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The X-Rayed Memory of a Cancerous Breast

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In memoriam, to beautiful mother

Breast, Săt, 乳房, Borst, Sein, Brust, หน้าอก, Seno, 胸, 胸部, Peito, pecho (English, Romanian, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish.)

It is remarkable how languages function because, if for the word “breast” there are almost completely distinct versions in the thirteen languages selected (above), on the other hand, for the word “cancer,” seven of these languages share an almost similar form. It appears that this illness cares little about the linguistic barrier. Put differently, cancer is a word that breaks up bodies and tears families apart; yet, ironically, we belong to a larger community because of it. Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1990 and died because of it two years later. I have ever since accepted cancer as a provocation.

“The X-Rayed Memory of a Cancerous Breast” somewhat resembles x-ray images, although, instead of seeing an individual’s inside, we observe some words that “speak” to all of us. This poster is part of my Scrabble-Cancer Project, which has started as a realization of the playfulness dimension of our lives. Games are collective, social, and inventing. Scrabble-Cancer is a project where I expose and challenge the linguistic impact of this illness on us. “Scrabble” is a rough word, meaning it has only two vowels and six consonants. The first three are hard consonants (s cr- ), and, when people pronounce the word, they almost choke. Despite its vocal toughness, it remains open to various combinations of words. The grids are retrieved from my own exploration into the subject of cancer. Ever since mom died, I have exhumed and reenacted this ordeal on numerous occasions. It is a ritual in self-discovery and a way to pay a tribute to beautiful mother.

My project follows the philosophy of artistic installations, in the sense that its main characteristic is fluidity. Ultimately, the configuration of any Scrabble-Cancer grid changes from users to users because mutability represents its sine-qua-non feature. This particular grid has 22 words, 12 horizontally and 10 vertically. Once a grid is completed, it can be used as a map to navigate and explore further not used but implied ideas. Moreover, a grid can be read from left to right, top to bottom, and diagonally. There is no strict rule on how one wants to use a grid. In addition, when an initial browsing is done, we could continue the game of creating sentences with those chosen words.

In all the grids, the central word to be “dissected” is placed in the middle. After I had arranged the letters in the noun “breasts,” there were two immediate others that came to mind: “self” that goes down the first “s” in “breasts,” and “protest” that goes upward in the grid and borrows the “t” from the central word. A woman’s breasts contribute to the development of her self-esteem and image; yet a woman does not want to be judged on this singular physical aspect, hence the “protest” word that could be employed as a noun and as a verb simultaneously to enhance its message.
Another interesting combination is “oncology” and “God,” where the two words share the vowel “o.” They both speak volumes about cancer: on the one hand, the branch of medicine that devotes its research to cancer is called “oncology.” On the other hand, science alone has not always proved to be effective by itself. People pray a lot when in pain. People remember God then more frequently. People are more vulnerable in uncertain situations, and hospitals have that unforgettable combination of smells that resuscitates our true fears.

Still, another useful association starts with “fake” and then goes down in two directions with “erótica” and “fantasy,” respectively. The last two words parallel each other and form a team, a pair. We may suggest that “erótica” and “fantasy” are intertwined to increase the word previously addressed, “self.” Given the large industry devoted to various obscure marketing strategies using women’s breasts (e.g., provocative intimate apparel, lewd magazines, adult movies), we may feel justified to add “fake” into the equation and generate further debates.

Over the years of research and personal introspection, cancer has reminded me that it is a random mutation at the cellular level, and therefore its recovery is in part a matter of chance. This is why we find “surgery” and “pray” as another tandem here, joining medicine and spirituality again. Personally, when mom was diagnosed with cancer, she was advised to undergo surgery and have a mastectomy. She refused because she wanted to still have her two breasts. Today, more and more women decide to have a radical double mastectomy to ensure that the cancerous tissue is completely removed from their breasts’ site.

There are some words that apparently seem to make no sense whatsoever: “ghost,” “hunt,” “exhume,” “zapped.” I beg to differ. We possess this invaluable quality called associative thinking that allows us to embark on several linguistic journeys. Any grid from Scrabble–Cancer Project intends to bring together people who suffer from this illness as well as their family, friends, and community members. A person with cancer has moments of distrust when s/he may feel invisible, like a ghost. Having replaced a comfortable personal bed with a neutral hospital one, having exchanged her/his personal attire with standard hospital gowns, having given up makeup to pallor and exhaustion, then we could better comprehend why patients feel like a “ghost.” Furthermore, healthy people waiting for their dear one’s recovery do feel like “ghosts,” too. It is not a permanent feeling, but it is a recurrent one. When faced with the issue of life-and-death situations, we relapse into our fearful mode if only for a couple of minutes. Cancer “exhumes” our concerns, misconceptions, and poor medical education. Yet we are on a hunt to win this battle. Having seen breasts zapped because of mastectomy, we have witnessed the shock that is cancer.

To conclude, there are many other ways to read this grid, just as there are many other ways to create different grids by focusing on “breasts.” Take a piece of paper, pick up a pencil, draw a square and think of a word associated with cancer that challenges your intellect. By so doing, you have already become part of this ongoing project.