SOCIALLY ME: MY LIFE IN POSTS, TWEETS, AND ACTUALITY – A LIFE NARRATIVE THESIS ON IDENTITY, NARRATIVE, AND HOW MILLENNIALS COME TO UNDERSTAND THEIR LIVES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

by

JESSICA LEIGH HENNENFENT

(Under the Direction of Elli Lester Roushanzamir)

ABSTRACT

How social media impact lives professionally, personally, and theoretically has been an issue that fascinates academics and non-academics. Drawing on theoretical tenets from Erving Goffman's dramaturgy theory, as well as conventions of postmodernist narratives and digital literacy narratives, I present the case that the "millennial" generation came of age with the internet, and this life-long relationship impacts how this age group constructs narratives across social media platforms today. They engage in "identity bending," that is, constructing online identities that differ from their offline ones. These online identities are also not the same across social media platforms. Using traditional approaches to autoethnography, as well as constructs of digital ethnography, I engage in life narrative research to study these issues through the span of my own life, and present an autobiographical case for how growing up with the internet and social media affect how I use them today.

INDEX WORDS: Social media, Dramaturgy, Performance, Identity, Narrative, Erving Goffman, Identity Bending, Autoethnography

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The size of the space in this thesis devoted to thanking those who have helped me along the way does not adequately reflect the size of my gratitude. It's a common joke that it takes a village to produce a grad student, and the truth behind this joke has always resonated with me.

First, I would like to thank my fantastic committee for their endless support: Elli Lester Roushanzamir, Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, and Valerie Boyd. These three women stood by me, challenged me, and helped me become the scholar – and the person – I am today. They have inspired me, encouraged me, and, at only a few times, made me sweat. I only hope to one day be a fraction of the amazing scholars, writers, and people they are.

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And to my family – my brother, Doug, for being the one I always look to for advice and the kind of wisdom only a big brother can provide. And Carolyn – I don't have enough words for what you've done for me. You've taught me more about love,

family, and how to be myself than anyone else in my life. You've always encouraged me to accomplish my dreams and be whoever I wanted to be, but I don't think you ever realized the person I wanted to be the most like was you.

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INTRODUCTION

Hi, I'm Jess.

Jess is short for Jessica, which is short for Jessica Leigh Hennenfent.

[1]

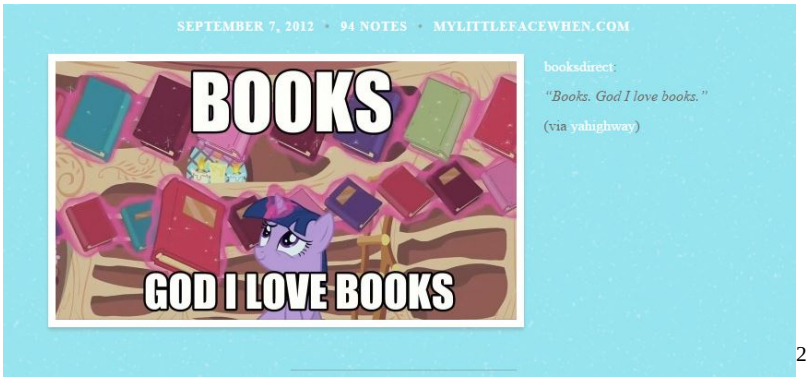
I was born on June 21, 1990 in White Picket Fence Suburbia – thirty minutes north of Atlanta, Georgia.

Today, I'm your fairly average twenty-four year old millennial.

[1] Deschanel, Z. (2011, July 2). *Tweet*. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/zooeydeschanel/status/87338246761218048 and www.jhennenfent.tumblr.com

I watch a lot of Netflix,

read a lot of books,



[2]

and listen to a lot of music.

[2] Thiessen, J., Wootton, J., Miller, J., & Faust, L. (2010). My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic. Studio B Productions & DHX Media/Vancouver: Vancouver, British Colombia, Canada. Retrieved from: www.jhennenfent.tumblr.com.
See also: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/im-so-alone

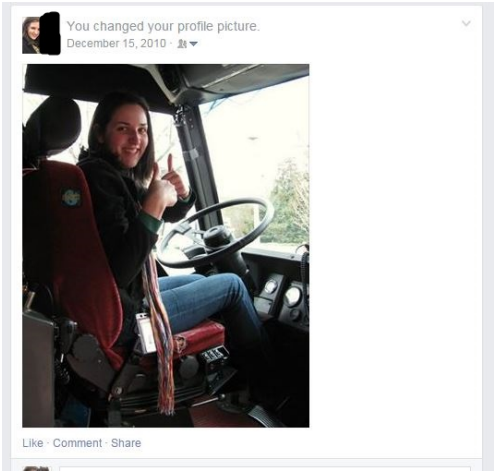
I love my friends. And my dog.

I'm also kind of a nerd.

[3]

I used to drive a bus.

[3] Linehan, G. (writer and director) and Boden, R. (director). (2008) Are We Not Men? [television series episode]. In A. Atalla (producer) , *The IT Crowd*. London, United Kingdom: FremantleMedia. Retrieved from: www.jhennenfent.tumblr.com



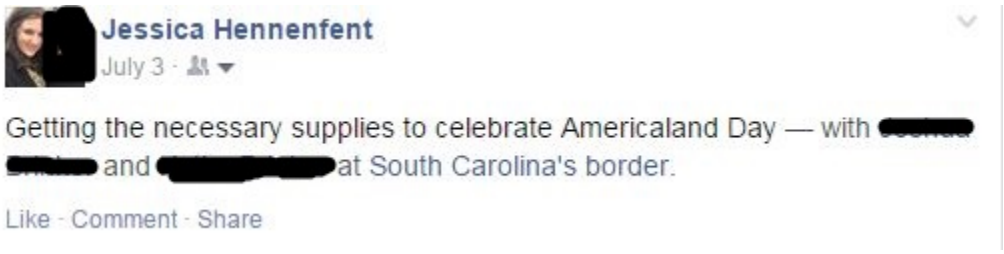
Now I work in marketing for the University of Georgia Press.

I'm a bit of a feminist.

[4]

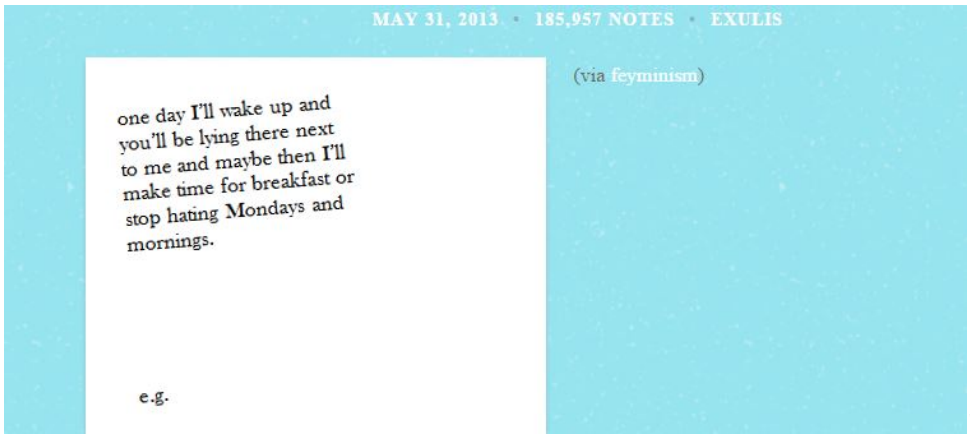
[4] Meriweather, E. (writer) & Spiller, M. (director). (2012) See Ya [television series episode]. In Baer, B (producer). *New Girl*. Los Angeles, CA: 20th Television

My friends tell me I'm witty,



and funny.

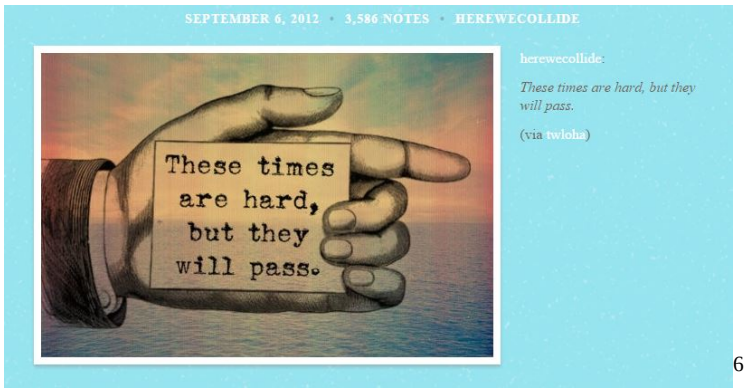
Though sometimes I can be a bit cynical.



[5]

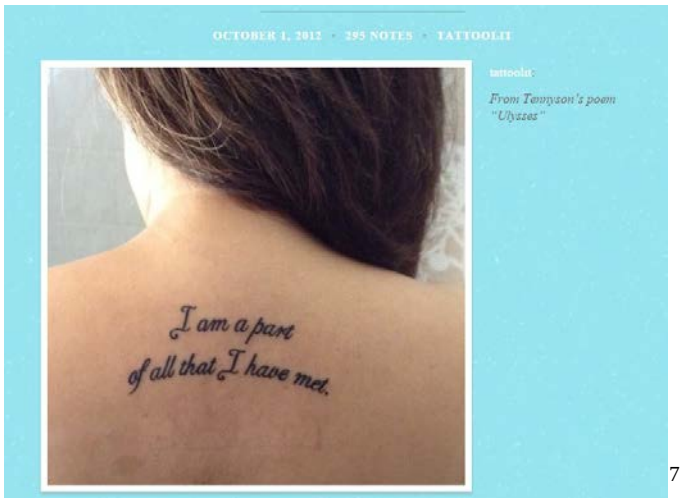
But at the end of the day, I subscribe to the belief that everything works out okay.

[5] Retrieved from: http://feyminism.tumblr.com/ and http://jhennenfent.tumblr.com



[6]

I've been through a lot in my twenty-four years of existence.

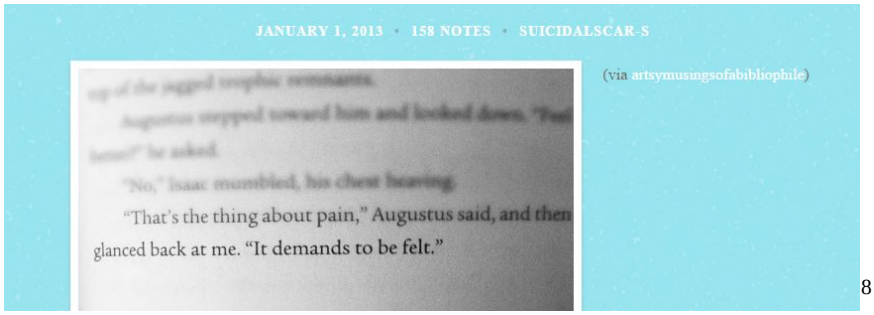


[7]

Because you see, both my parents are dead.

[6] Brown, D. (2012). These Times [recorded by Safety Suit: Douglas Brown, Dave Garofalo, Jeremy Henshaw, and Tate Cunningham]. On *These Times* [CD]. Santa Monica, CA: Universal Republic
[7] Retrieved from: http://jhennenfent.tumblr.com

Get the cynicism now?



[8]

But like I said, I try to err on the bright side of life, subscribing to the notion that it all happens for a reason and there's good in most people.

[8] Green, J. (2012). *The Fault in Our Stars*. London, United Kingdom: Dutton Books/Penguin Books. Retrieved from http://jhennenfent.tumblr.com

[9]

***

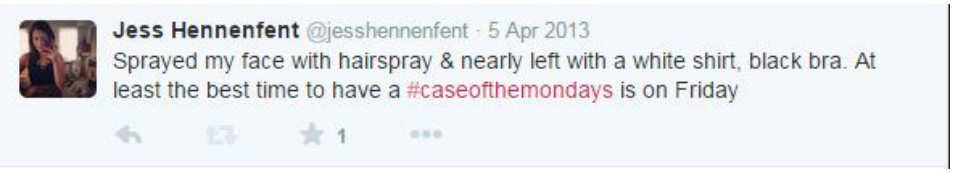
Today, I'm currently a second year master's student at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

My area of emphasis is mass media studies.

[9] Retrieved from: http://jhennenfent.tumblr.com

And I want to be a professor one day.

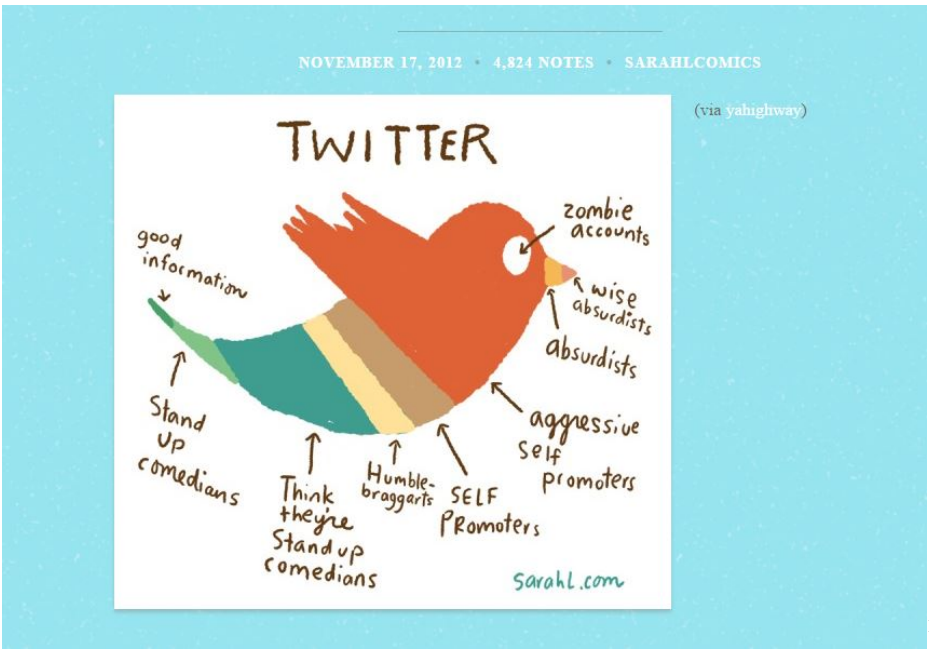
When I grow up, that is (whatever that means).



If my parents were here, I know they'd be so proud.

***

But enough of that. The point of this, this here, is that like all millennials – and maybe everyone in 2015, really – I'm fascinated by social media.

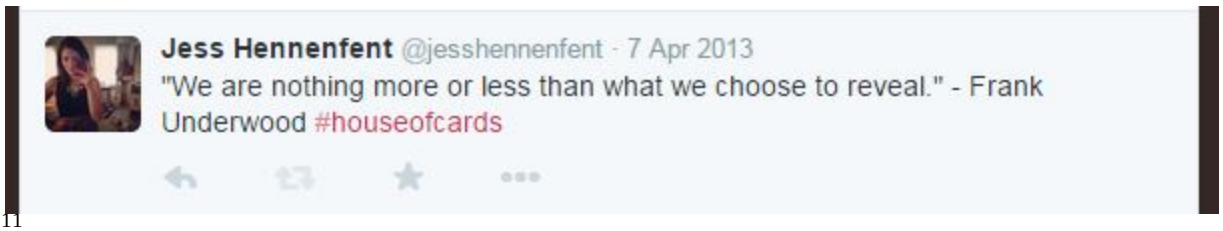


[10]

Why do we post what we post? What are the implications of that? What's at stake? Our digital selves connect with more people than ever before, and how have these ways of interaction changed? How do images like selfies, smartphone applications like Yo and Timehop, and viral charity movements like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge change the way we interact, communicate, remember and negotiate the past, and even live in the present moment?

Because after all, we are different people online than we are in physical reality.

[10] Retrieved from http://jhennenfent.tumblr.com



[11]

But just how much? And how and why are these differences constructed?

***

I was an English and Sociology double major when I was an undergraduate in college, so let's talk about Erving Goffman for a second.

> Erving Goffman was a sociologist whose work was grounded in the theory of symbolic-interactionism. His seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, posits that "individuals perform in order to project a desirable image, using the theatre to illustrate individuals' contrasting *front stage* and *backstage* behaviour [*sic*]. (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 101)

From day one in graduate school, I was fascinated by Goffman's research and how it relates to behavior on social media, probably due, in part, because I've grown up negotiating the front stage and the backstage.

---

[11] Barnow, K. & Willimon, B. (writers) & McDougall, C. (director) (2013). Chapter 7 [television series episode]. In Brunetti, D. (producer) *House of Cards*. Los Gatos, California: Netflix.

