with mental images.

> From my position on the table, I study the plastic covers of the fluorescent lights. Synthetic plants are etched into the pink and purple light encasements. Mood is important. These are carefully placed for

> cancer patients to see. A simulation of the sky. I stare at them every day, the images engraving themselves into my mind […] The frames cut the forest canopy into incomplete pieces, like a Japanese print. Branches have been cut, and the plants continue invisibly beyond the frame for the mind to complete". (Ryan, "I am a Tree" 26)

The reiteration of the daily routine of radiation treatment leads to a gradual movement into the dream space of slow vegetal growth, fused with fragments of myth and flashes of tattooed breasts viewed in *Rose Magazine* in the waiting room:

> Breasts have come to infiltrate my imagination. I have grown obsessed. I collect breasts in an internal scrapbook. Evocative stories, images. My favorite is of a goddess with breast regeneration powers. If her breast is cut off, another grows grow back in its place. I like this idea immensely. Spontaneous breast regrowth. That would solve so many problems for breast cancer, I think. My pink breast will be cut off. I imagine a new one already quivering from within, ready to sprout again, like the breasts of a young woman, hovering just below the surface. It can grow back, I think, spontaneous rebirth, a second adolescence. I imagine it emerging slowly, tentatively from the skin's encasing, like the push of green sprouts through dry, parched soil, or like one of those fleshy vegetable babies gestated by plants in fairy tales. It will swell, develop, fill itself out. I can already feel the process quickening within, preparing to respond in an instant to the excising pinchers.
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> The leafy *Rose Magazine* chest tattoos return. I feel the soil build around my body. The moisture of the earth. The life of the forest. I watch curiously as fresh green tendrils begin to sprout from my chest, across my shoulders and back. I can feel the eager leaves unfurling as they reach for the light. They wind slowly around me, covering my breasts, slowly, deliberately invading my body, stretching past the machines as they move beyond the steady pink light of the ceiling vegetation. The leaves etch themselves into my skin in that uncanny slowness of vegetal growth that is only visible when filmed and viewed in acceleration. I feel a delicate unfolding take hold of my body, and I rise into the pink forest. I am a tree. (Ryan, "I am a Tree" 27-28).

The pink fragments of branches on the ceiling panels are also a self-conscious nod at the formal incompleteness inherent to short fiction. Short stories indeed tease the reader into filling in blanks. Here the suggested blank is also the body amputated of one breast, leaving space for regrowth through literary creation.

10. In the forest dance of my Life/Art Process exercise, I found myself gazing at a fallen tree, still alive, somehow held in suspension by a line of youthful, upright trees. Exposed roots loomed over a deep tunnel system revealed at its base, dark depths carved over many years of growth. The ground was porous and crawling with busy spiders. I gazed into the dark depths left by roots. I studied the half-fallen tree. Life. Art. Process. Suspended between the world of academia and the world of creative writing, between art therapy and polished literary entities, I observe the emergence of

forms in surprising combinations, sprung from youthful readings, my family environment, university studies; these figures migrate across time to reveal themselves, often in startling ways, throughout the writing process. My stories are written along the lines of an integrative approach that blends the personal body with art, while also drawing upon my experiences as an American woman teaching in France. The result is a collection that functions as a fictional system where body, identity and landscape work in synergy.

11. Like Angela Carter, I seemed to be mobilizing the natural capacity of short narrative forms to mediate processes. As I explain in my afterword to "(P)ink" (2023), fragmentation, discontinuity, and instability are also terms used to describe short narrative structures. This formal connection is studied in a two-volume 2022 issue of *Short Fiction in Theory in Practice* dedicated to "The Health of the Short Story". As Lucy Dawes Durneen observes in her introduction, such a practice reaches back to early practitioners of the form such as Giovanni Boccacio with *The Decameron* (Durneen 3). This issue of *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, initially conceived as a conference topic, predicted with uncanny prescience the Covid pandemic that would follow its initial conception. The conference was cancelled because of travel bans, but as Durneen observes, the two-volume issue speaks of a long tradition of using short story forms to engage with the experience of illness, both physical and mental:

> The short story has long functioned as an examining room, psychiatrist's couch, emotional balm, case study. It provides a supportive crutch for dangerous, unstable times, reflects the physical and psychic wounding of war, maps the fractured spaces of the mind and acts as a barometer of a nation's socio-political health. Inside its boundaries wallpaper moves, women transmogrify, pathologizing grief, doubt and anxiety until their cure becomes something more and something other than medicine. (Durneen 3)

An allusion to women's health appears in the reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", one of the most famous autopathographical stories that deals with domestic abuse, psychological distress, and creation, also present in my story, "Floating", as the protagonist recovers from chemotherapy:

> Clutter has accumulated on the chest of drawers, and the closet door is always half open, stuffed full of clothing collected over twenty years of marriage. It looks like a staged version of Miss Havisham's dusty house of decay and lost love. Or even better, it recalls Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," as the narrator spirals deeply into the walls around her, rewriting her way into herself. Like the narrator, I feel the oppressive non-presence of the husband lurking in the downstairs quarters, his words hanging in the air, the seeming acts of kindness that vibrate with an underlying negligence

and malevolent love, invisible to the eye. (Ryan, "Floating" *Blue Breast*, unpublished manuscript).

Rachel Newsome has written of short fiction and abuse, citing the "qualities of brevity, condensation, fragmentation, ambiguity and elision" underlined by Lohafer and Clarey as being essential elements of the genre to engage with "difficult subject matter" (Newsome 60). She brings Jungian psychoanalysis to bear upon the formal considerations of representing childhood abuse in her critical-creative text, "Walking the shadows: Writing trauma, short fiction and Jungian psychoanalysis". The dominant modes of indirection and the implicit can indeed be mobilized to hint at the subtleties of abuse in a domestic environment, as is the case in *Blue Breast*.

12. In my critical work on *Blue Breast*, I have recently turned to the writing of American essayist Dodie Bellamy, who interweaves incongruent elements from high and low culture. She can move from a study of Sylvia's Plath's poetry, to images of her husband dying in the hospital, to comments about walking in the "shit" of her cat. I have found in her playful and irreverent writing, forms of conceptualization akin to those I have proposed in my *Habilitation* synthesis. I learned of Bellamy's writing after the completion of my *Habilitation* portfolio. In many ways it was like having found a critical soul sister. She writes from the movement of "New Narrative" that emerged in the 1970s, proposing critical essay modes that mix popular culture with the theoretical and literary. A YouTuber's notes on fashion intermingle with poetry quotations and descriptions of vibrators drying in the dish rack. She and Carter would have got along famously. Yet, her work is never devoid of affect, and a sense of the spiritual is threaded through her writing, particularly in her essays about grief in *Bee Reaved* (2021) where she comes to address herself in the third person as a character named Bee Reaved, whose best friend is Pea Culier. Bellamy's cheeky and biting social, artistic, and literary commentary is published by the American publishing house Semiotext(e). Such modes of writing are not new, yet their place within institutions continues to be questioned, as if boundary-breaking writing threatened to dissolve the glue that holds our academic paradigms together. I am interested in exploring such in-between spaces that blend the creative with the critical in my writing and research activities.

13. Dodie Bellamy writes in *Bee Reaved*, "When one observes the self, if one stays true to what one sees there, the self becomes a portal for the rest of the world to rush into, a wavering point from which history past and present streams" (85). I used the term "migration" in my *Habilitation* synthesis title ("Ethical Migrations of Short Forms in Contemporary Women's Writing") to indicate how short forms travel, migrate across time, genre, structures, suggesting how my own writing opens up, welcoming the "rest of the world" in a yielding to a rush of short forms resurging from

"history past and present". In Bee Reaved, Dodie writes to her deceased husband, also a writer: "The spirits of all the writers we've known who have passed over, are you with them? Do they care who's reading their books, who's organizing a paranoid landscape based on their titles alone? Does it do any good to honor the dead? Does the author's spirit depart from the writing, as it does from the body? Or do the words hold an indelible spark?" (211). I am interested in the "indelible spark" of texts that continue to act upon the reader long after an author's disappearance from the scene of writing. It is a bit of this indelible spark left by women writers that I have attempted to capture in my stories and recent critical work.

