



## A Production of Survival: Cancer Politics and Feminist Media Literacies

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**ABSTRACT** *In this paper, we argue that creative storytelling – by way of collaborative ethnographic songwriting and digital video production – can serve to complicate normative representations of breast cancer. We also argue that engaging in these artistic processes can be a practice of survival for people who do not see themselves in publicly available breast cancer narratives. At the center of our analysis is a song and music video, Breast Cancer Pink, which we composed and produced together about one author's experience with young adult breast cancer. We make a case for media and feminist literacies, which we believe enabled the production of Breast Cancer Pink, for the author in question, who found herself on the margins of normative breast cancer narratives. We explore cultural dynamics around breast cancer, visual imaging, and creative practice and draw on Ahmed's feminist notion of the feminist survival kit in order to understand typically invisible experiences of breast cancer.*

**KEYWORDS** media production; literacy; cancer

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of artistic practice to counter dominant narratives and amplify particular, unheard voices. Specifically, we investigate how songwriting in combination with digital video production can be used to complicate normative and corporatized representations of breast cancer. We understand songwriting and digital video production as modes of meaning-making and storytelling for people who exist on the margins of normative breast cancer narratives. By making art that amplifies our own language and experiences, we hope to reclaim our stories and seize authority over dominant discourses and narratives of breast cancer,

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placing storytelling “back in the hands of those who make culture, as well as to forge new models for how affective life can serve as the foundation for public culture” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 20). Organized as a case study (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009) our investigation focuses on *Breast Cancer Pink* – an arts-based project that was enabled through our friendship and our joint knowledge of how to tell stories in multi-modal ways – to illustrate how creative practice can serve as a site for counter normative storytelling. *Breast Cancer Pink* is both an artistic artifact – a song and an accompanying music video – and an arts-based project that narrates the story of Chelsey’s experience of queer, young adult breast cancer, and her reaction to certain elements of “pink culture.” For the purposes of this paper, we refer to the song and the music video together as *Breast Cancer Pink* and otherwise distinguish the song from the video in this way: *Breast Cancer Pink* (the song) or *Breast Cancer Pink* (the video).

Our paper addresses the following questions: (1) In what ways do multiliteracies enable collaborative media production and open up possibilities for people diagnosed with breast cancer to articulate their feelings and tell their breast cancer stories?; (2) In what ways is *Breast Cancer Pink* a queer, feminist project of survival that counters normative breast cancer narratives and pink culture?

### **The Problem With “Women” And Breast Cancer**

Before turning to our work on breast cancer and creative production, a word about our use of the term, “women.” In an attempt to navigate the messy (and queer!) landscape of gender and discourse as queer artist-researchers, and as people who continue to rethink how we engage with language in our writing, we must say a word about our use of the term “women” in this paper, mostly because the word “women” is so frequently paired with understandings of breast cancer. We understand that the term “woman” automatically sets up a binary relation with the gender marker “man” and leaves no room for fluidity of gender expression or identity. We also acknowledge that the term “women” is often read and understood as “cisgender women,” that is, women who were assigned female at birth based on their biological anatomy and have continued throughout their lives to identify as female. We also understand that breast cancer culture and medical language around breast cancer, generally-speaking, does not recognize, include, or consider in the category of “women” gender non-conforming women, trans men, Two-Spirit individuals, and other genderqueer people who may possess breasts. In this paper, we use “(cisgender) women” unless otherwise stated with the acknowledgment and understanding that people who do not identify as – or are not read as – cisgender are, more often than not, left out of conversations about breast cancer.

### **Feminist Multiliteracies & Creative Response**

In this section, we provide an analytical context for this work by discussing multiliteracies and the creative production of a song and accompanying video, which allowed us to feel our way (Ahmed, 2004), variously and together, through the breast cancer diagnosis and treatment that Chelsey experienced.

In response to how the shifting landscape of global networks impacts learning and literacy, scholars began to focus on linguistic diversity and multimodality (New London Group, 1996). Alongside new concepts of critical media literacy that emphasize the capacity to consume, produce, disseminate and intervene with and through media (Mirra, Morrell, & Filipiak, 2018), we understand multiliteracies to be the capacity to engage with, produce, and change knowledge as it appears across diverse mediums, and through that engagement to substantively effect the world. For example, in the context of *Breast Cancer Pink*, the ability to produce a music video about breast cancer that doesn't take up normative cancer stories, and to share that video and use it to create conversation and change would constitute a critical media literacy.

In recent years, the capacity to enact critical media literacy in this way has received significant attention in both popular and academic discourses; media networks and digital spaces are often situated as a key space of work for activists, advocates, and others who aim to create change (Shirky, 2011; Xenos & Foot, 2008). Even so, gender continues to be a major marker of access to knowledge production in mediated spaces (Cooper, 2006; Warschauer, 2002; Wellman, Kennedy, & Klement, 2003). While digital networks are a site of gender-based violence, they also enable gendered stories to be told and shared (Keller, 2012), and indeed, in our understanding of media literacy it is critical both to inhabit digital spaces but also to be able to produce, disseminate, and intervene with media. Our work is aligned with the affective turn in literacy studies, and we situate our interest in the affective experience of knowledge production alongside literacy scholars who look at how children learn affectively, and argue that literacy engagement – which we understand here to be the production and movement of information, especially stories – has a deeply affective quality to it (Ehret, 2018). Multiliteracies, and beyond that, queer, feminist, affective, and media literacies actually enable us to engage in what we call “a practice of survival” – the doing of creative multiliteracy work for people whose bodies and experiences are not typically visible and audible in breast cancer narratives.