I was born in 1990, almost at the midpoint of the millennial generation. This generation, which is defined as the cohort of individuals born between 1981 and 2000, is the first always connected age group, and they are (we are) extremely savvy with technology (Pew Internet and American Life, 2010; Hollenbaugh and Ferris, 2013). This includes social media, and how these technologies influence various – if not all – aspects of young people's lives remains at the forefront of theoretical, professional, and industry research (McMillan and Morrison, 2006).

McMillan and Morrison (2006) also suggest that the millennial generation – my generation – came of age with the internet.

As such, the internet is an integral part of our lives that coalesces with the offline world (McMillan and Morrison, 2006; Harrison, 2009; Page, 2012). Because of that, it is worth considering the depths of our relationships with these computer-mediated forms of communication, what's at stake, and what can be learned by examining such technological narratives (Ching and Ching, 2012; Kirtley, 2012).

The purpose of this thesis is to explore to what degree the narratives we tell on social media and the narratives of our offline world inform each other. What extraordinary circumstances lie behind the most seemingly ordinary posts or tweets? How are our online narratives informed by our offline ones? Previous work into how social media contributes to identity formation has considered offline interactions, but only slightly, and often as an afterthought. Using Erving Goffman's dramaturgy theory as

a guide, I seek to understand this online/offline negotiation through my own online and offline narratives. How do these two narratives hide, bend, and engage in a dialogue with each other? How do I adhere to Goffman's construction of the front stage online?

I use three interweaving narratives to explore answers to these questions. First, as presented thus far in my introduction, is my online narrative. Who am I online? Do my posts online adhere to certain social norms considered appropriate for Goffman's front stage? The second narrative is my offline one, in which I explain what was going on in my life at the time of those posts, i.e., "behind the scenes." By allowing some time to pass between these events and the present, I have been able to place a critical distance between myself and these experiences in order to theoretically examine them. Matthew Allen (2012) suggests the following from his study on the internet and creation of Web 2.0:

> I conclude that a fruitful new direction for internet and media researchers is to discover how individuals found a place in their lives *for* the change that technology brings. As a result, we would know more of individual users' agency in their own historicity, understanding how their own self-histories interweave with the history of technology. (emphasis author's, p. 271)

What Allen proposes is what I am doing with this thesis. How did I adopt technology into my life? Why did I make the choices I made? Examining the front stage and backstage of my life should provide some insight.

Because of the tremendous amount of posts I have created over time, I have elected to use my relationship with my father, prior to his death, as a unifying core. This helps narrow the online and offline stories into a succinct presentation without exploring the immense breadth of my entire autobiography. While such backstage conflict is unique to me, family conflicts at large are not. Neither are friend conflicts, classmate conflicts,

roommate conflicts, etc. The circumstances may be unique to me, but masking private occurrences in favor of a simpler public image is not. I move in a chronological timeline of computer and internet developments, starting with the first time my brother and I were given our own computer (1994) and moving forward, all while looking at how the "digital native" (millennial) generation came to grow up with technology.

Chapter four (MySpace) begins with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies and discusses some of MySpace's predecessors, Xanga and LiveJournal, and looks at how identities online and identities offline inform and help one another. Chapter five brings us to Facebook, a giant among networking sites, and delves deep into examining Goffman's front stage/backstage dichotomy by looking at the stories that play out online versus the stories that play out behind the scenes. Chapter six discusses Twitter and Instagram and how the narratives and identities that are presented on those platforms differ from that of Facebook, and explores some reasons as to why this may be the case. Tumblr use is interwoven throughout the whole narrative to show the emphasis and stock I placed on a regular blog versus mircoblogging. A discussion section (chapter seven) discusses these choices more in depth, and examines three crucial issues that are at stake in this research: identity bending, narcissism, and the eternal lives of social media. The discussion section also explains why I elected to write this thesis in this particular way.

So through my own social media profiles, I invite you join me on this journey. Travel back in time with me as I come to understand my own digital literacy and how I grew up to have such an intimate relationship with technology. I invite you to look at the differences and discrepancies, to see the deliberate actions and carefully thought out words that I, the subject, have put on my front stage.

[12]

I've presented a lot of the front stage in this very introduction. The curtain falls. I log out of Facebook. I put the iPhone5S down.

Let's go backstage, shall we?

[13]

[12] Bays, C. (writer) & Fryman, P. (director). (2007). Wait For It [television series episode]. In Bays, C. (producer). *How I Met Your Mother*. Los Angeles, CA: 20th Television

[13] Weiner, M. (writer) & Abraham, P. (director). (2010). The Summer Man [television series episode]. In Abrahams, J. (producer). *Mad Men*. New York, NY: AMC Studios.

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dramaturgy

Growing up, my whole house in White Picket Fence Suburbia smelled like peaches. Peach potpourri dotted the bathrooms, and peach candles towered in the gold candelabras in the dining room and provided additional ambiance in the living room (an inappropriately named room – we hardly did much living in there). In elementary school, I asked my mother: "Is it because we live in the Peach State?[14] *She just shook her head and shooed me away, so I accepted my own explanation. Years later, I saw the irony – my father was a washed-up basketball star Midwesterner who had fled the cornfields at 23, plagued by the curse of being smarter than everyone around him, and my mother was a Jewish American Duchess from Long Island whose lips pursed every time she drank sweet tea but ordered it at every meal regardless. It was always about appearances for them, and the extra detail of a peach-smelling house was no exception. That, and my middle name – Leigh, purportedly, according to my father, because of Vivien Leigh*[15]*, so I could have an appropriately southern name. But according to my mother, it was so*

[14] The state of Georgia is nicknamed "The Peach State" because Georgia peaches are the state fruit and supposed to be some of the most delicious and nutritious peaches in America. This also seems inappropriately named, given the fact Georgia's main export is actually peanuts. I don't think I would have enjoyed growing up in a house that smelled like peanuts, however.

[15] As in *Gone with the Wind's* Scarlett O'Hara Vivien Leigh. I consider myself a strong, independent woman, but I don't think I'm as shallow as Scarlett – but frankly my dear, I don't give a damn.

when my brother and I came to hate our father, we could drop Hennenfent and still have a normal surname[16].

To this day, the smell of peaches always makes me wonder why we go to such lengths to put on airs and present idealized versions of ourselves. Bending your identity to fit in seems to chip away at who you actually are instead of adding anything of value to you.

***

In 1959, Erving Goffman published his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. His work, grounded in the symbolic-interactionist theory of sociology, posits that "individuals perform in order to project a desirable image, using the theatre to illustrate individuals' contrasting *front stage* and *backstage* behaviour [*sic*]" (emphasis authors'; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 101). Hogan (2010) expands this: "On the front stage, we are trying to present an idealized version of self, according to a specific role…[and] the backstage, as Goffman says, is 'a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (p. 378; Goffman qtd. in Hogan, 2010, p. 378).

When it comes to this front stage/backstage (and public/private) distinction, sociological theory further argues that "a public realm of common values is set against the potentially divergent, hedonistic, egoistic, private interests of individual social actors: public solidarity and private autonomy" (Bailey, 2000, p. 386). Thus, how individuals act in public is at odds with how they would behave in private, since the public realm is governed by specific social norms and conventions that one must not violate in order to save face (Bailey, 2000; Hogan, 2010; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). In the

[16] This right here should be a good introduction to my family's dynamic.

twenty-first century, the public, in addition to referring to face-to-face physical interaction, also refers to online interactions. I find this perplexing, because there are now two, broad public realms, and only one private realm. Also, the ease at which we can slip into the online public realm from the private (on our couches with our laptops or on our beds with our smartphones) is confounding.

[17]

Goffman has been popular with internet and social media scholars, as well as scholars of technologies. Schroeder (2002) drew on Goffman's dramaturgy to examine virtual worlds; Hewitt and Forte (2006) use Goffman to explain identity production on Facebook; Lewis, Kaufrman, and Christakis (2008) employed the front stage/backstage distinction to attempt to understand internet privacy; and Menchick and Tian (2008) argue Goffman and symbolic-interactionism more broadly to interpret ListServs[18].

[17]Taken May 2011 on a trip to Universal Studios (Florida) with my then roommates. Universal Orlando has these thoughts bubbles positioned around their cartoon-themed area. The picture, while humorous, represents a larger issue at stake in terms of Goffman – my private thoughts are now available for public consumption.

[18] Examples condensed courtesy of Hogan (2010).

It is common on social media to tailor images of the self to fit situational demands (Bronstein, 2013). Goffman also refers to this in physical reality as impression management, and it is not surprising that this would occur on social networking sites since social media are seen as public realms that are extensions of the offline world (Hogan, 2010; Page, 2012; Bronstein, 2013; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). This tailoring of images on social media, however, in turn informs the offline self, though scholars disagree about the extent to which this occurs; regardless, it remains undisputed that individuals – regardless of personal intentions – engage in this impression management to conceal some personality traits and emphasize others to adhere more broadly to social norms (Hogan, 2010; Page, 2012; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). Page (2012) postulates that this is so we maintain an online identity that is approved by offline others.

Page (2012) further makes the following distinction on Goffman's dramaturgy theory in terms of social media: "The front stage is governed by protocols that maintain moral and social standards for decorum, where the audience is co-present with the performer. In contrast, the backstage is the space in which 'the performer can relax: he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character'" (p. 95; Goffman qtd. in Page, p. 95, 1959). Many times, individuals think they are seeing an intimate look into another's life through social media but this is in fact a *pseudo-backstage*[19] in which peeks into the life of another are only "publically staged constructions" (Page, 2012, p. 105). Hogan (2010) refers to this as *cyberperformance* to account for behavior online,

[19] This attitude is predominantly common in celebrity studies on social media, but carries over into everyday occurrences. See: Wheeler (2014): *The Mediazaation of Celebrity Politics through the Social Media* and Driessens (2012): *The Celebritiztion of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural Dynamics of Celebrity Culture.*

and argue that one does not necessarily feel affinity towards the individual's life on social media, but rather, the social medium itself. It is not uncommon to see Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* cited in online studies of identity, since he argues for the loss of an aura between the individual and the representation of the individual (1968). The "publically staged constructions" Page (2012) speaks of are only representations of one's life and not actually one's life.

This is why it remains an often muddled and far from solved conundrum of just how much the online, front stage performance narrative informs the backstage, private, personal narrative, but it is worth remembering that "if public and private construct each other…our understanding of the changing character of the public realm in the near future will be much enhanced if we have a more articulated approach to the private" (Bailey, 2000, p. 396). This more articulated approach to the private (in order to understand the public) is what I strive for in this thesis. This is why, in moving forward, I intend to focus on the private as part of social media studies, not just the public.

Narrative

My earliest memories are all of my father – My first memory of my mother doesn't happen until I was at least seven years old. I know she was present before that – the pictures from our Chattanooga vacations, the presents that were arranged perfectly below the Christmas tree signed Love Mom, the roasted chicken dinners she would make that would fill our house with their mouth-watering aromas for hours beforehand so I would run up to her and grab her shirt hem and beg Mommy-Mommy-Mommy-I'm-Going-To-Die-I'm-So-Hungry-When's-Dinner – but I don't remember her. I remember

she did all those things, sure, but my mother, my obscure mother, has always eluded me – in her life, and in her death.

I've always felt robbed of the chance of getting to really know her. She died when I was twelve, just nine days before my thirteenth birthday, so my preteen years were spent in hospital waiting rooms instead of the mall, and I learned how to don a sterilization mask instead of makeup. I wonder now if I would have liked her for the person she was, or if I would have grown to hate her, like I now do my father. Honestly, I think the latter might have been more likely.

Our own narratives may be the easiest to cling to, and the most difficult to release. It's human nature, I think, to want to hold so steadfastly on to something, to have a solid "truth" or story. Years after my mom passed, the hardest thing to accept was that she had in fact been a person, not just my mother, and she was just as flawed as the rest of us. My father, on the other hand, had no qualms about wearing his flaws on his sleeve within the confines of our own house, but as soon as we set foot out in public, the mask came on. Because, you see, the thing about those pictures from those Chattanooga vacations is that no one – not one of us – is smiling. We're all trying, sure. But even my nine-year-old brother and six-year-old self could only muster up the faintest skeleton of a grimace.

We all knew back then that our narrative was a lie.

***

Social media are frequently seen as platforms in which to engage in narration about the self (McMillan and Morrison, 2006; Good, 2012; Page, 2012). Page (2012)

proposes that "social media is [*sic*] used to document ongoing stories or personal experience from the narrator's private life" (p. 1). Good (2012) expands this point:

> Whereas on Facebook, a person might express a taste for *Casablanca* by listing it in her favorite movies, posting a video clip in her profile, or 'liking' a similar link posted by a friend, a scrapbook user could express a similar sentiment by pasting a *Casablanca* ticket stub or advertisement in the pages of her scrapbook. Such tokens…can potentially speak volumes about a user's cultural aspirations, dispositions and desires for social distinction. (p. 568)

These notions adhere to two constructs of social media use: one, social media are ways to document one's life for their "friends"[20] to see, and two, the content that is displayed reveals something insightful about the user's life (Good, 2012; Page, 2012; Hollenbaugh and Ferris, 2013). There are several aspects of these narratives that I intend to examine in this section of my theoretical framework, as they are all relevant and useful for understanding social media as narrative. First, I'll look at postmodern narrative in general, followed by an examination at what is referred to as the digital literacy narrative, and finally, how these both contribute to social media as narrative. I draw on theoretical tenets of all of these to guide my research.

Postmodern Narrative. According to Mark Currie (2011), "there has been a recognition that narrative is central to the representation of identity, in personal memory, and self-representation" (p.6). Adriana Cavarero (2000) expands this point, saying "every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a narratable self – immersed in the spontaneous autonarration of memory" (p.33). Memory is one of the first constructs of narration, as it is something so second-nature to humanity and the first tool

[20] 'Friends' is put in quotation marks because of the denotation of the meaning as it pertains to social networking. A friend is defined as someone who is in one's social network, and while actual, physical reality friends may be included in this list, one's total assemblage of friends may be much larger and more all-encompassing.

to comprehend the past (Cavarero, 2000; Tamboukou, 2010; Currie, 2011). Identity formation and solidification hinges on narration and narratives to grapple with and understand who we are, what we've been through, and where we're going. Identities may always be in flux and are far from stagnant, and narratives are tools by which one negotiates who they are, who they've been, and who they want to be.

This identity formation is another facet of narration. Tamboukou (2010) argues that "stories do many things; they produce realities as much as they are produced by them" (p. 170). Honeyford (2013) agrees, and proposes that "literacy, multimodality and material culture are interwoven together in many ways that interact with others and the spaces we inhabit…and weave powerful narratives blending modes, genres, artefacts [*sic*] and literary conventions to represent the real and imagined in…lives" (p. 17). This is what prompts identities to constantly be dynamic, and it draws upon all aspects of one's life, including the stories they tell (Cavarero, 2000; Currie, 2011; Honeyford, 2013). Furthermore, Stuart Hall "argues that identity is not an 'accomplished fact' but a dynamic 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Honeyford, 2013; Hall qtd. in Honeyford, 1997, p. 18). Hall's terminology of "production" is relevant to examine in tandem with Goffman's dramaturgy theory, which argues that performances are produced.

Stories are used to make sense of this dynamic nature of identity in order to have something (relatively) concrete to hold onto; through the constant telling of one's story, one comes to understand their story (Cavarero, 2000; Currie, 2011). The relationship

between representation and the original is never strictly mimetic, and there is always some kind of negotiation[21].

Cavarero (2000) argues that this is why each of us has a "narratable self," that is, one who is aware of their status as a unique individual and desires to hear their story told by another. The work of the narratable self, in recounting his or her own life story, is to blend *what has been* with *what is* (Cavarero, 2000).

[22]

In this thesis, I will engage in this act of being a narratable self – I will blend what has been with what is to attempt to understand the role this plays on social media.

However, this reflexivity is paradoxical. This symbiotic relationship is what keeps identity fluid in constantly prompting one to reassess, adapt, change, and grow as needed, yet always being able to have some strong sense of their own story to recount to another when asked (Cavarero, 2000; Butler, 2010). In the twenty-first century, Currie (2011) suggests that "the quickening of narration and renarration [*sic*] reflects the time compression of commercial life in general" (p. 105). It is necessary to quickly recount this because according to Poletti (2011), "having and presenting an intelligible life story is central to the functioning of everyday life" (p. 74). This is what is at stake in, and why we always strive to be, a narratable self.