14. In terms of boundary-breaking I would place Tracey Emin side by side with Bellamy. I encountered Emin's performative work early on in my career. I recently came across the 2023 volume *Tracey Emin: Paintings*, written by David Dawson, that includes an interview with Emin. She speaks unflinchingly of having had bladder cancer, and of the importance of color and affect in her painting. I read the book standing up in the Centre Pompidou bookshop in December 2024, struck by the manner in which I have come full circle, having first encountered her work as a doctoral student in San Francisco at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in the late 90s. I have seen photos of her taken in 2020 when she was operated on for squamous cell bladder cancer. Her uterus, ovaries, lymph nodes, part of her colon, her urethra and part of her vagina were removed. She now has a urostomy bag. She has archived images in a "Hospital Diary" and she speaks of finding the right shade of red paint for her most recent paintings in connection with her changed body (Jones 2021). Moving beyond the performative, provocative dimension of her earlier work, she blends vulnerability with audaciously crass depictions of illness, much as Dodie Bellamy mixes the deep sorrow at losing her husband of thirty years with stories of urns hidden in the closet and cat shit on the floor.

15. In a 2021 article published in *The Guardian*, Jonathan Jones observes how Emin "intuits a world beyond the visible", explaining how Emin "sees ghosts and dreams about her lost ones. She lives as much in the past as the present", much like Bellamy sees ghosts in Berlin, "When I manage to get up I see a guinea pig ghost scurrying down the hall. I see a woman with a baby and a youngish guy with dark hair" (28). We might also recall Carter's own play with ghostly immortality in the resurrection of the Countess in "The Lady of the House of Love", as "a glowing, velvet, monstrous flower whose petals had regained all their former bloom and elasticity" (209 Burning Your boats). Bellamy alternates between reverence and playful derision, moving from laughter to sorrow, sometimes within the same sentence. It is this coexistence of the irrational, the spiritual, the

darker aspects of our mortality, and the quirky, funny, bright aspects of a life that also informs my own writing.

16. Belamy underlines the "mandate of confession" that predominated at the beginning of the New Narrative movement: "The distinction between self and other was an abiding concern of these years, and it manifested itself in disparate directions. There was most obviously a mandate of confession and disclosure which made New Narrative vivid, memorable, 'transgressive'—the urge to turn the private into the public, and vice versa, ever questioning where does the self end, the social begin" (Bellamy and Killian, 2017, Location 297). New Narrative originated in California, although many theoretical and aesthetic trends fed into it from across the world. Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy edited an anthology of New Narrative writing in 2017, *Writers Who Love Too Much*, in order to respond to renewed interest in such modes of writing:

> Founded in the San Francisco poetry scene of the late 1970s, New Narrative responded to post-structuralist quarrels with traditional storytelling practice for reinscribing 'master narrative,' and attempted to open up the field to a wider range of subjects and subject positions. It would be a writing prompted not by fiat nor consensus, nor by the totalizing suggestions of the MFR 'program era,' but by the community; it would be unafraid of experiment, unafraid of kitsch, unafraid of sex and gossip and political debate. Novice writers have been lectured since forever to 'show, don't tell,' but one thing New Narrative did was tell and tell and tell without the cheap obscurantism of 'showing.' (Killian and Bellamy, 2017, Location 88).