By positioning *Breast Cancer Pink* as a narrative that counters dominant discourses of breast cancer experience, we build on the work of Black, Chicana, and Indigenous feminist scholars, storytellers, and poets who, by publishing, performing, and distributing their own essays, stories, and poems, insist on being visible and audible (see e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Chrystos, 1988, 1991; Lorde, 1982, 1984; Maracle, 1996; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984; Pendleton Jiménez, 2000, 2015; Simpson, 2011, 2013). We also take our cue

from queer youth of colour who perform agency and engage in knowledge production in different educational and social contexts through performance, video-making, and oral storytelling in order to resist dominant narratives, tell their own stories, and navigate various experiences of marginalization and oppression (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Bailey, 2009; Cruz, 2013; Quinn, 2007; Venzant Chambers & McCreedy, 2011). In addition, we draw from the feminist archival scholarship of Ann Cvetkovich (2003) around trauma, lesbian public cultures, and storytelling, and view storytelling as “a mode of survival and resistance” (p. 106). *Breast Cancer Pink* represents the liberatory power (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 109) of expressing anger: it narrates Chelsey’s story as a form of defiant speech that resists normative pink narratives, and articulates her experiences of breast cancer by harnessing the force of her own ideas, feelings, and language, thus reframing her breast cancer experience on *her* terms. Furthermore, we understand songwriting and digital video production as a way to liberate affective responses (Gallagher, 2016), and to “counteract the sense of physical and emotional helplessness” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 97) Chelsey experienced in relation to her diagnosis, treatment, and the pink culture into which she was automatically and inadvertently thrust. *Breast Cancer Pink*, as a cultural text, comprises “an archive of feelings” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7) that helped Chelsey survive – not in a “breast cancer survivor” kind of way, because we also reject “survivor discourses” in relation to breast cancer stories. Rather, engaging in the process of creating the song and video coupled with repeatedly listening to and watching the finished product supported Chelsey in thriving *within and beyond* pink culture and discourse.

Our combined literacies in feminist storytelling, songwriting, and digital video production provided tools and knowledge that permitted us to narrate and share Chelsey’s story in a way that profoundly impacted her experience of breast cancer by making her story audible and visible. It feels pertinent for us to note here that this creative project – *Breast Cancer Pink* – was not the result of a scholarly research project, but rather a response to the dearth of breast cancer narratives focused on young women’s lives and bodies (Haines et al., 2010). As such, we also outline how multiliteracies enabled us to respond and resist these narratives, and speak back to the social phenomenon referred to as pink culture (King, 2004). For these reasons, we situate *Breast Cancer Pink* in traditions of multimodal literacies and storytelling for social justice, theorizing it as both an “unhappy object” and a queer, feminist project of survival.

### **A Sea of Pink: Cancer Worlds**

Cancer stories – (cisgender) women’s breast cancer stories in particular – circulate in popular culture: almost everyone can recall an image, a poster, or other piece of media detailing events or stories about (cisgender) women who

have or have had breast cancer. Popularized by organizations like *Komen Race for the Cure* (<https://ww5.komen.org/RaceForTheCure/>), the circulation of images and stories about breast cancer patients constitutes public knowledge about what breast cancer *is*, the *kinds* of people who have breast cancer, and the *acceptable* courses of action for those living with the disease (Haines et al., 2010; King, 2004; Segal, 2007). Audre Lorde (1984; Lorde & Smith, 1985) wrote about the absence of visual images of lesbian women and (cisgender) women with mastectomies circulating in the public eye. Still decades later, *most* of the media about breast cancer narrates a safe, white, reconstructed (in the case of mastectomy) body that has, for lack of a better word, *survived* and is grateful to be alive (King, 2004; Segal, 2007). Choice surrounding breast cancer treatment – for example, whether to have a mastectomy or not – is highly surveilled, with a panic simmering among doctors and the public about the alarming number of patients choosing mastectomy over lumpectomy (Orenstein, 2014). The resulting dynamic is what some have referred to as “pink washing,” or “pink culture,” from which it has become clear that publicly available narratives around breast cancer are not neutral; that the availability of narratives shape how patients understand themselves and how others understand breast cancer patients; and that breast cancer “awareness” is frequently deployed as a marketing scheme (King, 2004). There has been significant scholarship aimed at disrupting the monolith of “pink,” gender normative breast cancer stories, which highlight feelings of gratitude for one’s diagnosis and happiness to be alive, and that tend to showcase particular stories that affectively focus on feelings of positivity in relation to breast cancer diagnoses (Ehrenreich, 2001; Jain, 2007, 2013; Segal, 2007).