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[21] See again, Benjamin: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

[22] Lewis, T., Duckworth, K., Graham, A., Molina, E., Harris, J., Jackson, J. (2013). Poetic Justice [Recorded by Kendrick Lamar]. On *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City* (digital download). Carson, CA: Top Dawg, Aftermath, Interscope. Retrieved from twitter.com/jesshennenfent

Currie (2011) discusses that even though this narrative is central to the outside world of everyday life, it should be "understood less in the spirit of an analogy between the mind and the world than as a dismantling of the boundary between them" (p. 106). It is not the mind against the outside world; the mind informs the outside world and vice versa (Honeyford, 2010; Currie, 2011; Poletti, 2011). It is a never ending, reciprocal process, but it is important to remember that even though stories are central to identity formation, "life cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards, it results; it is unforeseeable and uncontrollable, just like life" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 3). This is why narratives have become less about coherency and more about complexity[23] (Currie, 2011). This complexity is what gives narratives their richness and also informs constructs like memory and identity formation (Currie, 2011; Nunes, 2011). Today, narratives are not linear, but are constantly being (re)told, being internalized by the teller, and bouncing back and forth through a paradigm of reciprocity.

Digital Literacy Narratives. It is common in twenty-first century composition classrooms for individuals to write about their relationships with technology. Since my thesis examines how I came of age with technology and how my online and offline worlds coalesce, I will draw on conventions from the digital literacy narrative to help ground my method of life narrative research in theory.

Digital literacy narratives are a type of writing that encourages the author to delve deep into their own relationship with technology (Ching and Ching, 2012; Kirtley, 2012; Ng, 2012; Bradbury, 2014). According to Susan Kirtley:

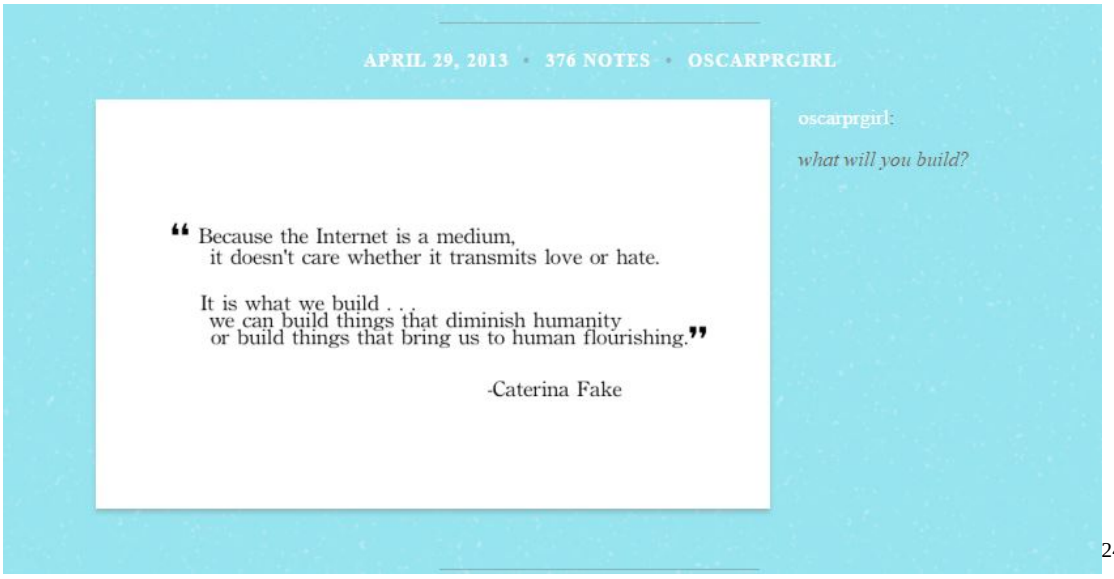
[23] This is seen on social media in that posts and tweets jump around – they are rarely linear and rarely pick up where the previous post left off.

> The narratives encourage students to explore the often unexamined technologies that influence the writing process, rendering technology visible in students' life stories and illuminating the link between the tools of composition and our writing practices, ultimately guiding the students toward revelations about their identities as writers and helping them better understand their best writing practices. (2012, p. 192)

Ching and Ching (2012) further expand this point, arguing that understanding the role of the technological medium is a crucial facet of not only understanding the writing process, but the role technology plays as it interweaves through one's life. Ng (2012) has studied whether or not this kind of digital literacy can be taught or enhanced to already prolific digital natives (and found that it could). Bradbury (2014) has examined the role of the digital literacy narrative in relation to graduate students, postulating that doctoral programs should be reworked to incorporate the role of technology in one's life into the course of study.

Santos and Leahy (2014) call this *postpedagogy*, in that "writing for an English class and writing for the 'real' world no longer have to be two separate activities" (p. 84). This supports Kirtley's notion that this kind of narrative invites students "to explore evolving technologies on the macro level, studying history and theory, and on the micro level, examining how world events influence the individual's life experiences" (2012, p. 194). Kirtley further acknowledges this is even more relevant to research and pursue because " the technological literacy narratives also [expose]…the sheer magnitude of the writing many students are doing outside of the academy, on Facebook and on blogs and on Twitter and through texting" (2012, p. 199). Santos and Leahy (2014) echo this idea, that the concept of writing is not static but dynamic, and what constitutes as writing is fluid.

This concept of the digital literacy narrative actually draws on literature from the role of computers and technology in education in order to study how composition professors can stay current when it comes to teaching digital natives; it also encourages them to examine their writing styles and adapt them to Web 2.0 technologies (Ching and Ching, 2012; Kirtley, 2012; Ng, 2012; Bradbury, 2014; Santos and Leahy, 2014). It is proposed that in order to be an astute writer in the twenty-first century, one must examine their relationships with the technologies used to create the writing (Ching and Ching, 212; Kirtley, 2012, Ng, 2012; Bradbury, 2014; Santos and Leahy, 2014).



[24]

In addition to just understanding the relationship with technology that the digital literacy narratives confers upon the writer, “the process of writing one’s personal history with writing and technology over time allows extended opportunities for the students to make their experiences ‘strange,’ achieving a critical distance that allows them to analyze their

[24] Fake, C. (2013, March 8). NCWIT Award. Retrieved from: http://blog.findery.com/2013/03/08/ncwit-award/ and www.jhennenfent.tumblr.com.
The internet is truly a fascinating medium. It is immune to good or bad, and it all depends on what we do with it. I find this relates to digital literacy in that if we understand our relationship with the medium, we can harness its powers for all aspects of good – bettering the world, understanding ourselves, and understanding others.

experiences with additional objectivity and understanding" (Kirtley, 2012, p. 194). The identity that the digital literacy narrative helps the author negotiate is just as important as coming to understand the role technology plays in his or her own life, and how the individuals come to understand their identities through technology (Ching and Ching, 2012; Kirtley, 2012). Finally, Kirtley (2012), proposes that the digital literacy narrative offers "an underrepresented perspective in ways that top-down research cannot…and the students take the lead in documenting *and* analyzing their stories, thus the information and the understanding is guided by the students themselves, rather than an outsider looking in" (emphasis author's; p. 200).

Social Media as Narrative. Social media are defined as "internet-based applications that promote social interaction between participants. Examples of social media include (but are not limited to) discussion forums, blogs, wikis, podcasting, social networking sites, video sharing, and microblogging" (Page, 2012, p. 5). On these platforms, stories are not just limited to verbal dialogue, and according to Page, "stories can use words, images, sound, and audiovisual resources, like the videos published on YouTube and the podcasts available from the archives of the oral history project [murmur]" (2012, p. 2)[25]. Good calls this online content "personal media assemblages," which she defines as "individualized collections of media fragments both original and appropriated, including notes, messages, photographs, symbolic tokens, and snippets of meaningful items" (2013, p. 559). The content posted to social media typically reveals something personal (though the degree varies from person to person) about the poster (McMillan and Morison, 2006; Page, 2012; Good, 2013; Hollenbaugh and Ferris, 2013).

[25] [murmur] exists in brackets as its title. I did not add these to replace the word with another.


[26]

Facebook and Twitter prompt users to share their narratives in a micro fashion by asking, "*What's on your mind?*" or "*What's happening?*" (Page, 2012). This is the beginning of what makes the world more open and connected, as well as making users feel inspired to post about their lives (Hollenbaugh and Ferris, 2013).

Given the hours users spend on Facebook consuming and posting, it is crucial to look past current theoretical approaches to social media as microcosms for social interaction and relationship maintenance (Good, 2012). It is worthy to examine "status updates [on social media platforms] as heterogeneous forms of communication" and why it is perhaps "no surprise that the affective dimensions of evaluation in storytelling come to the fore so prominently" (Page, 2012, p. 69, 73). Every status update, tweet, post, etc. has the potential to be a micro story in its own right. See below:

[26] My Blogger profile (the blog is now non-existent. I deleted all posts several years back in my attempt to start a new blog, but nothing ever came of it). But, this is a testament to my relationship with the internet and how nothing goes away on it.

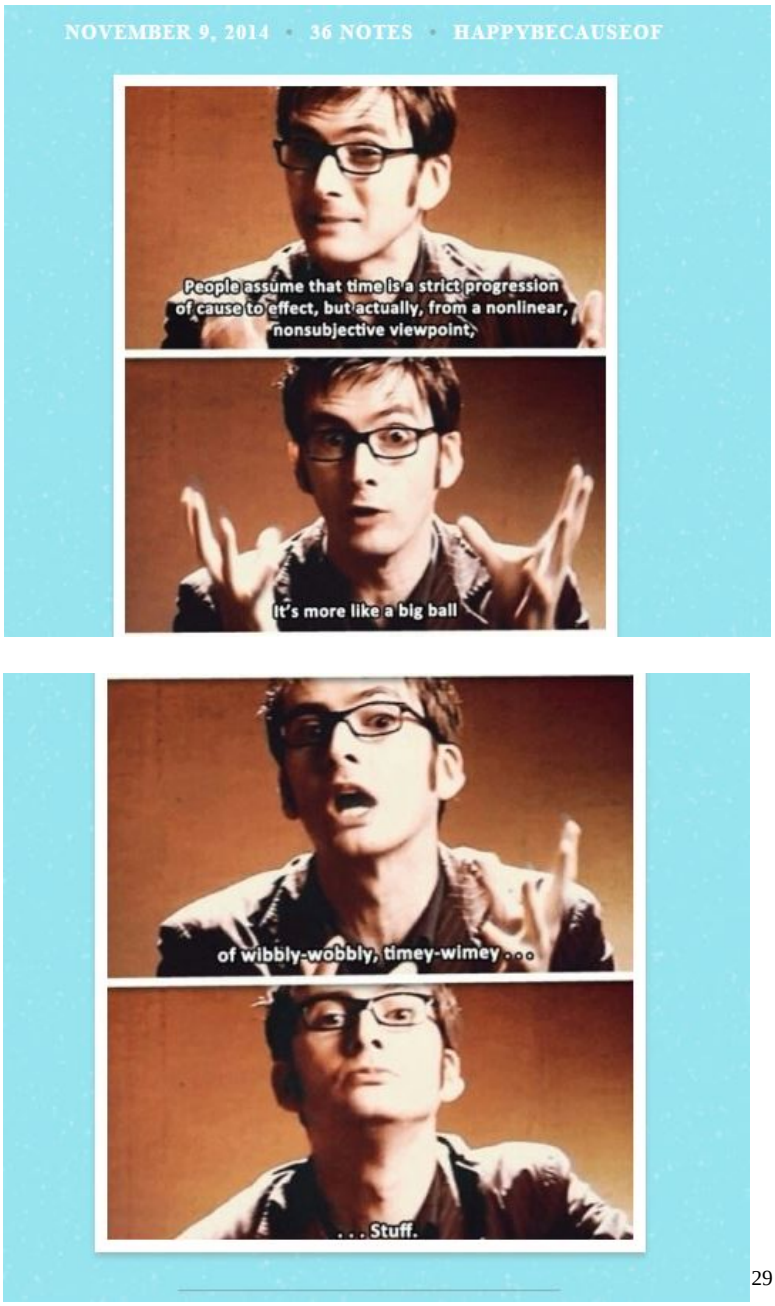
[27]

Content posted to social media essentially forms a story of the poster's life (Page, 2012; Good, 2012; Hollenbaugh and Ferris, 2013; Honeyford, 2013). However, there are conventions that must be adhered to when it comes to these micro stories (Good, 2012; Page, 2012; Bronstein, 2013). According to Page, individuals "may not wish to disclose the same levels of personal information" as to "avoid telling stories that result in face-damaging outcomes for teller and audience" (2012, p. 72, 91)[28].

By nature, social media are asynchronous, and they are fragmentary and rarely linear (Page, 2012). These "hypertexts," as Paul Arthur refers to them as, "[call] into question: one, fixed sequence, two, definite beginning and ending, three, a story's certain definite magnitude, and four, the conception of unity or wholeness associated with all these other concepts" (2008, p. 112). See the below image:

[27] I'm known to be a grumpy little sprite without my daily cup of coffee. At least my Facebook friends find it funny.

[28] Face-damaging consequences for the audience? This is worth its own study for another time.



Page expands this, saying "the kinds of narratives found [online] contrast with canonical narrative in terms of the linearity, embeddedness [*sic*], tellability [*sic*], and tellership [*sic*], all of which are reworked by the…practices of constructing intimacy, authenticity,

[29] Moffat, S. (Writer), & Macdonald, H. (Director). (2007). Blink [Television series episode]. In R. T. Davies (Producer), *Doctor Who*. London, UK: British Broadcasting Company.
Who doesn't love the Doctor? This is quite possibly the best explanation for the non-linear nature of social media and narrative that I've ever stumbled across. I reblogged (blogged it from someone else's blog) it to my Tumblr once upon a time just for my sheer love of all things *Doctor Who*, but it seems relevant here.

and consumable identity" (2012, p. 99). Essentially, the context of micro stories on social media are shaped by the context in which they are situated in, and these contexts are disjointed (Good, 2012; Page, 2012).

Tamboukou argues that "narration is a process of responding to the world and then connecting with it" (2010, p. 171). This is what is seen on social media today, as individuals share aspects of their own lives and opinions in order to fit in with the forthcoming conversations online around them (Good, 2012; Page, 2012; Bronstein, 2013; Hollenbaugh and Ferris, 2013). In regards to this notion, Page (2012) postulates:

> If all identities are discursively constructed they need not be stable or unified, but will always be in flux and susceptible to change. The small stories in Facebook updates are selective versions of the narrator's experience and are often idealized rather than reporting a comprehensive sort of all (perhaps less creditable [*sic*]) life events. (p. 163)

Social media may be tools for identity formation and solidification, but tools are not exempt from being governed by social and cultural norms. These stories, norms, and constructs fill culture more than ever before, because in postmodernism, the narratives we see today "are less abstract, less scientific, and more politically engaged. They begin by declaring that narrative is everywhere, that it is a mode of thinking and being, and that it is not confined to literature" (Currie, 2011, p. 10). With social media, narratives are indeed everywhere, causing individuals to be in flux and surveying themselves all the time (Cavarero, 2000; Currie, 2011; Good, 2012; Page, 2012).

***

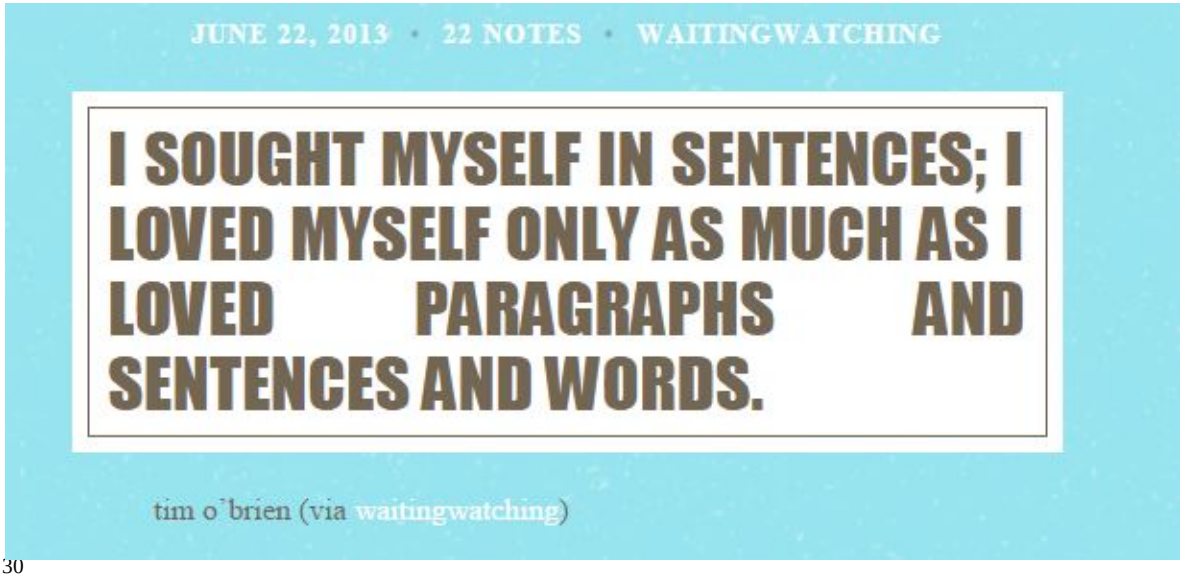
My relationship with my parents has always been defined by one thing, wrapped up in two narratives: twenty-five years ago, they nearly aborted me.