Writers associated with the movement include Robert Glück, Kathy Acker, and Chris Kraus (author of *I Love Dick*), amongst others. Bellamy and Killian's anthology resonates with recent research in modes of autobiography, such as Kaye Mitchell's *Writing Shame* (2021) and Jennifer Cooke's *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* (2020). Cooke focuses on texts she sees as proposing forms of audacity: "New audacity feminists use their writings to think from life, and this has formal implications" (3). Like New Narrative, "audacity" narratives propose "a public challenge to conventions, characterised by boldness and a disregard for decorum, protocol, or moral restraints […] to be audacious is to declare that one is striking out with daring in a different direction" (Cooke Audacity 1-2).[1] My *Habilitation* synthesis performs its own form of audacity by bringing my intimate experience as an American woman academic in France to bear upon my research. Although I was unaware of the connection between "new audacity" writing and New Narrative at the time I was writing my stories, I have been struck by the manner in which both my creative and critical

1 For an in-depth study of these modes in my own writing, as perceived against the background of Angela Carter's writing, see my essay: "Angela Carter, Rikki Ducornet and the politics of vulnerability: A research-creation essay" (2025).

modes of writing seem to be emerging in a dialogical relationship with the spirit of the movement, particularly with the predominant mixing of high and low culture and the use of visual art in personal narrative.

17. My story "Paths", for example, engages art as a means to explore the porousness between the personal and the collective, with a focus on landscape. This story is told in the third person, past tense, and depicts a series of intersecting, overlapping *chemins* that include paths along the Loire river, paths along the Thames, paths from London to Crosby Beach in Merseyside, just north of Liverpool. This beach features one hundred cast iron self-sculptures by British artist Antony Gormley. The display was created as an exhibition in 2005 and made into a permanent feature in 2007. The sculpted figures are all staring out at the sea. To stand amongst them creates a curious feeling of communal meditation with the ocean's power. Here, the one hundred casts dotted across a beach act as a *mise-en-abyme* of the fragmented autobiographical self within the structure of "Paths". In addition, Gormley's naked forms continue to live on, sometimes disguised by humans in various pieces of clothing, lending a performative dimension to the installation. These figures are also altered by natural elements: barnacles attach to legs, sand seeps up around the waist, and the ocean tide threatens to submerge the figures. The sense of being surrounded by one hundred Gormleys at the same time is eerie and titillating. This blending of autobiographical art with landscape breaks the frame of the traditional museum space, as landscape absorbs art and art adds to landscape. The body is replicated in a manner that indicates a refraction of the self across space, much as I have attempted to refract the self of my ill body across the short story collection, taking up Annie Ernaux's idea of the "je transpersonnel", an "I" deployed across space and time in a manner that can resonate with the experience of other women, while also avoiding universalizing writing gestures.

18. I indeed entered more deeply into Philippe Lejeune's perception of the porousness between the narrating I and authorial I through an intermedial connection to Gormley's play with self-representation. Gormley's work was seeded in my mind through a gift from British photographer Tim Power, two framed sets of three photos of Gormley figures in various disguises that decorate my wall. My lived, bodily experience of his figures then gradually filtered into the writing process. As Rita Felski observes in *Hooked*: "How aesthetic response unfolds over time is exceptionally hard to pin down […] Did that painting affect time as I stood in front of it—or was it an alteration that took place over days and weeks, as it worked its way into my memory and my thoughts? At what moment does an alteration of perception or sensibility come about?" (Felski 54). I explain in my

afterword to "(P)ink" in *Polysèmes* (2023), how my "attunements" to art fed into my creative processes over years of studying the dialogue between art and short texts. Affective responses are inscribed into the body over many years of viewing art in museums and beyond. My navigation between I and she is filtered through art forms and the representation of space.

19. If the Gormley installation focuses on the embedding of art into landscape, the story "Paths" also reflects upon museum space as landscape, as the character travels through the Tate Modern and Tate Britain as part of her pilgrimage. The vast space of the Tate Modern, built within the structure of a former Bankside power station, represents an overlaying of art and architectural innovation onto structures haunted by industrial pragmatism, the perfect incarnation of my own embodied contradictions, fed by my childhood immersion in the family business of airplane part manufacturing. The narrator travels to the restaurant that overlooks the Thames, and then walks along the river, in an uncanny echo of reiterated travel along the Loire throughout treatment.