Furthermore, we note the *silencing* of stories of cancer alterity (Bryson & Stacey, 2013; Taylor & Bryson, 2016). Countering dominant stories of breast cancer experience is seemingly forbidden. We consider the feelings of anger and alienation that Chelsey experienced in relation to this silencing and to *her* lived reality of having a breast cancer diagnosis. Thus, we locate this artistic project within the significant scholarship aimed at “queering cancer,” (Ehrenreich, 2001; King, 2004; Lord, 2004; Segal, 2007). In building on work that seeks to “articulate cancer differently” (Bryson & Stacey, 2013) we understand *Breast Cancer Pink* to be a queer *and* feminist intervention into normative breast cancer culture, because it centralizes marginalized bodies (i.e., young, queer) and amplifies othered voices (i.e., feminist) (Bryson & Stacey, 2013; Ellsworth, 2005; Howley, 2005). Where media representations of people with breast cancer diagnoses typically foreground older, heterosexual, cisgender, White, and middle-class women (Segal, 2007) – representations which are meant (mistakenly) to represent *all* women – *Breast Cancer Pink* tells Chelsey’s story: the story of a cis-queer-woman in her twenties who could not see her young/er, queer/er, feminist body – or bodies like hers – reflected in breast cancer narratives. *Breast Cancer Pink* also queers breast cancer in that it departs from (cis)gender expectations around

how to appropriately narrate one's breast cancer experience, and represents a refusal to participate in and support pink culture. In short, *Breast Cancer Pink* queers pink culture and the commodification of (cancer-ed) breasts and bodies. Finally, because there is minimal if any support tailored to people diagnosed with breast cancer in their 20s and 30s,<sup>1</sup> we understand this project to be an artistic archive "into which [Chelsey's] feelings are deposited" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 1), and which is essential to her ability to navigate pink culture and discourse.

### **An Unhappy Object – A Queer Feminist Project of Survival**

Pink culture is often a space for people with breast cancer to join together and attempt to generate "happy feelings" about their diagnoses. Here, we turn to Ahmed's work on the stickiness of particular emotions and on the relationship between making our experiences visible despite persistent challenges of invisibility. Ahmed (2014) tells us "groups cohere around a shared orientation towards some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight" (p. 5). Pink culture draws people with breast cancer (and their friends and families) into a circle of shared experience, where feelings of optimism, hopefulness, and security circulate, causing participants to feel included in a "club" of sorts that is swathed in pink. Having breast cancer ensures one's membership in this club, which coheres around the presence of objects that are "pinkified." Pinkified objects "become sticky, or saturated with affect" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11), imbued with feelings of positivity, happiness, and ideas of inclusion. Happiness, Ahmed (2014) tells us, "is promised through proximity to certain objects" (p. 5). When people wear and use objects and products that have been made pink – e.g., body wash, make-up, alcohol, soup, cleaning products, chocolate bars, chewing gum, facial tissue, t-shirts, and ball caps – these items become happy objects that signal the wearer's or user's inclusion in a group that comprises (usually) (cisgender) women with breast cancer, supports (cisgender) women with breast cancer, and raises money to fund breast cancer research. Pinkified, happy objects come to represent a social movement with a particular membership: (cisgender) women who have breast cancer, and those who support them. It is important to mention here that sometimes these and other products are made pink or emblazoned with the symbol for breast cancer – the pink ribbon – in order to raise funds for breast cancer research, but in actuality, they are appropriated into corporate companies' marketing campaigns to increase profit margins and sales of particular products, where

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Chelsey was directed to materials from medical staff about how to talk to grandchildren about cancer when she inquired about having children after her cancer diagnosis.

no proceeds go towards breast cancer research (for more on this important issue, see the documentary, *Pink Ribbons Inc.*, Pool & Din, 2011).

Rather than being a “happy object,” we consider *Breast Cancer Pink* to be a disruptive artifact, or, thinking with Ahmed, as an “unhappy object,” that is, one that rejects the collective happiness that circulates in pink culture. By rejecting pinkness and the discourse of hopeful and happy breast cancer narratives, this song represents Chelsey’s departure from a cohesive group of (cisgender) women with breast cancer. It disrupts group cohesion and rejects feelings of security that come from inclusion in a group of people who are navigating breast cancer. It is a refusal of all things pinkified, a refusal of “togetherness,” and a refusal to cohere with the corporatization of breast cancer that comes from the pink-ing of consumer goods. Working with creative expression to produce an unhappy object that voices anger and epitomizes an experience of breast cancer alterity is incongruous with the happiness of pink culture. To be clear, we believe that it is from this space of refusing to cohere and engaging in expressive arts that an *alternative hopefulness emerges*, a hopefulness that refuses to be codified by the market but that rises out of using art to make experiences on the margins, like Chelsey’s, visible and audible. It is also in this visibility and audibility that feelings of hope begin to crystalize.

