

---

## Books Forum

### How cancer remakes people and peoples

*Edited by Nicolas Langlitz*

Department of Anthropology, The New School for Social Research, New York, USA.

E-mail: LanglitN@newschool.edu

*BioSocieties* (2016).

doi:10.1057/s41292-016-0031-2

As cancer erodes human bodies, it remakes people's biosocial identities. Dedicated to recent social scientific publications on one of the leading causes of premature death in Europe and North America, this Books Forum focuses on two very different ethnographic monographs, which examine how medical facts can transform the self-conceptions of individuals and whole ethnic groups.

Carsten Timmermann compares Canadian legal and medical anthropologist Lochlann Jain's *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us* to other scholarly publications from the past four decades that were also inspired by their authors' own cancer diagnosis, from Susan Sontag's famous essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) to Arthur Frank's *At the Will of the Body* (1991) and Jackie Stacey's *Teratologies* (1997). Although personal, Jain's book is no cancer memoir. It examines the social, political, and economic context, in which whole industries either contribute to the growth of tumours through the distribution of carcinogenic substances or treat them with expensive drugs and other therapeutic

interventions. Timmermann seems pleasantly surprised that Jain, unlike many of her colleagues in the social sciences, defends screening procedures and forcefully defends this biomedical practice against the arguments of a sceptic. In the case of *Malignant*, not memoir but critique enabled the author to cope with her own illness experience, Timmermann suggests. The result is a book about how tumorous growths transform identity – in the first person plural.

Breast cancer challenges both the individual and collective identities of those who live with the diagnosis. The increased prevalence of two genes associated with the disease, BRCA-1 and BRCA-2, in Ashkenazy Jews, led the sociologist of medicine Jessica Mozersky and many of the British women she interviewed for her book *Risky Genes: Genetics, Breast Cancer, and Jewish Identity* to rethink their own Jewish identity. In the wake of national socialist race theory which presented Jews as a people plagued by hereditary diseases, Mozersky finds in her interlocutors no fear of discrimination. Instead, they profess supportive attitudes toward genetic research and testing, often conducted by physicians of Jewish descent, and even express eugenic concerns regarding the improvement of the Jewish gene pool. Reviewer Andrea zur Nieden locates this finding in the broader history of grass-roots attempts at such genetic betterment of whole populations.

The reviewed books suggest that cancer not only takes lives but also remakes them, both personally and collectively.

---

**Nicolas Langlitz** is an Associate Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* and currently studies the epistemic culture of neurophilosophy as well as the intersection between primatology and the human sciences in chimpanzee ethnography.



## References

Frank, A.W. (1991) *At the Will of the Body: Reflections on Illness*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Stacey, J. (1997) *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*. London: Routledge.

Susan, S. (1978) *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.