20. Such spaces also conjure up the idea of collective viewing, a sense of community in an ephemeral, shared reception of art. This is apparent in the narrator's experience of two exhibitions at the Tate Britain, dedicated to the work of Paul Nash and David Hockney. The character's worn, chemo-drained body finds itself reflected in Nash's post WWI landscapes:

> A friend had told her about Paul Nash, but nothing had prepared her for fantasy contrasting so violently with the bleakness of war. She stopped again and again to savor dream and revelation, each painting an entryway. She felt the pulsing art pull her into a trance-like state, as she glided past so many portals arranged into a trajectory by the curators. She gazed at landscapes, some beaming brightly, and others full of mud and death and barren trees. It was the wartime trees that caught her attention. They were seemingly decapitated. The foliage of magical vision had given way to landscapes of apocalypse and suspended lifelessness. ("Paths," *Blue Breast* 76)

Further on, the narrator comments on the consciousness of death and war shared in collective viewing: "The weight of death hung heavily in the air around, an eerie reminder of shared vulnerability. In this sharing she found a curious solace" ("Paths," *Blue Breast* 77). The character's post-chemo body is immersed, making connections between the temporal unfolding of somatic response in art reception and the heightened attention of a diseased body. Nash's war landscapes appear as if nature were diseased, an aftermath to the magical dimension of his earlier drawings and paintings. Paul Nash's work became increasingly surrealist throughout his career. The emphasis on dreams and perception feeds into the magical realist dimension of *Blue Breast* and resonates with the influence of American experimental writer Rikki Ducornet on my work. Ducornet's relationship

to surrealism has been foregrounded in my research, leading to my contribution to the *International Encyclopedia of Surrealism*, edited by Michael Richardson in 2019. In this entry I explain Ducornet's emphasis on the capacity for the imagination to reveal "potencies" that are "in constant flux in our minds" as well as in matter: "The mysteries of matter are the potencies that, in the shapes of dreams, landscapes, exemplary instants, and so on, inform our imagination minds; they are powers" (Ducornet 2015, 4). Dreams, landscape, illness and death are conjured through subtle references to Nash's paintings within the context of art reception. Somatic response is activated on a shared level through the coexistence of viewing bodies, inscribing "exemplary instants" into the imagination.

21. Collective reception is furthered exemplified by references to David Hockney's Woldgate Woods Video Project (Spring 2011, Summer 2010, Autumn 2010, Winter 2010), in a sort of *mise en abyme* of walking through life, as the four seasons are presented on four walls. An orchestration of video images creates the impression of walking down paths in the Woldgate woods in east Yorkshire. The installation is intended to involve the spectator, who is given the sensation of moving while seated on a museum bench:

> Each of the four walls was occupied by video footage that simulates movement down a path during four seasons: Summer 2010, Autumn 2010, Winter 2010, Spring 2011. Four large screens appeared on the walls, framed by smaller screens that resonated disjointedly with the timing of the main footage, creating a vague sense of spiraling down the paths as the images peeled off to the side. Benches were placed strategically so one could sit side by side with strangers, moving down paths together in the infinite repetition of the video loop. The effect was hypnotic. ("Paths", *Blue Breast* 77)[2]

The protagonist of the story is joined by two older women on her bench, one in her sixties, and another in her eighties, as she journeys down the path of "Winter". An acute awareness of aging and death emerges in their conversation:

> "I'm glad to hear that. How is your work? Still painting? Any recent pieces?" Warm energy spilled from her mouth.
>
> "I'm making some progress. But I'm moving more slowly than before. We're all moving more slowly." She said these last few words gently, seemingly at peace with this idea as she gazed at Hockney's winter.
>
> They paused their conversation momentarily, suspended in the rhythmic movement of a strange non-progression through Hockney's snow-filled Yorkshire countryside.
>
> "So many people are disappearing. We just hang on the best we can. Only last week, I learned that

2 The video installations can be viewed here: https://www.hockney.com/works/digital/movies

> Julien's wife has been diagnosed with lung cancer."
>
> The snowy path continued to move and split and envelop in an enchanting, almost unearthly movement of endless repetition.
>
> She sat in quietness, lulled by the gentle hum of the two women as they discussed another exhibition. She turned inwards towards her diseased breast, wanting to cradle it in her hands. She watched the snow repeatedly peel off to the sides, as she continued down Hockney's path.
>
> The conversation subsided beside her as the women prepared to move on to the next room. ("Paths", *Blue Breast*, unpublished manuscript)