Ahmed (2017) argues, “becoming a feminist was about becoming audible” (p. 73). Following Ahmed, we argue that creative arts can do the affective work of making visible and audible people who cannot see themselves in normative representations of breast cancer. For us, composing, singing, and recording *Breast Cancer Pink*, and making a music video, allowed us to express our anger about breast cancer and breast cancer culture, and made Chelsey’s story visible and audible. It was a way for us to voice a particular experience of breast cancer: one that is contradictory; one that refuses to communicate a more acceptable story of breast cancer; one that is willful. Therefore, we include *Breast Cancer Pink* – as a queer feminist project of survival – in our “feminist killjoy survival kits” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 17), where a feminist killjoy survival kit might include artifacts (in this case a song and accompanying music video), ideas, theories, and language that provide us a means to navigate the world from a feminist standpoint. Feminist killjoy survival kits give us the motivation and discursive tools to intervene in normalizing societal forces and to survive what it means to live and thrive in a cis-heteropatriarchal society, which polices people in relation to gender rules and expectations. Ahmed tells us, “if a killjoy is to be one who gets in the way of happiness, then living a feminist life requires being willing to get in the way. When we are willing to get in the way, we are willful” (p. 66). Ahmed continues by telling us that feminist killjoys are those “who [do] not make the happiness of others [their] cause” (p. 74). By creating *Breast Cancer Pink*, we do not make the happiness of others our cause. *Breast Cancer Pink* is Chelsey’s (and to a lesser extent, Kate’s) refusal “to put up with a world” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 236); it is our refusal to put up with the world

of pink culture and the world of breast cancer. Pairing gritty lyrical discourse that is decidedly “un-pink” with imagery and video, Chelsey seizes exuberant authority over her breast cancer story through the willful expression of *her* emotions and feminist ideas, and the obstinate telling of *her* story.

### **Collaborative Ethnographic Songwriting and Digital Video Production**

In this section, we stress the multimodal literacy skills that allowed us to bring this project into existence. However, due to limitations with space, we focus our discussion mainly on the storytelling and collaborative songwriting processes.

When we created *Breast Cancer Pink*, both of us were graduate students in Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. We had been engaged, separately, with musical and digital production worlds for a number of years, and the skills and experience we had developed in these areas were substantial. Chelsey was diagnosed with breast cancer while working as a doctoral student with Mary Bryson, whose work on queering gendered cancers is cited elsewhere in this paper. Bryson’s scholarship offered a queer, feminist lens to Chelsey’s understanding of her own cancer, and enhanced the telling of this story of young adult cancer. Kate brought to this project a long history of doing queer, feminist folk music production as a professional recording and touring artist (<https://www.katereid.net>). Her storytelling expertise and ability to translate lived experience into song was the primary literacy that enabled the crafting of the song *Breast Cancer Pink*. Our capacity to do feminist creative work, move across artistic mediums, and articulate a story from the margins were critical to this project, and to the making of the song and video as a queer, feminist project of survival. Initially inspired by a blog post titled “Where is the black & red, where are the sparkles and spikes?,”<sup>2</sup> which Chelsey wrote shortly after her mastectomy, our songwriting process involved storytelling and iterative translation of Chelsey’s thoughts and feelings – shared through the process of telling stories – into lyrics and music. The lyrics are reproduced in Appendix 1.<sup>3</sup> We also include samples of data – lyrics and stills from the video – followed by our analyses.

In articulating Chelsey’s experience of breast cancer, we worked with songwriting and digital video production in order to “make sense of what [did] not make sense” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 20), that is, Chelsey’s experience of receiving a diagnosis of breast cancer at a young age and enduring treatment. Pairing lyrics and music with image and video-production allowed us to

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://chelsincancerland.wordpress.com/2014/05/14/where-is-the-black-red-where-are-the-sparkles-and-spikes-on-what-it-feels-like-to-be-four-days-post-mastectomy/>

<sup>3</sup> The lyrics to *Breast Cancer Pink* may also be found at [http://www.katereid.net/singles/s/breast\\_cancer\\_pink](http://www.katereid.net/singles/s/breast_cancer_pink). The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhvVzlsv1wM>



depart from the “more welcome, more permissible... more speakable” (Segal, 2007, p. 159) normative breast cancer narratives shared by mostly older, straight(er), middle-class, “well-behaved” women. We draw on feminist ethnographic methods to analyze the our data, which includes the music video, the song lyrics, and various pieces of writing produced through the [creative] process (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000; Pink, Kürti, & Afonso, 2004). Feminist ethnographic methods evidence a commitment to understanding how gender operates and to centralizing knowledge that is historically misunderstood or marginalized.

Additionally, as a form of activism, the creation of digital stories that narrate marginal experiences through the combination of music, image, and video, offers multiple access points (Goldstein et al., 2018) to social justice. We argue that multi-modal artistic production *and* its resultant artifacts offer myriad pathways for making sense of difficult lived experiences, not only for producers of art, but also for consumers of art. Critical creative artistic production that articulates the experiences of those who exist on the margins of dominant narratives – and, more crucially, that speak back to those dominant narratives – shifts the spotlight onto underrepresented bodies and amplifies voices not typically heard. The products of critical creative artistic production can profoundly impact not only the lived realities of those who create the stories, but also those who witness and listen. Taking up the work of Goldstein et al. (2018), we believe that “creating multiple access points through multiple performance languages” (p. 182) – i.e., visual images, lyrics, and music – is a powerful strategy for providing windows into the experiences of those whose stories remain outside of the dominant narrative of a particular issue. Pairing music and lyrics with visual images through digital video production “infuses [Chelsey’s narrative] with more emotional complexity” (Goldstein et al., 2018, p. 182), and provides viewers with multi-modal access points into her experience of breast cancer. In this way, combining digital video production, photography, and music, we argue, is a powerful activist tactic that provides more possibilities for others to experience and understand Chelsey’s story.