I've been told that my father came home after another two-day drug bender, still high as a kite, and told my mother to get rid of me. Those in my father's corner do not dispute the bender, but say my mother threatened to abort me if he didn't finally try to get clean and sober.

For the next twelve and twenty-three years respectively, the guilt would eat them alive, making me the world's most spoiled child in terms of material things. My brother, Child 1, was the band-aid, a temporary fix on the more permanent wound of a marriage that was doomed from the start. Child 2 was the nuisance, the dead weight. Once I learned this, I couldn't help but feel that if my mother had gone through with the abortion, it would have been easier for her to pick up Child 1 and leave my dad. But Child 2 was the extra mouth to feed, the anchor nobody wanted, latching them all to a life they didn't believe in. This was the way I saw it, and this was the way I felt it. This was my narrative. This became my truth.

It's easy to tell a false narrative. It's much harder to tell a true one. Lack of moral obligation to truth makes you free to say whatever you would like, but telling the truth frees your heart and your mind. The following pages are my attempts of placing critical distance between myself and my life events, as I try to make sense of what has never seemed to have rhyme or reason or order – my academic research questions included. Memories are tricky, and easily misleading. But according to Mark Nunes (2011), this kind of rhetoric "depends upon self-disclosure, an ethics of honest self-revelation, and a generalized sense of integrity of self" (p. 359). Furthermore, "scholars of life narrative have argued memory [is] always more than the storage of impressions of past events.

There are many processes of memory: retrieval…flashbacks and flashbulbs, dreams, traumatic memory, postmemory, and prosthetic memory" (Smith and Watson, 2013).



[30]

[30] Retrieved from http://ezinearticles.com/?Dear-Caleb-%28A-Letter-to-My-Son%29&id=4493334 and http://www.jhennenfent.tumblr.com . This quote seems an appropriate introduction into my method of life narrative research, a sect of autoethnography (a controversial term that I, and my professors, don't feel adequately represents the nature of the work done under this umbrella). But within this thesis I seek to understand myself in my own words and sentences.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

The method of research for this thesis is life narrative research, a mode of autoethnography, which Ellis and Bochner define as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (1999, p. 733). Autoethnographical texts appear in a variety of forms, including personal narratives, complete-member research, auto-observation, literary tales, lived experiences, experiential texts, indigenous ethnography, and enthographic memoir, just to name a few (Ellis and Bochner, 1999). I will use life narrative research to engage in a dialogue with my own social media profiles, which will be the texts for analysis. Poletti and Rak (2013) sum up Smith and Watson (2010) and present the following about life narrative research:

> Life narrative research is seen…as a more accommodating term than autobiography, because it can be about the representation of another person's life as well as one's own, and it can also describe nonwritten forms of self-representation, which are found in new media, including digital media. To this, Smith and Watson connect their sense of identity as a discursive construction of available models, which autobiographers (and others) use in their narratives…As they say, "the stuff of autobiographical storytelling, then, is drawn from multiple, disparate and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constructing these experiences." (Poletti and Rak, 2013; Smith and Watson qtd. in Poletti and Rak, 2010, p. 8)

Life narrative research, then, is an appropriate measure when combined with Goffman's dramaturgy theory as a way to examine multiple identities and their performances.

[31]

This thesis will examine my own relationship with the internet, social media, and Web 2.0 technologies through the lens of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis in order to assess the answers to my questions. Using my relationship with my father, who first introduced me to the internet and worked in the industry as an interweaving strand, I will use the approach of personal narrative to ground the theoretical in the personal to own my experiences and still contribute to social media scholarship (Kirtley, 2012).

In addition to being based in life narrative research and dramaturgical analysis, this thesis is also theoretically grounded in feminist scholarship. Feminism makes the personal, political, and the familiar strange and additionally posits that every day, ordinary experience can be grounds for extraordinary research (Acker, 2000; Olesen, 1994). In feminist research, one must go beyond the surface level to find out why something that appears regular has a powerful narrative behind it. In her work, Susan McDonald (2003) cites Shulamit Reinharz, who says "in feminist research, learning must occur on three levels: the person, the problem, and the method" (McDonald, 2003, p. 1; Reinharz qtd. in McDonald, 1992, p. 94). This is a summary of what I have previously stated that will be interwoven through the course of this thesis: the person (myself), the problem (how do we present ourselves on social media versus physical reality), and the method (telling stories to explain why we tell stories).

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[31] Ellis, C. and Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds.) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Retrieved from twitter.com/jesshennenfent
The first time I read this quote in Ellis and Bochner's article was in my qualitative methods course during my first year as a master's student at the University of Georgia. This quote jumped out to me as important to research and myself even then because of its distinction between life and stories about life.

Page argues for this approach when she recommends that for social media research, one "must go beyond a surface level interpretation of the discursive text alone and, where possible, take into account the ways in which identity work online connects with the identities that are performed in offline extrasituational [*sic*] and behavioral contexts" (2012, p. 18). This supports Ellis and Bochner's point that "autoethnography has become the term of choice in describing studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural" (p. 740). Furthermore, the life narrative approach allows for me to take on the dual roles of academic and individual to delve deeply into what's at stake in daily life (Ellis and Bochner, 1999). A dual role seems appropriate when examining a dual stage (front stage and backstage). Furthermore, life narrative research, and subsequently autoethnography, tell "a personal tale of what went on in the backstage of doing research" (Ellis and Bochner, 1999, p. 741). Thus, there are several dualities at stake in my work: the front stage and backstage of social media, and the front stage and backstage of academic work.

Additionally, this thesis is a dual approach to autoethnography, because it will merge traditional approaches to autoethnography with the expanding field of digital ethnography. Underberg and Zorn define digital ethnography as:

> A method for representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story. These projects use the expressive and procedural potential of computer-based storytelling to enable audiences to go beyond absorbing facts about another culture to entering into the experience of that culture. (2013, p. 10)

Sava argues that that by "using the internet as a platform, the ethnographer can insert text, images, documents, audio files and other types of data within a unique environment and link them to one another in a flexible way" (2011, p. 55). Given the nature of the

medium, Olesen (2009) proposes that this critical approach may be the only way to adequately keep up with the changing nature of technology. Differences in digital ethnography from that of traditional ethnography include:

> The electronic text's capacity for flexibility, interactivity, creating multiple paths and voices, simulating a sense of space, and enabling readers to act like authors. In place of linear and single-authored texts delivered in a static medium, digital media creates [*sic*] a spatially inflected nonlinear presentation that brings together disparate voices and empowers audiences to affect their encounters with texts" (Underberg and Zorn, 2013, p. 11-12).

The fluidity of social media is apropos for the fluidity of autoethnography, since "memory does not work in a linear way, nor does life, for that matter" (Ellis and Bochner, 1999).

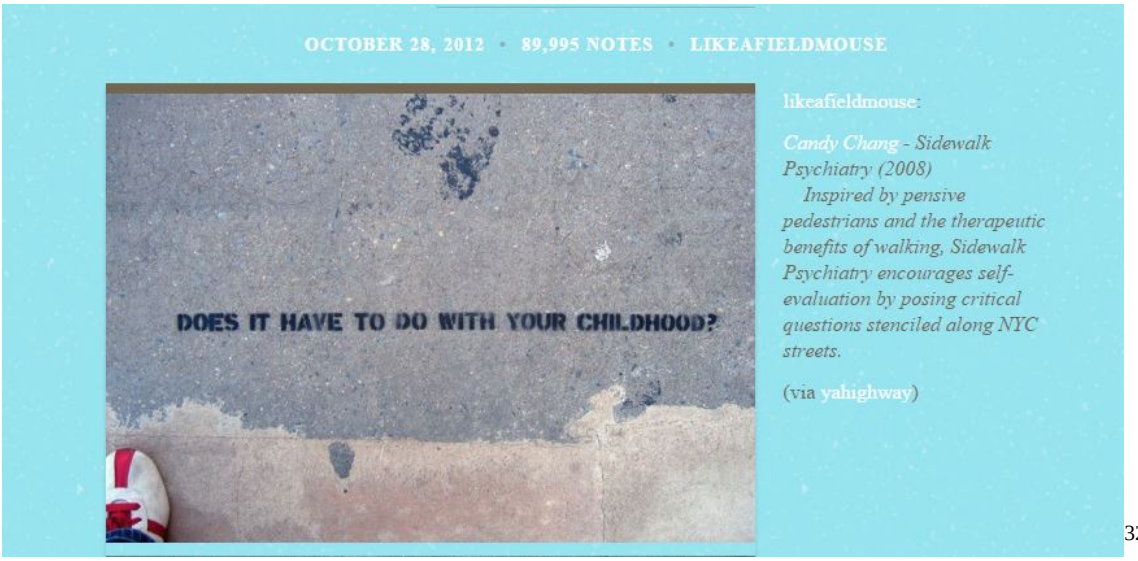
To merge social media and autoethnography, this thesis incorporates screenshots from my own social media profiles to present my life on the front stage. I then will go backstage and explain what was going on in my personal life at that time and what led me to post what I did. I use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, LiveJournal, and MySpace screenshots to engage in a dialogue of the public and private. These screenshots are useful in creating a multimodal text, which "can create a different system of signification, one that affords 'a new way' of making meaning that is important for diverse youth' (Honeyford, 2013; Hull and Nelson qtd. in Honeyford, 2005). LiveJournal was the earliest platform I was able to recover through internet searches for my old profiles, and it is from 2004. To describe my relationship with the internet and computers prior to 2004, I rely heavily on memory narratives to tell the story. I have elected to use these platforms since they are some of the most widely used ones that were essential in creating today's social media culture. Future studies could benefit from examining

smaller or less widely known platforms to compare and contrast how narratives are told on those.

But for this study, I intend to follow the process for autoethnography laid out by Ellis and Bochner (1999): First, I will start with my personal life, examining all physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. This is what Ellis and Bochner (1999) refer to as "systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall". This allows the individual to understand the past experience. Then, the experience is written like a story, all in the attempt to understand a way of life (Ellis and Bochner, 1999). This is apt in conjunction with using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis as a starting theory, since autoethnography examines what happens in the backstage of the researcher's life.

This is the crux of my life narrative research. There is still a real person offline, creating the online content. That person is just as worthy of study. Why do we post what we do? Why do we choose to present ourselves in those ways?

Once our content is posted, we may be alone physically, with our privacy apparently intact. However, we tune back into the public faster than ever since we enfold the public almost unthinkingly as our smartphones and laptops extend out like fingers. The private may not be completely private for long. When I sit at home, on my computer, I seemingly am in the private, but as soon as I log on to Facebook or Twitter, it may appear that I am in the private but have actually returned to the public sphere.



[32]

[32] Does it have to do with your childhood? (Citation in image). Oh, does it have to do with my childhood? Absolutely. This question is frequently asked by therapists and laughed off as Freudian in some circles. I reblogged this initially on Tumblr because it seemed like a relevant question, one that I had been asked many a time by my own slew of therapists. I had a complex childhood, one that wasn't always happy. But even for those with consistently happy childhoods, the question remains the same. Childhood is the first narrative that offers sense and insight into who we are. And for the purpose of examining my own life, and examining McMillan and Morrison's (2006) proposition that I grew up with the internet, we must ask: did it have to do with my childhood?

CHAPTER 3

THE EARLY YEARS

1994-2003

"College students are an ideal study group for life histories of interactive media. They are young adults whose memory of childhood and teenage media use is relatively fresh but who are mature enough to have started building lifetime patterns of media use."

(McMillan and Morrison, 2006, p. 76)

My dad worked in computers; we were a family always on the cutting edge of technology. It was 1994 when one of those machines first showed up in our house, the newest and biggest one on Devon Leigh Walk, the cul-de-sac of cookie cutter houses in White Picket Fence Suburbia (we had the biggest backyard in the neighborhood, too. Dad wanted it that way). All of my friends were jealous – of the backyard, and then the computer. Dad promised me a swing set and something called the internet.

Computers weren't foreign to our house, but they were as a tool of amusement for me and my big brother (three years my senior). My mom was a medical transcriptionist who worked from home so my brother and I didn't get shipped off to daycare, and my dad was a software engineer. By virtue of their trades, we were always the tech-savviest family in our White Picket Fence Suburban neighborhood.

That night my dad brought that clay-white machine home (*it was bigger than me!)* and set it up in our playroom, where it would watch over our antiquated Barbies and Legos like a sentry, I hopped around him in circles.

"For me? For me, Daddy? What do I do with it?"

"For you and your brother," he corrected. *"And don't go bragging about this to your friends."*

My father was always a giant among men, literally and figuratively. He lumbered tall and proud at six feet, six inches tall, with broad shoulders and a close-trimmed goatee. When I was older, one of his favorite stories to tell in order to earn cool capital with my friends was that he used to be a bouncer, and one time, a man tried to knife him while my dad was sitting in his stool by the door. All my dad had to do was stand up, and the assailant cowered away in fear. But his stature was midget-like compared to his intellectual prowess. He was a master of math and science and was fluent in every computer language known to mankind. He wrote computer code for fun and created his own virtual reality computer games. My mom was always running around the house, picking up after his strewn-around books on the Linux kernel and PERL.

I was always a daddy's girl, and my favorite activity to do with my father happened every Saturday morning. We would go to the Gwinnett County Public Library, White Picket Fence Suburbia branch, and check out oodles and oodles of books – so many books that we'd have to bring two or three tote bags just to lug them all home. And when we would finally return home from our bookscapade, we'd hole up upstairs in the computer's room on oversized, white fringed pillows and have "reading club," for hours

and hours. My father loved learning. It made sense that he would be the one to bring the computer home then, to set it up, and be the gatekeeper for my digital world.

For many, these experiences of getting a computer and learning to use it (as well as the internet and other related digital technologies) can be seen as a coming of age ritual (McMillan and Morrison, 2006). At four years old, that's exactly what it was. I felt as if I was being granted a particular access to growing up, especially because my older brother and I were equals in terms of being able to use it. Also, by being the first on my cul-de-sac to have it, I felt ahead of the curve.

Additionally, in terms of this technological rite of passage, McMillan and Morrison (2006) found that "fathers [are] presented as enablers while mothers [are] viewed as reticent" (p. 80). Facer, Sutherland, Furlong, & Furlong (2001) support this idea upon discovering the facilitation of computer education for children was often gendered, with fathers being the primary teachers. My father was always our family's computer catalyst. He brought me home all of my computer games, from Barbie ones to Roger Rabbit reading comprehension ones[33], to my personal favorite, Storybook Weaver[34]. My mother was not necessarily taciturn, since she herself worked with computers, but she did not deviate much from her prescribed work for many years.

She never sat with me or my brother when we wanted to show off our skills at the reading comprehension games or the latest story I had made in Storybook Weaver. My

[33] As Facer et. al (2001) suggest, "the incorporation of computer technology into the home is therefore intended to construct the domestic environment as a new site for education, in which children are learning both from computers and learning 'from' computers in support of formal educational objectives" (p. 206). Thus, my Roger Rabbit reading game, and others of the like I played, were all originally education-focused. They weren't just games – I was expected to learning something as well. Such is the introduction to computers for a four year old.

[34] A children's game in which you can write and illustrate your own stories with preset scenes, people, things, etc. I played this one much more frequently than any of the others, and I attribute my contemporary love of writing in part to this game.

dad, however, was another story. For about two years after we got the computer I remember him sitting next to me, asking about the worlds I was creating, as my mind expanded under the weight of infinite possibilities. These differences are worth noting here because "the landscape of the home environment may facilitate specific types of [computer] use" (Facer et. al, 2001, p. 205). In my earliest childhood memories, this landscape was one that prompted learning and imagination, and for a while, that was not cultivated in solitude, but amongst laughter with my father as we giggled over the silly things I would insert into my Storybook Weaver stories. Then, two things happened: First, the weight of the farce my parents were living became too much of a burden, and they began to pass the weight of the crumbling pieces on to me and my brother. Second – and I still don't know if this was a cause or an upshot of the first – my dad came through on his promise and we brought the internet into our home.