There is a slippage between the narrator and women of other ages, as is also evident in my story "Time", a first person narrative where the linearity of the phases of breast cancer treatment is disrupted. The narrator engages with the layers of time embedded not only within her own body, but also in those of the women around her:

> Now I am waiting again. The pain is dull. My underarm is swollen with lymphatic fluid that needs to be drained. Every nerve is on alert. I am in survival mode. And then I am on a bed, and I look down and see my hand is curved and aged. But it is not mine. My head aches, and I am out of breath. I reach up and touch my freshly drawn eyebrows. Then I look down at the yellow strip that runs across the floor and star blankly at the *Pink* magazine on my lap. There is a bald pregnant woman on the cover. How can that be possible? Miracle chemo moms, all blissfully beautifully bald with burgeoning bodies. I feel the chair melting beneath me. ("Time", *Confingo* 29)

My story "hum" similarly foregrounds intergenerational synergy through the narrator's trip to a t-shirt shop with her teenage daughter. A crowd of young women mill and stir around them:

> Their bodies were young. They had recently rounded out, forms still slight from childhood, but adjusted with curves in new places.
>
> I was not large, myself. But I felt big and bulky in this shop, out of place, oversized, my own breasts sagging slightly. As these girls entered their women's bodies, my own was in flux. I could see the clock of biology changing us all, in slow motion, as we wound our way through the racks. These girls would, like me, slowly age, perhaps have children, watch their bodies puff, round out with new life, shrink down, and then blossom again.
>
> I studied the busts on the wall. I watched the girls filter through the racks, shelves and rows, like marbles in one of those games, or like pinball. I waited for the lights to flash. I waited for the cling clang of the score ("Hum", *Blue Breast*, unpublished manuscript).

The healthy bodies circulating in the shop are an uncanny foil to the protagonist's soon to be re-arranged body, while also foregrounding a painful perception of future danger.

> I watched the girls wind their way through the shirt racks. The plastic busts loomed above their heads.

> I thought about the number of young breasts moving through the room. I saw them walking, walking, walking. Constant motion. They were unaware they carried bombs within them that could detonate at any time. It would be stress. It would be random misdirection of cell growth. It would erode them from within. They would be dissolved, erased. It felt so unfair. These beautiful young beings, budding, bursting into bodies that might at one point betray them. I stood still in the middle of the room. Voices rose up around me. The busts turned above my head. Hangers on the racks scraped and rattled as the girls sorted through. Fabrics. Colors. Threads.
>
> I wanted to leap up. I wanted to shout out. Be careful! You could die! You could die! ("Hum", *Blue Breast*, unpublished manuscript)

Throughout the collection there is a constant movement between the I/she of the protagonist and other women, or even men, as in the final story, "(P)ink," where the color pink speaks to the ongoing question of individuality against the backdrop of the collective phenomenon of breast cancer:

> Pink t-shirts have blurred women, men, families into a streaming mass of flowing ribbons, like a coursing system of pink fluid that winds itself down the path along the river and down to the lake. I look about me, desperate to find my friends in the crowd. We all melt into a collective *Octobre Rose* blur of torsos moving in unison for breast cancer. Individuality is achieved only through the use of clever hats. Veterans of the walk know techniques. One woman strolls by in a multi-colored beanie with a propeller. Another group has balloons tied to their hats. A mother has sprayed temporary dye on the heads of her children, one orange, one green, one blue, so she won't lose them in the crowd. Her own head is covered with a bright yellow scarf. She must be in treatment, I think. A set of "cat in the hat" floppy hats march by. ("(P)ink", 2023)

Here a collective stream of color veils the plight of the individual as part of the collective fabric of cancer experience.