We worked with a songwriting process Kate terms “collaborative ethnographic songwriting.” Kate views collaborative ethnographic songwriting through a social justice lens in that it is a process that centers the voices of people whose stories are not typically heard in mainstream music. It also produces musical artifacts – songs – which do the same. Kate defines ethnographic songwriting as a way to study, analyze, understand, and disseminate the knowledge, beliefs, language, and practices of a particular culture through the artistic processes of songwriting and performance. In this case, the purpose of composing *Breast Cancer Pink* was to make sense of Chelsey’s experience within pink culture. Kate says,

Working collaboratively with someone to tell their story through song is a humbling and intensive experience. Along with trying to recreate the storyteller’s

experiences and feelings, I rely on my own feelings about a topic as the storyteller and I work with music, sound, rhythm, imagery, and lyrics to compose a song in this way. It's also important to consider what the listener might be imagining and feeling while listening to the song. It's really about trying to recreate affective and emotional moments that the storyteller experiences, not just for the person whose story is being told, but for listeners to experience as they listen. It's like working to develop a relationship between ourselves as storytellers with the people who may eventually listen to the song. (Personal communication, September 2014)

When composing songs about her experiences or collaborating with individuals to compose songs about theirs, Kate works with Goodson's (1998) notion of "storying the self" where constructing and making sense of one's identity is an emergent process, an "ongoing process of self-building and self-negotiation...an ongoing project of storying and narrative" (p. 6) in relation to a particular culture. Collaborative ethnographic songwriting involves working with individuals to compose narratives that reflect and archive particular life experiences of the individual(s) in song, allowing them to story "a contemporary snapshot of an ongoing process" (Goodson, 1998, p. 10) of identity-building and sense-making within a given culture. Often, these stories are not typically shared or heard in the mainstream. For Kate, collaborative ethnographic songwriting is about bringing "the emotional archive to life" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 110) in song so that people who are marginalized by particular social beliefs and discourses are not only heard and seen, but validated in their telling of experience(s).

In her collaborative ethnographic songwriting practice, Kate attempts to be as accurate in the telling of the story as possible – accurate, in the sense that the song-writing process is executed with care (Fusco, 2008). Using care means making countless decisions about lyrics and the music with her collaborators throughout the composing and recording processes from an embodied place. This takes the form of checking in consistently with the storyteller that the lyrics and the arc of the story feel "right," ensuring the intensity, rhythm, and tone of the music "get at" the feelings experienced by the storyteller, and making sure the song arrangement, instrumentation, and vocals are used in ways that express what the storyteller wishes to express.

Composing *Breast Cancer Pink* involved a number of steps. Kate began by setting up two Microsoft Word documents: a songwriting document and an interview document. Kate split the interview document in half: Kate used the left side of the document to type out Chelsey's answers to the interview questions and the right side was reserved for possible lyrics that came to mind, words or particular phrases that Chelsey said that stood out as poignant or "catchy," and feelings that Chelsey described in relation to her experiences. On the songwriting document, Kate laid out a generic songwriting framework as follows – Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Double Chorus – and then added headings beside each Verse/Chorus/Bridge to mark the particular themes for each stanza. Then, for approximately two hours, Kate and Chelsey engaged in an open-ended, conversational-style interview, which Kate also

audio-recorded on her cell phone. They began with a discussion about Chelsey's blog entry, "*Where is the black and the red, where are the sparkles & spikes?*" and the anger Chelsey felt about what she experienced as a loss of power and control over her own body, the infantilization of women's undergarments, and her rejection of pink culture. Halfway through the interview, Kate realized that Chelsey had so many anecdotes to share that it made better sense to ask her to simply "tell stories" about her experiences rather than trying to get at these experiences by asking questions. As they continued dialoguing, they came up with a few themes they wanted to touch on in the song, and several ideas for lyrics, which Kate typed on the right side of the interview document. During the interview, Kate worked with a few chord progressions until she found one that they both felt would fit with the feeling of Chelsey's story. Once they finished the interview, Kate transcribed the audio-recording of the interview and sent it to Chelsey via email, asking her to read it over adding, deleting, or editing any part of the conversation. Kate then went over the transcribed document and coded it for major themes, interesting words and phrases. She used the coded transcript as she continued working with the interview document on the lyrics for the song, and each time she wrote a lyric, verse, chorus, or bridge that she felt was strong, she made an audio recording of it on her phone – just her own vocals and guitar – and sent it to Chelsey for her feedback. As Chelsey gave feedback, Kate revised lyrics and then sent Chelsey updated versions of the song as it was being developed until they came to a final version with which they both felt satisfied.