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"The World Wide Web made its debut in 1991, with easy-to-use browsers widely accessible a few years later. Search engines, portals, and e-commerce sites hit the scene in the late 1990s. By the turn of the millennium, the first social networks and blogs cropped up online. In 2001, Polaroid declared bankruptcy, just as sales of digital cameras started to take off. In 2006, Tower Records liquidated its stores; by 2008, iTunes had become the largest music retailer in the United States." (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008, p. 3)

This was 1990s internet culture. In 1996[35], after swinging on our much-promised swing set in the largest backyard in the neighborhood (my swing was green. My brother's was blue), mom sits us down in front of the computer and tells us we can have our own internet usernames. Username? USERNAME? A whole new identity just for six-year-old me? But she chooses for me – alas, too young to be independent just yet. As six year old being introduced to the concept of a username for the first time, according to Hassa (2012), my excitement was justified and understandable. Hassa (2012) further says that a username "acts as an indicator of linguistic innovation and social norms…[and] unlike nicknames, which are usually chosen by one individual, internet usernames are deliberately chosen" (p. 202).

JLH0621. I am a condensed version of my name and my birthday, fragments of who I really am. Today, this all strikes me as incredibly Vonnegut-like. But back then, mom says we have to go with that to be practical, and besides, everything else is probably taken. My username was my first axiom of internet culture, my first entrance into the molding, changing, and condensing of my identity to fit digital norms. But back then, in any case, the first time I watch that Little Yellow Man[36] run across the screen, towards a graphic icon of a world while a high-pitched dial tone drones on in the background (*you've got mail!*), I am mesmerized. Six-year-old me gets to be a part of the world.

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[35] 1996 was a big year in terms of developments. Most notably, that year is defined, particularly in Georgia, by the year Atlanta hosted the Olympic Games. At time of writing, you would hardly be able to tell such festivities once occurred in the Peach State, and nobody really thinks about why Centennial Olympic Park is named as such. They're even in the process of tearing down one of the last remaining game sites, Turner Field, as Atlanta's MLB team negotiates a move to neighboring (and much more upscale) Cobb County.

Also, in 1996, in his State of the Union address, then-U.S. President Bill Clinton announced that "every classroom in America must be connected with the information superhighway" (Clinton, 1996). Such was the official, declarative beginning of internet supremacy in the United States.

[36] The Little Yellow Man was iconic in early internet imagery. First appearing in 1997, he was inspired by 1940s and 50s postwar imagery with a round head and angular legs. It was one of the earliest icons to be anthropomorphized by brands.

I want to bring the computer to show and tell. My teacher, Miss. Monroe, would love it. But mom says no. *The computer is too big to move*, she says. And I accept that. After all, the whole world is in there.

Ching and Ching (2012) present the following case for the digital literacy narrative, in terms of how we have come to understand our relationships with technology:

> As Mary Soliday (1994) puts it, "literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds"…in other words, they are used to help students consider what Soliday called "the distance between an early and a present self to consider the role of technology in their literate histories." (p. 207, Soliday qtd. in Ching and Ching, 1994).

The computer, and subsequently the internet, were integral parts of my childhood, almost like another friend I could play with. By retroactively examining this relationship after putting some distance between myself and the memories, I come to see just how intertwined the computer was in my child rearing and how it was present at some of the most pivotal moments of my childhood. For instance, if you ask me what happened in 1996, I'll tell you even today it was the year the Olympics came to Atlanta and the year we got the internet in my house. These two things might not be inextricably linked, but they stand out because they are noteworthy and definitive memories of my childhood that set the stage for how I would later come to understand things in my world (the internet in terms of everyday interaction, the Olympics for every four years when we Georgians can turn on the TV and say, *hey, remember when that was here?*).

As a child, and passing between worlds (the computer and physical reality), I had friends everywhere. Even with the time constraints my parents imposed (*no more than thirty minutes at a time with an hour long break in between so you don't ruin your eyes*), the transition between the two worlds was freeing. I could venture out into the "real

world" without ever leaving White Picket Fence Suburbia. At that time in my life, I didn't see any consequences. I wasn't yet bothered by impositions of pretending to be someone else on the internet or how I portrayed myself. I only saw the benefits then – the benefits of exploring Soliday's (1994) new worlds.

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It's 1998. My friends all begin to get computers in their own houses. This was typical, because by this particular year, "most North American households [owned] at least one computer, and over 40 million people [were] now on-line, that is, connected to the internet, able to send and receive electronic mail (email) and able to read and post messages in newsgroups" (McKenna and Bargh, 1998, p. 681). Computer and internet use were both on the rise, but at that time, I was more concerned by the fact my friends were getting cooler internet usernames than mine. My best friend, Mary, gets to be BugMagic2[37]. I want a new one, but mom refuses. I ask, and she shoos me away. She's always aggravated lately. All I know is Dad hasn't been home in days. Everybody always tells me not to worry, that it's no big deal, that he's just on a business trip. He's always on business trips[38]. This is typical in his field. He works in technology, doing something with phones you can take out of the house. I'm not sure that's even possible.

[37] If I remember correctly, chosen for her love of Volkswagen beetles. Now, I can't help but chuckle, for in those early days of the internet, was there really just "BugMagic"?

[38] Right after I turned five, he came home from a business trip in Seoul, South Korea. He brought me home a beautiful doll he had bought me at a mall when the client had taken him out for lunch. The next day, that same mall, the Sampoong Department Store, collapsed in one of the worst structural failures in history.

Halloween, 1998. I want to get on the internet and take my NeoPet[39] trick or treating, but I'm not allowed unsupervised internet time – something typical, according to Facer et. al (2001). Mom and Dad have been holed up in their room all morning, fighting, but that's okay. They always fight. It's just another normal morning in the Hennenfent house.

Dad moves out that night[40].

1998 drags on. Divorce wasn't as acceptable back then as it is now in 2015. Today, most of my high school friends who got married straight off the coattails of graduation were divorced within the year, almost like they planned it that way. But that's now, and this was then, so I was the weird kid with the only divorced parents in the third grade.

Mom wrote a note on the same yellow notepad paper she always wrote our grocery lists on. *Give this to your teacher,* she instructed, as she helped me into my backpack straps and sent me up the cul-de-sac to the bus stop. She did it so matter-of-factly, like it was just another item on her itemized grocery list. *Milk. Eggs. Jiffy peanut butter. Oreo O's. Note for Jess's teacher saying her parents are getting a divorce.*

And I handed that yellow piece of paper to my teacher, a kind old woman with red frizzy hair[41]. As she read it, I slunk to my desk, bowed my head, and began my D.O.L[42] exercises that I had to do before the first bell rang for morning announcements. It was the first time in my life I remember wishing to be invisible, and I tried to achieve

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[39] In case you're not familiar, NeoPets was a virtual pet website where you take care of and buy things for your pet with virtual currency. I distinctly remember the leak soup I often bought to feed my pet.

[40] Years later, I would learn mom found the moving truck receipt in a pair of dad's jeans while she was getting them ready to wash. Halloween was a Saturday, and he was intending to move out that Monday while my brother and I were at school, and never look back.

[41] Who, now that I come to think of it, looked strangely like Ms. Frizzle from *The Magic School Bus.* Just older.

[42] Daily Oral Language exercises – analogies, finishing sentences, vocabulary, etc.

such status by keeping my mouth shut and withdrawing into myself. I didn't want to be seen as the kid marred by an imperfect family life. I didn't want to be the odd one out.

Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) argue that "when in the front stage, an actor is conscious of being observed by an audience and will perform to those watching by observing certain rules and social conventions, as failing to do so means losing face and failing to project the image/persona they wish to create" (p. 101). In addition to wanting to be invisible, that day was the first time in my life I remember feeling like my whole life was on display, but the audience had snuck into the theater and hadn't paid for their tickets. I was ashamed, naked, and didn't want anyone to see. My parents' faults had tumbled downhill on to me, and now it was my cross to bear, my scarlet letter that socially marked me.

My teacher came over and put her hand on my arm.

I'm sorry about your parents, she said. *It's not your fault*.

Everybody kept saying that, but that didn't make it any better.

It's computer lab day today, she continued. *We're going to get to play Oregon Trail*[43]. *I know how much that's your favorite*.

***

1999. My weekends are split, and nothing's the same anymore. Three weekends a month with mom; one weekend with dad, who now lives thirty minutes away. I don't like going there – he just sticks me in front of a computer with my Barbie Detective games and says he'll be back soon. I never see him again until the next morning.

[43] Ask any kid that went to a public elementary school in the 1990s. Oregon Trail day in the computer lab was like Christmas, except when your oxen died fording the river or someone in your party died of dysentery.

One night, when I was staying there, I woke up, covered in vomit. I don't remember throwing up in my sleep, but alas, I had none the less. I gingerly walked into the living room of the apartment, where my dad's brother was – he had been living with my dad while he was temporarily in Atlanta seeking medical treatment. He stared at me, his mouth agape, and hurriedly put me in the bathtub to get the hardened, salmon colored slime off of me. I can't remember how old I was at the time, but I was at least nine, and I wailed as I sat alone in the scalding water. Snippets of his conversation with my brother carried into the room:

Son, call your father. I know you tried. Try him again. I don't care if he's not answering. I think the phone is fine. I just don't think he's answering. His daughter needs him.

He never came.

Mom doesn't really care anymore either. At her house, she sits me down in front of a computer, but at least I know where she goes. She closes the door to her room, but I can still hear her cry.

According to Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013), "both the mask worn and the hidden person behind it are facets of the same individual" (p. 102). For my mom, that meant, post divorce, being the most active PTA member, the most supportive room parent who threw the coolest classroom parties, yet being unable to forget the torture of her failed marriage[44]. She now had the stress of raising a now nine year old and twelve year old by herself. For me, it meant being the quiet, shy little girl in the classroom who

[44] It was when I was nine I found the pill bottle under her sink when I was snooping in her bathroom (I was always a nosy little kid, and later in my life, I would really come to wish I hadn't been). I didn't know what Lithium was at the time, but eventually, I could piece the puzzle together, and the picture made a whole lot of sense.

felt like everything was her fault, with the isolation screaming white noise in her ears almost constantly. Quiet came, however, in the other facet of my identity – when I was finally, actually alone, not surrounded by classmates or mom or my brother – I could sit in front of the computer and connect to a world far beyond White Picket Fence Suburbia. Facer et. al (2001) suggest that in this isolation "young people construct their own uses for the computer" (p. 201). It was in this innovation that I found peace with Bullingham and Vasconcelos's (2013) conflicting facets of my identity. Furthermore, Valentine and Holloway (2002) expand this point when they suggest the following:

> On-line activities can also help to produce "private" space in the off-line world. Children commonly have little privacy from parents or sibling within the spatial constraints of the average family home. By claiming they need peace and quiet to use the PC for schoolwork (although often they are using it to play games, surf the internet for fun, or e-mail friends) some children can appropriate a room at home for themselves. (p. 316)

The only difference for me was that I was seemingly always alone in the confines of my own home. And when I got the computer, it wasn't to find solitude – it was to find company, to find distractions, to find peace.

As I look back on these moments in hindsight, my reflectivity is supported by Susan Kirtley (2012) and her ideas that technology holds powerful memoir sentiments for making sense of life. She positions that this introspection allows individuals to "fully immerse themselves in rendering their past relationships with technologies before considering how that past affects their present" (2012, p. 193). Technology was omnipresent in my childhood. Almost every early, pivotal memory has a mention or use of a computer or the internet within it. As I come to understand that I have always relied on technology for myriad purposes, chief among them in my early days of escaping, negotiating, and amusement, I realize these early experiences I had with computers came

to form the foundations of the relationships I would have with them later in life. I would always come to rely on computers and the internet, simply because they had always been there.

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Y2K. Mom puts the computer in the basement on New Year's Eve, "just in case." Me, I just want to make sure that my Amazing Ally doll doesn't stop talking to me.

We survive when the clocks strike midnight.

Y2K phobia was bolstered by the mass media. Many feared the world would actually end, because no one knew if computers would have the capabilities to process transitioning from 1999 to 2000. Allen (2012) suggests the following: "The 1990s saw the discursive production of the internet audience, that vital commodity within the media, and the coming to dominance of the broadcast model to make sense of the internet" (p. 268). It was easy for the media to prey on the unfamiliarity of the internet. Nobody knew *what* exactly it was capable of. However, the difference of my reaction and my mother's was partially maturity – but it was also generational.

Much has been written about the Digital Native versus the Digital Immigrant. According to Corrin, Bennett, and Lockyer (2010), "the term 'digital native' was popularised [*sic*] by Prensky (2001) who claimed that technology had created a discontinuity, resulting in a radical change in the characteristics of the new generation of students entering [the] universities" (p. 643). While occasionally disputed, research consistently agrees that one, the generation who is technologically savvy is the millennial generation, and two, they are (we are), in fact much more apt and flexible towards technology. Even though my mother (and even my father) had worked in computers since

they were available for mainstream purchase and consumption, they were still digital immigrants[45], because they had not grown up with them. Palfrey and Gasser (2008) suggest:

> Most notable, however, is the way the digital era has transformed how people live their lives and relate to one another and the world around them. Some older people were there at the start and these 'Digital Settlers' – though not native to the digital environment, because they grew up in an analog-only world – have helped to shape its contours…Those who were born digital don't remember a world in which letters were…handwritten…The changing nature of human relationships is second nature to some, and learned behavior to others." (p. 3-4)

By this point in my childhood – and I was nearing almost ten years old – technology and I were inseparable, and it wasn't just the case for me. My brother might as well have had his Nintendo Gameboy glued to his hand. One of my favorite activities was to sit in his room with him and watch him play Super Mario Brothers on his N64 gaming system. My friends and I would write stories in nascent versions of Microsoft Word, print them out, and share them with each other. We were the digital natives, and the world was our oyster. For our parents, the digital world was changing how they communicated, interacted, and took in new information. For me and my friends, it was the only thing we had ever known. It wasn't the World Wide Web. It was the Web of the Whole Wide World.

***

2001. Hull Middle School brings with it AOL Instant Messenger. AIM is what all the cool kids use to talk to each other after the final school bell rings. I race through my pre-Algebra homework and gerund exercises to talk to my friends (or type to them, rather). We gossip as much as eleven year olds can. Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter

[45] Digital immigrants are defined as "those who were not born into the digital world and who, it is claimed, do not think learning and technology can be 'fun' and will ever be able to master the use of technology to support engaging education" (Corrin, Bennett, and Lockyer, 2010, p. 644)

(2005) call this typical of an adolescent my age, since girls have been found to have stronger desires for instant messaging and chat rooms – but, this is due, in part, to the fact "it is usually females who first embraced such [communication] technologies" (p. 386).

In the midst of talking (typing), sometimes the internet connection drops and I have to send that Little Yellow Man running towards the world again and again – a proverbial moving Atlas. He must get so tired.

Across the house, from the kitchen, mom sneezes.

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June 12, 2003. I'm on AIM again, but this time, not for any chatty, gendered adolescent talks. *My mom died* I type. No one is incredibly surprised. The chemo hadn't worked. The bone marrow transplant hadn't worked. We'd known that forever. What started out as a cold she couldn't shake had revealed what was really happening inside of her. The cancer had been eating her away until she was just skin and bones and no eyelashes – to this day, that's what really bothers me about the portrayal of cancer patients on TV. They always have their eyelashes.

The funeral is tomorrow I type. We do that in Judaism[46]. We bury our dead as soon as possible. Out of sight, out of mind (death is highly contagious).

Mom's death marked a turning point in my life, a turning point that allowed me to break my life up into "before mom's death" and "after mom's death." After mom's death happened quickly, staunchly, and without much say from me or my brother. Legally, I was now being shipped off to live with a man I barely knew, who had been hiding away

[46] Earlier, I mentioned Christmas presents. My mom was Jewish; my dad, Catholic. They were pretty areligious but all about the culture, so we celebrated Christmas and Hanukkah in our house.

at a job in New York City following the dotcom crash[47]. Finally, like the prodigal son, he had returned to hesitantly claim the children he didn't know what to do with. The man who used to have "reading club" with me seemed long gone. Those memories were bittersweet, and hazy, like the fragmentary pieces of a dream. No matter how much you think about it, you're constantly a dog chasing cars. There is no catching the past.

As I still grapple with these life events and where technology was at that time, it is worth noting what Susan Kirtley (2012) proposes:

> Through the process of composing [digital literacy] narratives, students claim ownership of their experiences, making connections and coming to new understandings of their histories…the process of writing one's personal history with writing and technology over time allows extended opportunities for the students to make their experiences 'strange,' achieving a critical distance that allows them to analyze their experiences with additional objectivity and understanding." (p. 194)

Almost twelve years later, at the time of this writing, there has been significant critical distance[48] between myself and these events. Because no early evidence remains in a place where I could retrieve it for this section of my thesis, I have had to rely solely on memory and the construction of my own digital literacy narrative to tell the story of my interweaving relationships with my family and technology. On a personal note, I have reached a point of peace with these events. I have found solace and understanding with the fact that death is a part of life – though what perplexed me for longer was the life left behind after death, the memories of a woman I never did really know.