22. Other echoes of the shared experiences of illness appear in performative makeup sessions to hide chemo side effects in "Hair" and also in "My Body, My Self: A Bathtub Meditation" the title of which refers to the 1970s manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a book about women's bodies, health, and sexuality, published by a cooperative of women. The story focuses on the narrator's confrontation with her estranged body while immersed in an egg-shaped bathtub. The reflection alternates between the individual and the collective, musing about a public hair regrowth art installation composed of multiple videos, a "cinematic collective performance of 'lady hair' over time" 17), while also engaging provocatively with chemotherapy and sexuality:

> And the vagina. I don't remember anything about the chemo vagina in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. Mine has grown strangely silent. Not even uttering a peep. Not a squeak. Itself

> suspended throughout this process. It is keeping a low profile. Fluids have dried up. Menstruation has stopped. The chemotherapist says my ovaries are resting. I must find a way to wake my vagina up. It needs a nudge. I do a brief exploration, running fingers over the folds, checking the small bumps and wrinkles. My children journeyed through here. I do a quick check of the clitoris. Still responsive. Thank God. (17)

Eve Ensler's monologues address the intimate, individual body through the prism of the collective, a process of "making visible" that finds an echo in this story. The audacity underlined by Jennifer Cooke, as well as the open references to sexuality foregrounded in New Narrative writing, are also brought to the fore.

***

23. In June 2024. I went to the Louis Vuitton Foundation to see an exhibition with a colleague: *Matisse: L'Atelier rouge*. The painting of Matisse's workshop formed the focal center of the exhibition. The creative space of the painter was set forth. *L'Atelier rouge* presents art works by Matisse *en abyme*, suggestively nodding at the workshop space beyond the painting. Viewers were able to complete images by strolling through the gallery, itself a composition of works, assembled to accompany the painting. *Composition. Assemblage.*

24. At the end of the exhibition, we explored the gift shop. A small box caught my eye. It was imprinted with the following inscription: *The Marina Abramović Method: Instruction Cards to Reboot your Life*. Inside I found a small booklet and set of cards. I felt a strong impulse to buy them, even though I was not familiar with Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović. I took the box home and found a small booklet and thirty instruction cards inside. I read about Abramović's artful pushing of the body's limits. Each card proposes an image of Abramović performing, and serves as an invitation to join a "global participatory project that welcomes artists and non-artists of all backgrounds, intentions, and personal and physical experiences to gain a deeper understanding of time, space and themselves, just as Marina has across her practice" (Introduction, *Abramović Method*). My attention was drawn to one card entitled *Places of Power*, *Floating*, 2013. The card proposes to "swim in a freezing body of water" as a means by which to "reboot" perception. Another card proposes to "feel an energy in front of you, without touching". I was fascinated by this collection of short challenges to be arranged and rearranged. I was stunned at the synchronicity. I could not help but think about the surrealists. I stared at the card, feeling the water on my own body. I have performed my own bodily extremes. I have developed a stronger "understanding of time, space and myself".

25. While writing, I took a break and scrolled through Facebook. A colleague was wearing a headscarf to decorate her baldness. Her breast had gone rogue. Another colleague's cancer diagnosis landed in my inbox. In Kim Evans's documentary, *Angela Carter's Curious Room*, filmed shortly before Carter passed away from lung cancer in 1992, Carter evokes the life that will continue on without her. Evans underlines this rare, poignant moment of fragility:

> There was only one moment when Angela's voice broke in the interview. It was when she was talking about comedy standing in cultural terms for fertility and continuance, for 'the un-appeasable nature of appetite and desire, which isn't necessarily a tragic thing. It's the motor that keeps us going, it's the desire to go on, the desire, even if we don't go on, for something else to go on, the knowledge for the world to go on. The fact that you are not there to see the cherry tree next year … [she swallowed] … the fact that you are not there doesn't mean the cherry tree has disappeared. It means the cherry tree is doing its own thing in its own space and time. And that's how it should be'. (Evans 35)

I think of Angela Carter's cherry tree blossoms and the creeping rose vine etched across the scar on my back. I feel the skin on my back stir. I feel leaves unfurl and petals spread, ready to ink their way upwards. I am a Tree.

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