### **On Survival and Creative Practice**

In our analysis, we would like to argue that songwriting and music video production open up possibilities for people who feel different than *most* normatively represented cancer patients (maybe they are younger, queer, feminist, gender non-conforming, a person of color, etc.) to articulate their experiences and feelings and tell breast cancer stories from "the margins." We build on Ahmed's notion about feminist survival kits, to suggest that the creation of a survival kit – in this case, the song and music video – is in itself a practice of survival (Wargo, 2018).

Lyrical language and musical arrangement brought together in the framework of a song provides a space for experiences, thoughts, and emotions to be documented. We understand this song to be part of a feminist survival kit, and the *process* of writing, composing, and producing as a *practice of survival*. Composing the song *Breast Cancer Pink* allowed Chelsey to give voice to certain emotions and thoughts that she was experiencing in relation to her diagnosis and treatment. Lyrically, *Breast Cancer Pink* traverses a landscape of feelings: shame, despair, and grief, indignation and anger. Through our joint process we wrote those emotions into being. Here, we choose three examples to discuss.

The lyrics of the first half of the first verse express Chelsey's shame related to her new body – the body that underwent a recent mastectomy:

I'm just trying to find a way to hide this new body of mine  
I've got me some of those loose-fitting, with-the-sleeves-rolled-up-  
Hipster-boyfriend-button-down shirts to pull around my chest  
Shirts that make me look like I wouldn't  
If you saw me undressed

Here, by donning loose-fitting (men's) button-down shirts, Chelsey considers how her new body, with an implant in the place of her left breast, will be received by the people around her (see Figure 1). This scene, both in the language and in the visuals, illustrates the re-articulation and re-imagination of one's own sense of self that a life-threatening diagnosis coupled with non-elective body modification surgery require. After she looks through some shirts (and we see them drop to the floor) and finds nothing suitable, she dons the only item remaining: a hospital gown. This is the visual representation of how deeply cancer forces people to become and embody existent narratives of cancer. As Chelsey inspects herself in the mirror, we can see the dissonance between who she once was, someone who did not have cancer and once had two healthy breasts, and who she has become, someone who is left to perform "cancer patient," evidenced by the blue hospital gown.





Figure 1. Stills from *Breast Cancer Pink* music video.

This kind of all-encompassing shift in one's sense of being, and in how the world perceives them, is present both in public and private spaces and in the multitude of medical spaces the cancer patient finds herself inhabiting. In this set of images, Chelsey references being worthy of time and attention *because* she has donned a blue gown, because she has *become* cancer. We illustrate this painful experience, one that occurs again and again, where multidimensional people are rendered, singularly, as *cancer* through their interactions with the medical system. *Breast Cancer Pink* is an alternative to the seemingly ever-present call *to feel grateful*: grateful to be alive, grateful to receive care, grateful to survive. The making of the song was a tonic to this environment: a tangible, collaborative way to create something that instead offered visibility, storytelling, and the option to narrate *both* the feeling of *becoming* cancer *and* the desire to become something and somebody else. In order to do this, we relied on a diverse set of literacies. Media literacies enabled us to compose and imagine this story in two genres: folk storytelling and video image. This, we argue, is a practice of *making* a feminist survival kit (Ahmed, 2017), which was enabled by media literacies coupled with the capacity to tell a counter narrative – a practice that has long been linked to a Freirian approach to literacy and social justice. In this case, the desire to *queer* cancer relied on a feminist literacy: the capacity to identify and articulate a feminist account of one's own experience, and to share that experience, in community, with others.

### Visibility

A main motive of this creative work is to enhance visibility. Other research on breast cancer finds that cancer is experienced through identity categories such as gender, sexuality, and race (Cartwright, 1998). We extend this work to highlight the experiences of people diagnosed in their 20s and 30s, because of the absence of images of and stories from this population. Most images that show younger bodies “might intend to educate and empower young women to

‘fight’ against breast cancer, paradoxically the messages employ imagery that sexually objectifies young women’s breasts and bodies” (Haines et al., 2010, p. 731). In order to counter this dominant narrative, the chorus of *Breast Cancer Pink* is:

Cuz they took my left tit away  
Like they didn’t even give a shit  
And I’m on the brink of a fit of rage  
Cuz all I’m surrounded with is  
Breast cancer pink

Building on the persistent feeling of becoming cancer, the chorus irreverently names the severing of breasts from the body that is mastectomy, along with the unfeeling-ness of the medical institution. It also highlights the omnipresence of pink culture that makes little space for anger and offers few representations of young/er, feminist, queer/er breast cancer patients.

Being consistently unseen *and* consistently not seeing people that one can relate to results in a real need to *create space*. Space was created through the collaborative nature of song and video production: multiple people were involved in the creation of this video. These people, our friends and colleagues, served to bear witness to this story as we wove it together (see Figure 2) They participated in the creative world-making with us offered through the production process, and that participation was *a practice of survival* because together with our friends and colleagues, we created space for another world, one in which we could speak back to breast cancer and breast cancer culture. Part of that practice of surviving was choosing language that made this othered and difficult experience of breast cancer visible, and allowed us the space to acknowledge the emotional stickiness of this creative work (Ahmed, 2017).



Figure 2. Still from *Breast Cancer Pink* music video.