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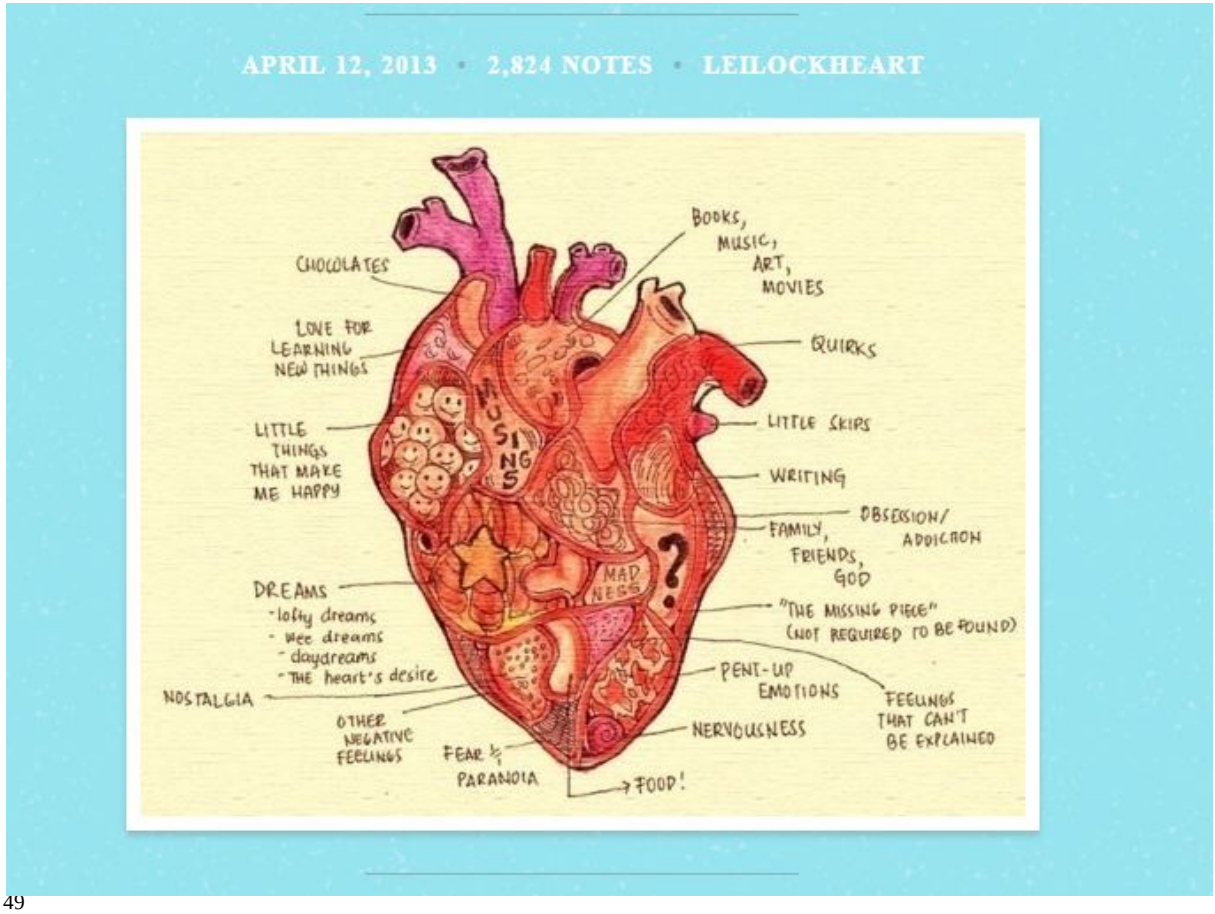
[47] I'm not good with the specifics of economics (I barely passed it in undergrad with a C+) but basically, the internet bubble got too big and well, burst. Internet companies were forced to liquidate their assets after a loss of capitol, and Cisco, the company that would one day hire my dad and worship the ground he walked on, would see an 86% decrease in the value of their stock (see AMZN stock price chart, Yahoo Finance). The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center did nothing to help that stock market at this time either (not to make trite or light of a devastating, disastrous situation).

[48] And lots of therapy.

There are no more swings, but the computer remains. We leave the house in White Picket Fence Suburbia.



[49]

[49] What is one's heart made up of? This always seemed like an accurate representation to me, so I reblogged it to my Tumblr account. It made sense to me that musings, obsession, and madness would be so close, because I've been blessed by, and struggled with, all three. My thoughts are wonderful, and I love and am thankful for my incredible mind. But that incredible mind has also driven me quite mad on more than one occasion. It seemed okay to put this heart out in the open where everyone could see it. After all, there are only generalities on there. No specifics allowed.

CHAPTER 4

MYSPACE

2004-2005

"The development of new narrative forms continues to expand as fast as technological innovation, and faster than can be documented by scholars and reviewers…much of this online discourse is hybrid in nature, blending the written word with near-instantaneous communication, giving rise to what Ong (1982) described as secondary orality. In particular, narratives that emerge in Web 2.0 environments where personal expression is inextricably woven with dialogue…require paradigms of that account for both their interpersonal and expressive qualities." (Page and Thomas, 2011, p. 4-5)

Christmas, 2004. It's been a year and a half since my brother and I were carted off to live with our stranger of a father and his new wife, the woman he left our family for. I hole up in the upstairs office of their house, writing in my Xanga and talking to my friends on AIM. Christmas was another bust. Dad threw a remote across the living room and put his fist through the laundry room door. *I hate my life and everything about it* I type into my Xanga page. "Dead on Arrival" by Fall Out Boy wails from my Windows Media Player (Pete Wentz just understands me. Music just understands me).

Xanga is one of those new "new narrative forms" that Page and Thomas (2011) described. It was an early form of "Web 2.0" (the term would not be coined or adopted until the following year, in 2005), but could be defined as "the principal way to describe

emerging trends and new developments for the web…that allowed users to create content as well as read it" (Allen, 2012, p. 262). Previously, my internet use had consisted of talking to my friends in private outlets such as AIM (where only the participants of the chat could see), or by playing with already structured content on the Internet. Xanga, a site made up of weblogs, videoblogs, and audioblogs, was my first experimentation with creating my own content and self-presentation online.

On Xanga, I write about my days of the drama in the hallowed halls of Duluth High School and how hard my AP Human Geography texts were. I tell the tales of what matters to me in my fourteen year old life story. This was a fairly typical adolescent use of Web 2.0 narrative technologies. Smith and Watson (1996) suggest that a life story is "where one gives an account of oneself and also where one listens to the life stories of others…[it] is the stuff of the everyday" (Smith and Watson qtd. in Poletti, 1996, 2011, p. 74). Because my friends all had Xanga blogs, it is not just about me telling my life story. I read the updates that my friends post, and they read mine. We leave "eProps" on each other's posts and gossip about what we see on the pages of other kids at school (but we wouldn't dare follow them – that would be a violation of high school hierarchy, which carries over from school to home on the internet[50]).

What we communicate to each other can range from seemingly lighthearted topics to more serious ones (as serious as they could be for a group of privileged fourteen year olds), and we add images to our pages to enhance the story and our individuality (Page,

[50] Valkenburg et. al (2005) postulate that in adolescence, "dramatic developmental transitions take place, including…social expectations" (p. 385). I came to understand my "role" in high school; my "role" at home, and how the internet didn't necessarily superimpose a "role" on me. There were things I couldn't reveal for social conventions, sure, and I was coming to learn and understand these conventions through the freedom of a lack of a "role." Valkenburg et. al (2005) further suggest that "internet-based identity experiments will be more common in pre- and early adolescence than in middle and late adolescence" (p. 385). Simply because, as one grows older, they come to understand that identity work must take place within certain parameters of social conventions and norms.

2012). At that moment on Christmas, 2004 – not wanting to venture out of the office yet because there's still yelling going on downstairs – I change the layout of my Xanga. I opt for black with pink sparkly letters instead of the blue and white lettering that I had been using for a while. The Fall Out Boy track changes to "Saturday," reminding me that *I'm good to go, but I'm going nowhere fast*[51]. I forget about the empty handle of bourbon and plastic bag of cocaine downstairs.

I don't have a lot of history from this period of my life. In 2013, after a steady decline in users, Xanga shut down, having been outpaced by the likes of contemporary websites such as Word Press, Blogger, Tumblr, and LiveJournal (Knibbs, 2013). In 2014, Xanga purged their archives, essentially erasing the hordes of internet angst that used to exist for emo[52] young teenagers like myself. This remains a staunch fact of our ever-changing digital era, where the database has supplanted the archive, and computer code is just as impermanent as the fragility of paper. Even though the space on the internet is infinite, our digital afterlives and memories are not as stable as we think (Smith and Watson, 2013). Xanga's downfall demonstrates this.

There were ways to go about contacting Xanga's corporate offices to attempt to bring back my narratives from 2004, and I went through more of them for this thesis than I'd like to admit. Alas, they all fell short[53].

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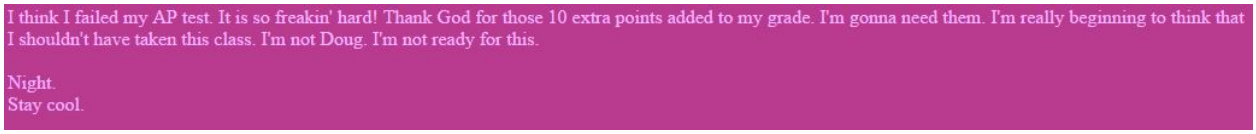
[51] Stump, P., & Wentz, P. (2003). Saturday. On *Take This to Your Grave* [digital download]. New York, NY: Fueled By Ramen Records.

[52]Contemporary slang term for "overly emotional."

[53] I emailed and called the folks over at Xanga, and they said because I had initially emailed them about preserving my pages when they began the purge, mine were already long gone, data deleted from the sands of internet time, never to be mined again. This is an interesting look at the impermanence of internet content – while it's out there, it can be accessed at any time. But in the blink of an eye (or click of a button), it could all be gone forever.

I do, however, possess this gem from one of Xanga's distant relatives, LiveJournal, and this account from 2004 is the first internet archive I can provide:


I think I failed my AP test. It is so freakin' hard! Thank God for those 10 extra points added to my grade. I'm gonna need them. I'm really beginning to think that I shouldn't have taken this class. I'm not Doug. I'm not ready for this.

Night.
Stay cool.

My LiveJournal, like Xanga, was filled with sentiments like this. I bemoaned the troubles of school and why the cute soccer player in my biology class didn't like me back. These words formed representations of my life, highlighting the "normal" teenager girl activities while completing disregarding the fact my brother and I were known all over school as *those* Hennenfents, the ones whose parents liked to get sloppy at the bar at the local Macaroni Grill. Valkenburg et. al (2005) suggest the following about why I focused on certain traits and neglected others:

> Both identity experiments and self-presentational strategies are most significant during adolescence. Adolescence is characterized by an increase of identities that vary as a function of the relational contexts in which the adolescent participates (Harter, 1999). A critical developmental task in adolescence is to transform these initially compartmentalized identities into an integrated self (Josselson, 1994; Marcia, 1993). (p. 384)

I did in fact come to learn myself through the texts of my Xanga and LiveJournal; I came to like myself. I focused more on the positive aspects of my identity instead of the shame, embarrassment, and anger that were directed towards my parents. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, as well as poststructuralist tenets of Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, Rob Cover suggests that "identity and subjectivity is an ongoing process of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being, whereby becoming is a sequence of acts that retroactively constitutes identity" (2014, p. 56). The posts I put out into the digital world became a coping mechanism for negotiating my realities. Just like in my childhood, where the computer was linked to inner peace and escape, LiveJournal

and Xanga provided me with outlets to be the person I really wanted to be. I could pretend I didn't have a stepmom who hated me and that my dad didn't have a…drinking problem[54]. I internalized these digital words and carried them with me into the physical world, bestowing upon myself the normal teenage girlhood I so desired to have. Because "changes in technology have always meant changes to the idea of the self," I was able to come to understand myself in a way a simple, private diary couldn't afford (Polletti and Rak, 2013, p. 20). Diaries are, by nature, wholly private. But the digital inner looks into my life –while not revealing everything, but enough to convey normal teenager girlhood and distaste for my parents[55] – provided a sense of community. I wasn't alone. People understood.

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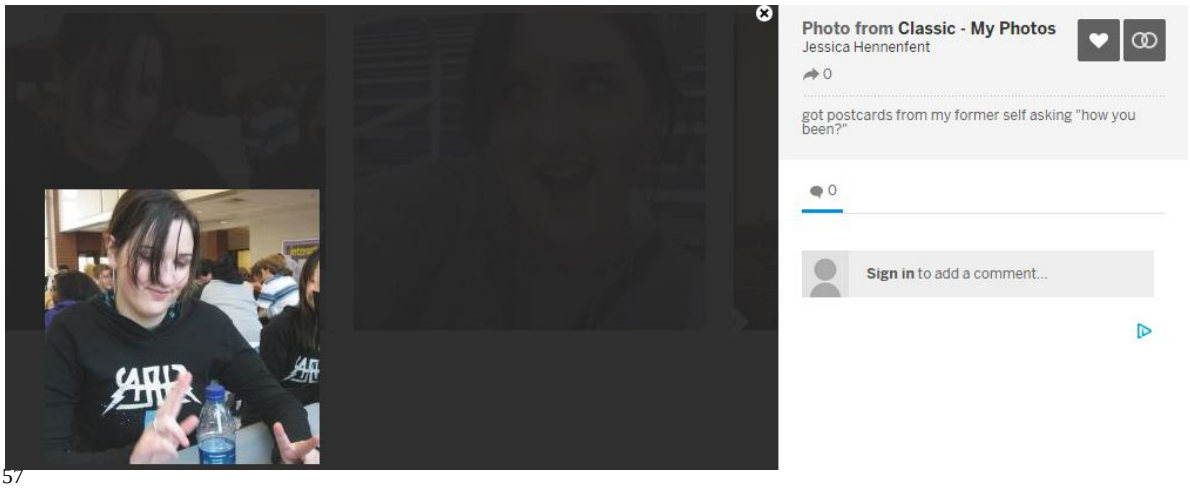
2005 brings MySpace. MySpace? MySpace? Finally, my space. My first friend, Tom, is automatically there, and thus begins the world of internet "friends." I set up my profile; I pick out a picture; I write notes; I set a song to play n the background ("She Doesn't Get It – The Format. *All the girls pose the same for pictures. All the boys have the same girls' hair*[56]).

[54] We didn't dare say these words out loud for years to come. From here on out, I use the word "alcoholic" and "addict" interchangeably.

[55] It's common for teenagers to be at odds with their parents. I just never revealed *why* I was necessarily at odds with mine.

[56] Fifteen year old me was obsessed with that song for the way is called out mainstream culture and everybody who dressed like a clone at my high school. In hindsight, those lyrics, when combined with my social network profile, were an eerie foreshadow to the internet culture that was to come.



[57]

Rob Cover (2014) further positions that "the act of selecting profile catagories, choosing tastes…[and] 'friending' others…is an encounter with a discursive and technological framework, one that for some users may stabilize elements of identity and for others may invoke wholly new concepts of identity categories, names, and norms (p. 63). At first glance at Cover's work, I'm not sure which side of the dichotomy I fell into in the MySpace years of my life, but when I look at it through Goffman, it becomes clearer. The things that these digital acts did for me was stabilize who I *wanted* to be, which were already very real aspects of my identity. I just highlighted those, elected to focus on them, and neglected the things (about my family) I wouldn't dare speak out loud. By the level of importance I placed on enhancing certain aspects of my identity, I invoked new concepts that, in turn, informed the old ones.

Valentine and Holloway (2002) suggest that "children's on-line and off-line worlds are not oppositional or unconnected but rather are mutually constituted. One cannot be understood without the other" (p. 316). This reciprocity sustained my juvenile

[57] I had no patience for mainstream culture and opted for wearing mostly black and jagged lightning bolt earrings, and donned droopy bangs that covered my eyes. Oh, to be young and rebellious again…
Stump, P., & Wentz, P. (2006). The Carpal Tunnel of Love. On *Infinity on High* [digital download]. New York, NY: Fueled By Ramen Records

self, helped build my self-confidence[58], and was an outlet for the family dynamics I didn't want to face. This notion constitutes what Bullingham and Vasoncelos (2013) call "blending identity," which is where "the offline self informs the creation of a new, online self, which then re-informs the offline self in further interaction" (p. 102). They expand this point when they say "there are reasons why users choose to adopt personas and particular masks – to conform and 'fit in'"(Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 110). By feeling like I fit in, I built my self-confidence. By building self-confidence, I internalized the more positive aspects of my identity and grew to like myself. By having an outlet to escape the hellacious household I was living in, I took the self-confidence I cultivated online and applied it to my own physical reality.