### Chicks With No Left Tits

The song also requires that the listener enter uncomfortable territory and bear witness – through the lyrics and vocal performance – to the tension, irritation, and force of emotions and thoughts Chelsey experienced in relation to her diagnosis and treatment. Much research has focused on the public panic around preserving women’s breasts in cancer treatment (King, 2004), and while the issue of choosing surgery has landed in the public eye (Orenstein, 2014), images and stories of women who choose mastectomy and undergo the removal of their breasts are scarce. The subtext of most narratives about surgical choice and breast cancer is that (cisgender) women who are cancer patients lack awareness and need to be educated about their bodies (Haines et al., 2010). Our response showcases the dizzying onslaught of pink, the insistence of the general public and mainstream media to weigh in and comment about private surgical decisions, and painful private moments resulting from not fitting into clothing items like bras that typically engender femininity. The following verse outlines this frustration:

At the lingerie store it’s all about the perfect rack from that straight male fantasy  
Whether it’s Victoria’s Secret, or the store for women like me with partial  
mastectomies  
But excuse me, what’s so perfect about  
Bras for chicks with no left tit, trying to make me look all flawless  
This is one more space in which my body just doesn’t fit

In the images in Figure 3 Chelsey is standing in a hospital gown, surrounded by angry people wearing pink, and the camera tilts. The viewer can feel how dizzying and invisibilizing being trapped in a sea of pink can be for cancer patients. We then see Chelsey collapse on the floor of a pinkified bra store because she cannot find a bra that will fit around her scars. This is followed by handfuls of pink powder thrown at her even as she continues to move forward with steely resolve. This set of moments, held together, showcase both the extraordinary pain of not being able to fit – literally, into a bra, and figuratively, into mainstream culture – while also making space for anger, resolve, and agency to shine through.

In the scene captured in Figure 4, the visual representation of forward movement *in spite of* the pink powder clouding Chelsey’s vision evidences what building a feminist survival kit for people going through cancer might entail. As artists, we reject the metaphor of “pink,” which in society has come to stand for femaleness, femininity, and weakness. Additionally, in breast cancer culture, “pink” has become synonymous with women, hope, positivity, community, and fund-raising. We call attention to and reject overtly feminized undergarments made for women, specifically “pink bows, pink lace, pink ribbons, pink panties all over the place.” We refuse to submit to or comply with the pink-ness of breast cancer, instead demanding undergarments that have “attitude;” that are “red and black” and stitched up

with “rhinestones and spikes,” rather than underwear that is “proper” or “ladylike.”



*Figure 3.* Stills from *Breast Cancer Pink* music video.

Our visual representation evidences literacy as a practice, especially where the emotionality of the content *and* the relationships that enabled the content are what shaped our response to pink-washing. While we might have individually experienced pink-washing this way, it was our coming together in a literacy event – engaging in storytelling and collaborative visioning – that enabled our *practice of survival*. It was through collaborative ethnographic practice that the sticky, relational means to production were made possible.





Figure 4. Stills from *Breast Cancer Pink* music video.

*Breast Cancer Pink* makes a story that is invisible to mainstream media heard, known, and felt among the multitude of breast cancer narratives. Being visible and audible is central to survival. Significant medical research has noted that people with stronger social ties tend to do better in medical treatment and recovery from cancer and other ailments (Haines et al., 2010). What most of this research does not account for are the market-driven parameters of connection that locate people and bodies that don't fit into the "typical" breast cancer story outside of visibility. In order for a breast cancer patient to be understood by society, to be visible, she must embody narratives that are not necessarily hers. Ahmed (2017) contends that it is this "we" that feminisms can negate. While Ahmed (2017) contends there is "so much you are supposed to not say, to do, to be in order to preserve that we" (p. 30), there is also another option: an option to disrupt the "we" and through

creative production, forge something else. *Breast Cancer Pink* spoils the happy breast cancer narrative of survival and gratitude by expressing disharmony with normative breast cancer stories. *Breast Cancer Pink* is not a happy song. It kills the joy of surviving, instead offering a range of feelings experienced in relation to breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, including anger. *Breast Cancer Pink* normalizes anger and offers the possibility that by being present with rage and narrating our experiences – exactly as they are, and not as others wish they were – a kind of renegade hopefulness can emerge. And yet, as noted in the following stanza, we are critical of the war metaphors typically laid upon breast cancer patients, which use language like “fight,” “battle,” and “lost the battle”:

And they call us all warriors, as if we're fighting a war  
Then they call us badass survivors when we don't die  
Well, warriors don't wear pink lace lingerie  
And survivors don't hide behind little bows  
So gimme some underwear with attitude  
Gimme some red and black gitch  
Stitch it up with rhinestones and spikes  
But nothing proper and nothing lady-like, no!

We argue that this stanza engages critically with the pinking of culture and the interweaving of war narratives into cancer experiences. But, it also represents a politically imbued hopefulness that emerges – a hope from the margins – because creative expression offers an opportunity to redraw the contours of the world and narrate a story outside of *pink culture*. In Figure 5, we see a normalization of medicalized bodies *and* a hopefulness and playfulness emerge as Chelsey and two of her friends, former cancer patients, strip out of the hospital gowns and show viewers the “red and black gitch” underneath.

Alongside Ahmed (2017), we imagine that the feminist experience is one that is rarely central. Together with feminist scholars of cancer politics, we understand that “doing” breast cancer is hopelessly tied up with normative femininity. Therefore, we understand *Breast Cancer Pink* to be a clear example of both how deeply painful it can be to *be* and *feel* marginalized, and also, how the process of storying through music can provide an experience of “us(ing) metaphors to understand the meaning of what is happening to us” (Rudd, cited in Baker & Wigram, 2005, p. 9). We argue here that *Breast Cancer Pink* is a cultural intervention that allows young/er queer/er people to imagine, see, and hear themselves and their stories of breast cancer as witnessed.



Figure 5. Stills from *Breast Cancer Pink* music video.

### Conclusion

*Breast Cancer Pink* is a queer, feminist project of survival. It is a project that exemplifies multimodal literacy engagement that moves across mediums, evidences intentional engagement with the world, and queers breast cancer normativity. *Breast Cancer Pink* allowed us to “generate counter knowledge”

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(Ahmed, 2017, p. 41) about young/er, queer/er women's experiences of breast cancer. Working with music and video production provided "ways of thinking about [cancer] trauma that [did] not pathologize it, that seized control over it from the medical experts, and that forged creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 3). *Breast Cancer Pink* helped return Chelsey "to the pleasures of sensory embodiment that trauma destroys" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 1). In this case, we refer to the trauma of receiving a breast cancer diagnosis, navigating breast cancer treatment, and experiencing feelings of disempowerment when engaging with the medical field about one's health and body.

Working with music and video production also allowed us to venture onto a landscape of unspoken emotions and taboo thoughts, or rather, invited us to traverse what Cvetkovich (2003) refers to as "the terrain of the unsaid" (p. 108) where "there are stories that have not yet been told or heard because they are too disturbing" (p. 108). In our case, "the terrain of the unsaid" refers to the landscape of unspoken anger, frustration, alienation, and disempowerment that Chelsey experienced as she navigated the territory of breast cancer. Expressing anger about having breast cancer and rejecting the "pink-ness" of breast cancer is disturbing: it spoils the cohesiveness of collective identity between people with breast cancer. But, *being diagnosed with* breast cancer is also disturbing. Revisiting Goodson's (1998) notion of storying the self, we argue that songwriting and digital video production helped us articulate *Breast Cancer Pink*, which stories the "othered cancer body:" the younger, feminist, angry body that is not reflected in and is critical of normative cancer discourses. *Breast Cancer Pink* opens up the terrain of the unsaid breast cancer story. Composing, recording, and distributing a breast cancer song that queers cancer does social justice work because it disrupts normative, pink cancer narratives and provides a space for lesser known experiences of breast cancer to be audible and visible. The song and video, *Breast Cancer Pink*, illustrates accounts of queer experimentation with and subversion of cis-femininity, and insists on a different telling of a breast cancer experience, that is, Chelsey's breast cancer experience.

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## Appendix 1

### Breast Cancer Pink

by Kate Reid & Chelsey Hauge, 2014

I think I've got everything under control, it's going to be fine, it's going to be fine  
I'm just trying to find a way to hide this new body of mine  
I've got me some of those loose-fitting, with-the-sleeves-rolled-up-  
Hipster-boyfriend-button-down shirts to pull around my chest

Shirts that make me look like I wouldn't  
If you saw me undressed  
But there's one more problem, I want to feel normal again, I want to look normal  
again  
I want to look like what people expect normal should look like  
Whatever normal should look like, what does that look like?  
I need to fill in this space the surgery left behind  
Something to cover up this scar zigzagging across my ribcage and my mind

*Chorus*

Cuz they took my left tit away  
Like they didn't even give a shit  
And I'm on the brink of a fit of rage  
Cuz all I'm surrounded with is  
Breast cancer pink

At the lingerie store it's all about the perfect rack from that straight male fantasy  
Whether it's Victoria's Secret, or the store for women like me with partial  
mastectomies  
But excuse me, what's so perfect about  
Bras for chicks with no left tit, trying to make me look all flawless  
This is one more space in which my body just doesn't fit

*Chorus*

Cuz they took my left tit away  
Like they didn't even give a shit  
And I'm on the brink of a fit of rage  
Cuz all I'm surrounded with is  
Breast cancer pink

Everywhere I turn all I see is this ghastly pastel shade  
Pink bows, pink lace, pink ribbons, pink panties all over the place  
What's any self-respecting, no-left-breasted, post-structural feminist supposed to  
think?  
What can I say?  
This gendered cancer game feels like a straitjacket to me

*Bridge*

And they call us all warriors, as if we're fighting a war  
Then they call us badass survivors when we don't die  
Well, warriors don't wear pink lace lingerie  
And survivors don't hide behind little bows  
So gimme some underwear with attitude  
Gimme some red and black gitch  
Stitch it up with rhinestones and spikes  
But nothing proper and nothing lady-like, no!

*Chorus*

Cuz they took my left tit away  
Like they didn't even give a shit

And I'm on the brink of a fit of rage  
Cuz all I'm surrounded with is  
Breast cancer pink