Upon its arrival, MySpace was the eye of a perfect storm. The timing of the millennial generation's psychological development, combined with the advances in technology, fueled the digital natives of the world to tell their stories and build identities online. In younger adolescence, on the days of the early internet, Xanga, and LiveJournal, I played with my identity more, as I didn't necessarily understand social norms of the front stage yet. But as I got older, my online identity became more unified across platforms and more lighthearted, focusing more on fun pictures and music. Valkenburg et. al (2005) support this idea and found in their research that "older teenagers use the internet more often to communicate with their existing personal network, whereas younger adolescents use it more frequently to communicate with strangers and play with their identities" (p. 396).

[58] Valkenburg et. al (2005) find that "compared to boys, girls experimented with their identity much more often to explore their selves and investigate how they appear to be in the eyes of others. Girls are more likely than boys to experience decline in self-esteem during adolescence….this decrease in self-esteem could encourage girls to use the internet more frequently than boys to explore and test certain aspects of their self" (p. 397).

In 2005, I thought MySpace was the greatest thing in the world. I was now fifteen, starting to come into my own as a person, and was forming a vague sense of who I wanted to portray on social networking versus what I wanted to hide. The days of complaining and griping about drama, gossip, cute boys, and family problems on the internet were over. Instead, I was in the middle of the internet heyday, trying to present myself as cool as possible through song choices and pictures. MySpace was King, and I thought nothing could supplant it.

Then my brother came home from his freshman year at the University of Georgia, bragging about a new social network all the kids in college were using. It had just opened up to high school students, but you needed an invitation to join. I begged him to invite me, because I wanted to be that cool kid on the forefront of the internet. Nobody in my high school was on this site. I would be the first.

So he sent the link to my email account (JLH0621), and I made a profile on this new site. Such was the beginning of the downfall for MySpace, as people would soon flock to this new site in waves.

The Face Book had arrived.

[59]

[59] "Facebook stalking" was a term coined to describe the act of looking at another's profile, sometimes to find desired information, sometimes just for fun. But can we really call it stalking when the information is willing put out there for anyone to see?

CHAPTER 5

FACEBOOK

2006-2014

"In asking every user, 'What's on your mind?' Facebook elicits personal disclosure. But how, exactly? The ways that compliant subjects answer the question demonstrate the way their practices are shaped by the coaxing technologies, both discursive and material, afforded by the moment of interaction between status update interface and human user. In constructing our life stories…we are guided not only by the often-implicit discursive precedent of the genre in which we write or speak but also by the material affordances and constraints of the objects through which we structure these stories of ourselves."

(Morrison, 2013, p. 117)

Even though I had a Facebook profile since 2005, the social networking site didn't explode into everyone's live until 2008 (the same year I enrolled as a freshman at the University of Georgia[60]). Between 2006 and 2008, Facebook accumulated more users, and, according to Allen, it was one of the Web 2.0 technologies that became "seamlessly integrated into everyday social and economic life to the point where it would no longer be distinct from that life" (2012, p. 266). This is most notably seen in how the name of the site changed as it grew. What was once The Face Book became Facebook. Without the article, it became a definitive entity. Without the space, everything began blending into one – life is Facebook, and Facebook is life.

[60] Go dawgs.

For me, however, it was a life in which things became harder to hide.

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It started out easy enough because the unwritten rules of disclosure on Facebook seemed straightforward: keep it light. Talk about your friends, family, school, and parties – but only the good stuff. After all, social media are really just all about "modifying the content…in order to reduce levels of personal exposure" (Page, 2012, p. 72).

It was easy to adhere to the norms at first. By this point in my life, my father was my only living biological parent, and talking about our relationship on social media just seemed normal. By the time I wrote this particular post in 2010, I was nineteen, and a sophomore in college. The earlier adolescent, MySpace days of publicly bemoaning my relationship with my parents was over. Even though I never wrote in my Xanga, LiveJournal, or MySpace about the drinking and drug problems that were really going on at home, I could pretend, like most teenagers, to dislike my parents simply because they didn't understand what it was like to be young or thought they were out to ruin my life. It was easy to pass as something I wasn't.

But by the time Facebook came around, and I was nineteen, I was at that age where kids began to reconcile with their parents and understand them as fun humans[61].

[61] **Gasp** A novel concept for college students; a foreign one to teenagers.

My Facebook newsfeed was littered with stories of girls in my dorm getting their nails done with their moms when they went home for the weekends or guys talking about camping trips with their dads. I wanted to be in that conversation, and have that life, too.

It was easy to ignore online what we as a family weren't even talking about in physical reality – my dad had a problem. These paradigms and these relationships are what McMillan and Morrison (2006) suggest when they say that "future research that seeks answers to these [internet] questions is needed and will shed more light on the role of media technologies in the changing dynamic of the modern-day family" (p. 89). In academia at large, and in my personal life, it has become clear that technology and the family are interwoven. It wasn't truly until the advent of Facebook that I was able to finally start pulling apart the threads.

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In October of 2010, my father was pulled over on I-85 South, going over 100 miles per hour with an open handle of bourbon in the passenger's seat. His B.A.C was .28. Yes, you read that right. .28. I've never forgotten what he told me when I stared at him, watching the addiction dwarf him: *Jess, I've been driving drunk for thirty years. I can't believe it took the cops this long to catch me*.

So as a family, we all went to rehab for the first time.

It's cliché to say that was the beginning of the end, but I can say that was the beginning of the end of my father and I's relationship. I desperately wanted to believe in him, to believe that he could get better. I tumbled headfirst into a rough period of my life, when I went on anti-depressants and other anti-anxiety meds. I felt like my life was spinning out of control due to the overwhelming sadness and helplessness.

[62]

Whenever something in the solitude of my backstage perplexed me to the point I needed to get it out there some way, somehow, I resorted to song lyrics. They were vague enough for people to have no idea what was actually wrong, but carried certain sentiments that people knew something was going on (in hindsight, this was really just a good way of grabbing attention, but seems worth theoretically examining now). Because in looking at the duality of Goffman's front stage/backstage dichotomy in terms of social media, there is also the "tension between media as channels of the heart and media as arenas of narrative construction" (Nunes, 2011, p. 360). Facebook statuses, such as the one above, walk a thin line when the author takes into account social appropriateness, the need to disclose, and the desire to express emotion. Nunes (2011) further proposes we do this because of a desire for community that has its roots in American popular culture, and I position that it is more than desire for community; it is specifically a desire for community that comes from not wanting to experience sadness alone[63]. But in the Facebook arena, we are bound silent by social, context-specific norms of disclosure (Smith and Watson, 2013)

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[62] Daughtry, C. (2006). Home. On *Daughtry* [digital download]. New York, NY: RCA/Sony Music Entertainment

[63] And, as previously mentioned, wanting to be in the happy family conversation that played out on social media, especially around Mother's Day and Father's Day.

In spring of 2011, I sat at the kitchen table in my apartment one Sunday morning, writing a paper on the theory of the novel and Don Delilo's *Mao II*. My phone buzzed against the wood, and I glanced over it. Dad.

Hey, can't make it for lunch today after all.

I shrugged and kept writing my paper.

That hospital? That was Ridgeview, one of the top rehab facilities for alcoholics and drug addicts in the country. The recovery? That was from when my stepmom came home from a weekend away and walked into her house, now a mind-altering winter wonderland, as it was covered with powdered cocaine. My father was in the living room with a prostitute. Whacked out on drugs, he ran naked through the streets of White Picket Fence Suburbia attempting to commit suicide until the cops found him.

My brother (then a University of Georgia law student) and I drove from Athens to Smyrna twice a week for family therapy. Even though *he* has the problem, Ridgeview constantly emphasized it was a *family* illness. I wanted my dad to get better. But I didn't understand why I had to be there – I hadn't given him the drugs. I hadn't held his mouth open and poured the bourbon down his throat.

I turned twenty-one that summer he was in rehab, so under Georgia law I could legally consume alcohol for the first time in my life. But I was walking a thin line. I wanted to test my newfound freedoms but was held back by being in a rehab center when I wasn't even the patient. Instead, I'd spend hours of my days in Ridgeview family therapy, eating mediocre food in the cafeteria, and meeting the the individuals that lived in the halfway house with my dad. There was Ted, the train conductor who had killed someone walking on the tracks and turned to alcohol to cope. There was Marcus, the alcoholic gambling addict who would sit just a little too close to me. Then there was Lyle, the pharmacist abusing his power and writing scripts for himself. Finally, the one I remember the most was Kevin. He was there because he had been driving drunk, rear-ended a woman, and killed the baby she was eight months pregnant with. That was the first time in my life I had heard the term *feticide*. Some people spend their twenty-first birthdays in bars. I spent mine listening to what could happen if I wasn't careful in those very same bars.

On our weekly Tuesday and Sunday visits, my dad, brother, and I sat at the gray plastic tables and chairs of the Ridgeview cafeteria, and my brother would talk so much over lunch that I would have finished my meal before he had even taken three bites. I would stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows to my left, watching those who passed by on the grass. The starkest thing I remember was the day the youth group walked by. My brother was prattling on about some student organization he was in during law school, and I stared at the kids (because that's what they were, kids) that walked by. Their shoulders were slumped, their heads were down, and they wore American Eagle and Old Navy, just like I did – one of them, a girl who looked like she could have been on the

cheerleading squad at my high school had the same red AE t-shirt as me. It was like looking in a convoluted fun house mirror, one that existed to serve as a strange, prophetic warning of things that could be.

It was at those lunches we had “quality” time with our father, and I remember we never talked about why we were actually there. We acted like it was just another Sunday lunch, like we were supposed to have that day Dad was walking in a winter wonderland, but cognizant enough to tell us he wasn’t going to be able to make it. It was at those lunches we pretended to be normal, and it was at those lunches Dad said he was adventurous with his food by trying whatever the daily special was (lasagna, meatloaf, taco salad). But I thought he was fairly predictable, since each lunch was always christened by two glasses of milk.

It was easier to say he was sick from something out of his control than admit the truth, the ugly truth, which was that he had done this to himself. When I spoke of my mom, I never felt ashamed to admit the fate she met. Leukemia hadn’t been her fault. She hadn’t asked for it. But my dad’s situation was something he had found himself in by his own volition.

Ruth Page (2012) suggests the following:

> Although sociability characterizes the generic context of Facebook as a site that enables its members to 'connect and share with the people in [their] life' (Facebook homepage), the extent to which a member might use an affective style to narrate a small story in a status update is not a simplistic measure of actual relational closeness between that member and their Friend list, nor of the emotional states of the updaters…Instead, the small stories in status updates are rhetorical performances, not transparent representations of reality…within this context, interaction with others operates within a system of exchange, where appropriate language use enables the updater to gain social capital (i.e., social acceptability). (p. 85)

It would be socially acceptable for my father to be sick and in the hospital from cancer, appendicitis, or a heart attack – something of natural causes. The unnaturalness of my father's alcoholism lacked any kind of social appropriateness[64]. I felt compelled to post something of the sort to share just enough of what was going on in my life to present a snippet, but not enough to lose face. Smith and Watson (2013) suggest that "we are not autobiographical subjects at every moment of the day, but we are called on to become autobiographical subjects in a variety of situations, a range of temporalities" (p. 75). In my case of dealing with my father's alcoholism and drug addiction, what called upon me to narrate my story was a need for solidarity, the kind of solidarity Nunes (2011) refers to as a construct of American culture. Through people's likes and comments I didn't feel so alone. Though I felt as if I was duping my list of "Facebook Friends", for my biggest fear was that if they knew the truth, I would be viewed as a messed up crack child and lose face altogether.

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[64] Is alcoholism a disease? I didn't want to take a definitive stance on this issue in this thesis, but it seems necessary to do now. So is alcoholism a disease? Depends on who you ask. I'll tell you no in a heartbeat. I think people can have addictive personalities, and that's the genetic component people fret so much about (I'm not a doctor. This is merely my nuanced take). And if alcoholism is a disease, why is there no definitive treatment? Why are there twelve steps that seem to lead to nowhere. Alcoholism, and the proposed "treatment" of it seems strangely reminiscent of the Winchester Mystery House or Danielewski's *House of Leaves.* At Ridgeview, we were told over and over again that alcoholism and addiction are "family illnesses." But I didn't feel sick. I'd always been able to handle my liquor.

We tell stories – and post Facebook statuses – because of our desires to hear these stories told and to see them put forth into the world. This is from our compulsive nature to be what Cavarero (2000) calls "the narratable self," which "cannot be said to be a *product* of [one's] life-story, or an effect of that story's performative [*sic*] force, but coincides rather with the uncontrollable narrative impulsive of memory which produces the text" (emphasis author's; p. xvi). For me, internal conflict arose when wanting to express my inherent tendency as a narratable self but I had to do so in a manner that would adhere to social considerations of the front stage. Thus, there remains a stringent set of guidelines in bending one's identity to post in the digital realm of Facebook. The narratable self must always be cognizant of social norms.

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Aimée Morrison (2013) argues that the stories we tell on Facebook are a result of Facebook's interface and layout. By asking *"what's on your mind?"* Facebook elicits disclosure. Morrison (2013) suggests that "Facebook's status update feature makes use of designed affordances and constraints, as well as emerging cultural conventions, in order to coax life narratives from its users" (p. 119). When asked that question, and in seeing the answers others have posted in our newsfeeds, we feel compelled to share.

Coaxing affordances are crucial aspects of examining life narratives, identity work, and disclosure on social networking sites. Morrison points out that Facebook's *"what's on your mind?"* prompt, combined with social norms of the front stage is like a "well-designed object" (2013, p. 118). She uses the example of a chair, and this kind of instruction "leads us towards appropriate use (sitting on a chair) and away from inappropriate use (lying down on a chair) but not entirely away from nonstandard uses

(standing on a chair)" (2013, p. 118). Thus, Facebook works like a well-oiled machine. Most users understand the conventions that govern it as a front stage where they are under the scrutiny of others, but I'm sure we all have that one friend who posts way too many personal details on Facebook[65] (and we only stay friends with them to watch the train wreck as it unfolds).

So when Facebook asks *"what's on your mind?"* there are two main aspects at work: the desire to tell versus the desire to adhere to social norms. Constructing this answer walks a thin line in regards to proper wording: don't reveal too much to be branded as an "oversharer" or don't reveal too little to be purposefully vague. So, for instance, when I posted the following:

[65] At time of writing, that friend for me is one I went to high school with, who posts way too many details I never really wanted to know about her "baby daddy" drama. But I can't stop consuming these updates. They're like a soap opera that plays on in my Facebook newsfeed. My mother would have called this "airing your dirty laundry out in the open where everybody could see." Some things are just reserved for close friends, and some things are socially acceptable to broadcast to a friend's list that includes old classmates, old bosses, old teachers, current friends, current coworkers, and extended family members.

[66]

I left out how what was on my mind was that I was amazed my father was still alive and made it another year. I was amazed he hadn't drank himself to death, overdosed, or killed someone else amidst all his drunk driving[67].

As time passed, we tried to make it work. My stepmother, brother, and I all wanted to believe that the rehab had worked, that he was a reformed man. But more often than not he vanished, gone for two, three, four, five days at a time with a cell phone that would go straight to voicemail. It's the story anyone who's had a loved one who is an alcoholic knows all too well.

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[66] Mirkos was my dad's favorite restaurant in Athens, Georgia. Today, I associate it with where he would have gone to lunch that day had he not brought a hooker into our house, and the memory is constantly associated with my favorite meal there – spinach and ricotta ravioli with the Bolognese sauce.
Also, FourSquare was an application that allowed you to "check-in" to places to earn points and badges. You could link the post to your Facebook account when something really noteworthy or exciting was happening. In this case, my dad's birthday.

[67] Honestly, this was a fate worse than my father's death for me. I could one day make peace with his death, but I don't know how I would ever come to terms with him killing an innocent person amidst his destruction.

It was at this time his employer, one of the largest internet technology conglomerates in the world, laid him off. There were very few engineers in the world qualified to do what my father did, so they looked the other way as long as the work got done. But when budget cuts came down the line, he was one of the first to go. His work was one of the only things that grounded him. He'd spend his sober days building hologram technology and database securities. Long before DV-Rs were available for mainstream purchase, he built them on the floor of our dining room.

When he moved to Texas for a job, I knew it was over. Relative geographical closeness to our family was a grasping-at-straws attempt to ground him to some semblance of reality, but my stepmom had enough. She had (understandably) kicked him out, and I knew he couldn't survive on his own. It had taken two years for the cancer to eat away at my mom. It had taken a lifetime for the drugs and alcohol to do the same to my dad.

There was no room for any of these stories among Facebook's coaxed affordances. It is worth noting here that Morrison's article on Facebook as a coercive technology points out that within the contemporary Facebook status update, "the user's name now acts as a simple heading, like the title of a blog post or the byline of a (very short) newspaper article" (2013, p. 124). We are all the stars of our stories in our own right, and we want to make sure we are perceived in a way that best suits our interests. In viewing each post as a micro newspaper article, I remember the first thing I ever learned in grad school, what I joke is "journalism and mass communication grad school 101" – agenda-setting theory. The media don't tell you what to think; they tell you what to think about. If we look at our highly thought out, highly crafted status updates with deliberately

chosen words, we can come to see that our front stage posts insert our life stories into the consciousness of those on our friends' list. The posts don't advise our Facebook friends how to think about our lives. They just tell our Facebook friends to think about us, and they draw their own conclusions. Because of this, I can tell you that I, as a poster, moderate my posts so that when people draw their conclusions, they hopefully draw favorable ones.

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After my dad moved to Texas, the next six months played out like variety night at the theater of the absurd. I would lie awake at night, tossing and turning amidst my tan bed sheets, wondering why I hadn't heard from dad in days – even a like of my Facebook status or a comment on the latest uploaded picture of my dog would assure me he was off a bender and not lying in a ditch somewhere. When my heavy eyelids would peel open after just a few hours of restless sleep to my blaring iPhone alarm, I would check the Facebook app on my phone to see that after days of no contact, he had liked nine, ten, eleven of my old statuses. I would like to tell you it didn't take a toll on my sanity. But Facebook had become the way of the world, the chains which linked us to the things we wanted, and the things we didn't.

In 2012, my brother and I went on a trip to Texas to see our dad for Christmas, and spent our days holed up in our room in the extended stay motel he lived in, watching copious amounts of Netflix while our father slept off his latest drug binge. I saw more of the cheap, rough, red carpet of the motel room, scratchy, oversized quilt I slept under, and Olivia Pope of *Scandal* than I saw of the man I had driven over a thousand miles to see.

That was the last time I saw my father – him standing in the doorway of our room, wearing a gray XLT polo shirt and navy blue winter jacket, looking like the man I called dad but lacking the emphasis, the aura, the je-ne-sais-quoi that made him who he was. *The light were on, but nobody was home* I remember telling my brother. It was then if I wondered if he had always been that way, and I just couldn't see it until some literal distance came between us, as well as some emotional aloofness.

He was always boisterous in public with me and my brother, cheering the loudest at my dance team competitions and videotaping (*wow, talk about ancient*) all of my piano recitals. But ever since that trip to Texas, I wondered if it was all overcompensation – guilt of never wanting me in the first place, and a distraction for himself so he could pass the time until his next drink[68].

So my dad stood in the doorway of that cheap motel room, and we all had just learned that his divorce from our stepmom was finalized. In that moment, he was already gone, and I couldn't help but wonder how long he had never been the father I wanted him to be. Because all the cheering at the dance recitals, all the times he sat there and listened to me practice my piano, didn't make up for the times he wasn't there, or put me in the back of a car while he was driving drunk, or vanished for days at a time.

I could always tell he was drunk or high based on the grammatically incorrect, jumbled nonsense he would post as comments on my statuses or pictures. Joe Bailey suggests:

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[68] Once, he was giving my fourteen or fifteen year old brother a driving lesson in an abandoned office complex parking lot while I was in the backseat. He asked me to lean back behind my seat and hand him a lemonade, so I did. When I innocently recounted the story to my mother when we got home, that's when I realized I had given my father not one, not two, but three Mike's Hard Lemonades while he taught my brother how to drive a car.

> The inner world of the reflective contemplator in her or his moments of isolated concentration, the other-directed world of the communicating, performing and calculating worker and organizer [*sic*] conscious always of the observing and judging audience are obvious and banal idealisations [*sic*]. The domestic and familial has often been taken for granted as private, and, indeed, has almost become the hypertrophied form of the private. But the family has a public quality in so far as it is organized [*sic*] as a division of physical and emotional labour [*sic*] and of authority, and it exhibits some forms of inspectrable [*sic*] performance. (2000, p. 390)

Presumably, family life is an idealized backstage, but for me it was the backstage that, if ever observed, would destroy my front stage. I lacked the trope of the supportive, loving family on social media, the one that made me jealous each time someone posted a selfie with their sister or happy anniversary to their parents. This weighed on me in my isolation, making me extremely aware that what we all seem to portray (and I definitely do) on social media is only a mere fraction of the story. Facebook is where we all strive for some version of the white picket fence ideal, chasing something we pretend we have but can never really catch, all while forgetting such a dream is just a primer of representations, a communal goal to aspire in order to make perfection and success a publically shared and traded commodity. It is a medium of exchange that never goes out of style, the currency of all front stage, social interactions.

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2014. That summer, my online and offline worlds, my front stage and my backstage, finally collided.

My dad and I came to blows when he forgot my birthday (for the second year in a row[69]) and then publically wished me a belated birthday by commenting on a picture from my party.

I was humiliated. The thought of anybody seeing that my own father had forgotten my birthday consumed me with embarrassment, since, once again, social media are all about "modifying the content…in order to reduce levels of personal exposure" (Page, 2012, p. 72).

So I blocked him on Facebook, thus ending our already tainted relationship. This man brought the internet into my world, and now I was using the online tool he introduced me to as a way to sever our physical ties. Only now, in the twenty-first century, and in the age of social media, could a physical relationship be ended by digital

[69] The year before, he had called me four days before my birthday, high as a kite after trying to jump a fence and had broken his wrist. He was on his way to the hospital, still high, but wanted to call to wish me a happy birthday, since it was my birthday, after all.

means. So I blocked his phone calls; I forwarded all of his emails to my spam folder; I made sure he could never find me on Twitter, LinkedIn, or Instagram.

And I never heard a word from him again.

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Facebook changed the way we self-disclose. By asking us "what's on your mind?" we feel compelled to share, yet we're still held back by acceptable behavior on the front stage. We're not privy to other people's Facebook news feeds, just their timelines, so even though we know everyone is presented with the same coaxed affordance, it feels intimate all the same. Additionally, this is now a front stage we are keyed into almost all the time, with it being just a click of a mouse or tap on a smartphone screen away. According to Hogan (2010), because cell phones connect us to myriad situations now it is more possible than Goffman ever foresaw for our front stages to collide and coalesce. Additionally, this is what happened when my relationship with my father finally came to blows. I was forced to block him, to eradicate him on my front stage in order to find peace in my own backstage.

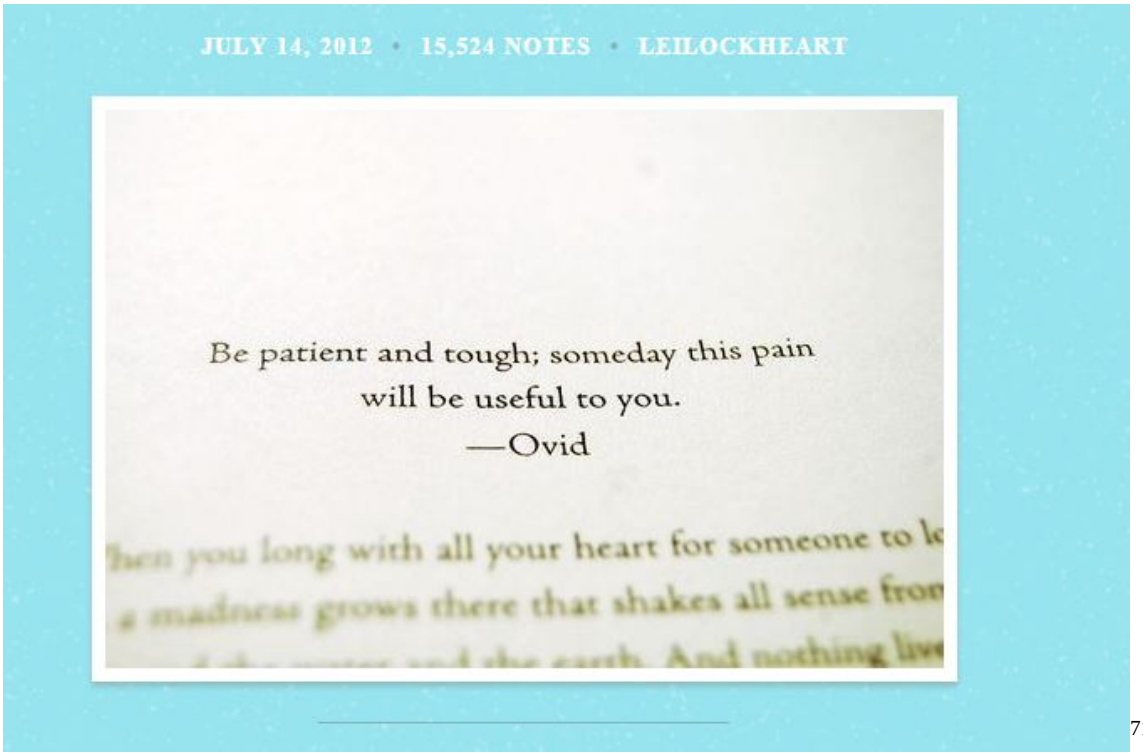
This is where the disconnect begins between the physical front stage and the digital front one: Ruth Page positions that "intimate disclosure might be appropriate for face-to-face conversation", but among those in her study, this was not the case online (2012, p. 72). This is mitigated by individuals not wanting to put certain words out there, "as that information can't be used against [them]" (Page, 2012, p. 72).

What Facebook coaxes out of us aren't factual reports, but continued, highly selected representations that fit with our "brand" among friends – being condensed into

this one trope is what makes the digital front stage more rigid than the physical one, at least on Facebook. I employed this rhetorical strategy occasionally to bolster my own ego, provide some humor into the lives of my Facebook friends, and be highly sharable. This falls in line with the funny, "with-it" person I constantly strive to portray on social media. See below, regarding The Interns In This Office Were Dropped On Their Heads As Babies:

These comments are receptive, and I continue to post them because typically on social media, "the audience makes a single coherent demand of the individual" (Hogan, 2010, p. 378). People enjoyed my humor and wit, so I felt compelled to meet the demands of my audience. This was the front I preferred to display on social media. I liked being the funny girl, the smart girl. Not the girl whose father couldn't shake a bender to wish her a birthday on time[70].

[70] It makes me think of the Tolstoy quote: "All happy families are alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. This quote took on new meaning for me when writing this thesis. I used to be extremely judgmental of families that appeared happy – then I realized I was portraying the same act to the world. Any family can be happy if they present themselves to the world that way. But backstage, every family has their own circumstances that try them.



[71]

[71] I would be lying if I told you this wasn't one of my life's mantras. After everything I've been through in my life, I've come to accept that the phrase *what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger* is scarily true. So why would I reblog something so emotional on my Tumblr? No specifics, sure. But I think Tumblr is governed by different social conventions than microblogging platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Microblogging simulates physical interaction. But according to McKenna and Bargh (1998), on blogs, one does "not have to deal in face-to-face interactions, individuals can admit to having marginalized, or nonmainstream, proclivities that they hide from the rest of the world" (p. 682). Maybe the extra space doesn't just give way to extra space for text. Maybe it gives way to extra space for emotional release, too.

CHAPTER 6

TWITTER AND INSTAGRAM

2011-2014

"The ongoing need to negotiate between apparent back stage freedom of expression and the restrictions of front stage public consumption is a tension that tweeters confront regularly." (Page, 2012, p. 95)

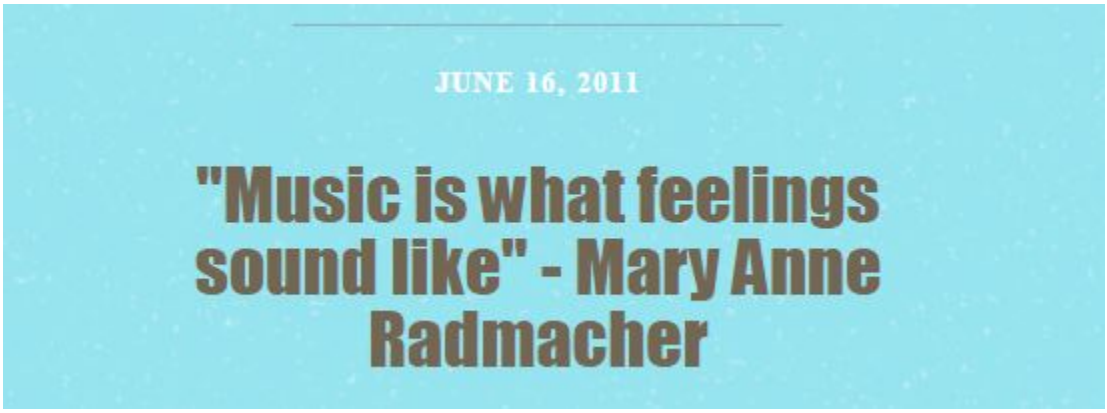
Facebook may have been the arena in which my relationship with my father came to blows and ended, where my front stage and backstage collided, but there were additional social media outlets at play while I negotiated my father's addiction. He may not have been an active player on my Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr, but my thoughts and emotions regarding him and his actions bled over to those social networks regardless.

[72]

As on Facebook, I used song lyrics to convey the extreme emotions when I couldn't say what was actually wrong. The hashtag #np (now playing) helped legitimize

[72] The verse this is from goes: "I'm turning out just like my father/ even though I swore I never would/ Now I can say that I have love for him / But I never really understood / What it must have been like for him / Living inside of his head/ I can still feel him with me now/ Even though he's dead" (Everett, M. (2005). Things the Grandchildren Should Know. On *Blinking Lights and Other Revelations* [digital download]. Los Angeles, CA: Vagrant Records.)

my tweet and defer suspicions of problems. On Twitter, I did not necessarily need someone to know what was wrong; I had so much pent-up emotion inside of me that it needed to get out somehow on the media that were such integral and dominant parts of my life. Maybe this is because we've become too dependent on social networking if this dependency is where we've gotten, but I think it's part of a healthy release cycle. Sending the above tweet out into the world removed the stress from inside of me. Twitter was my public diary, albeit one still governed by social norms. This kind of writing, which upholds "offline social norms and exigencies, including what Furedi calls the 'therapeutic imperative,' which dictates the appropriateness – even the requirement – of personal revelations" (McNeill, 2011, p. 148; Furedi qtd. in McNeill, 2004). But, in regards to music, as we know:



The song lyrics could express what I couldn't in my own words. The feeling was real and valid. The circumstances behind it remained mine and mine alone, to convey only to my closest friends of my choosing. I could find emotional release on Twitter without losing face. Laurie McNeill (2011) calls these posts "auto/tweetographies" and defines them as "short installments of life narrative, which share moments, experiences, and lives in

miniature, and which will be updated or replaced regularly – daily or even more – with new material" (p. 149).

This is seen in my tweets from that 2012 trip to Texas, where I frequently posted about my trip as an outlet for the frustration I felt at family time – without the family.

The constant updates displayed my life in miniature, and each update, each "diary entry" adhered to front stage constructs while still providing an emotional release for me in the backstage. Even though in online situations, "the 'I' of reference is constructed and situated, not identical with its flesh-and-blood maker," it still exists parallel and in tandem to the creator. Every online post, interaction, and representation still requires a physical being with emotions and thoughts to produce it" (Smith and Watson, 2013, p. 71). Twitter, like Facebook, coaxes narratives out of its users. Twitter's version of *"what's on your mind?"* is *"what's happening?"* and like I did on Facebook, I shared my

narratives. The difference between Facebook and Twitter (and an affordance of Twitter that may have contributed to why I post more freely about my emotions on there than on Facebook) is that Facebook's question is very introspective. Twitter poses a more external question (*What's happening? What are you doing?*), and Facebook prompts the user to turn inward with *What's on your mind?*. This can be seen as threatening, especially when one is aware of the social norms at play. But in 140 characters or less, when one is asked *"what's happening?"* they may feel like they're in safer space.

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In March 2013, four months after the failed Texas trip and the news that my father had drunkenly crashed not one, not two, but three cars on various Texas interstates, I accidentally left my phone at home while I went in for an eight hour work day at my student job as a bus driver for UGA Campus Transit. It was a Wednesday; meaning I was a spare driver, subject to the whims of anyone else not showing up to work.

When I got home, I saw my phone sitting on the wooden coffee table in my living room. But I walked my dog first, traipsed across the street to check the mail, threw away some coupons for a bedding store, and opened my power bill, and then I looked at my phone for the first time. It was 3:07 in the afternoon.

I had one missed call and one voicemail from my brother. As I cradled the phone to my ear and tossed my dog's favorite green ball across the living room, I listened to the message.

Hey, Jess.. So, dad's in jail. Again. And this time no one is bailing him out.

[73]

That was the tweet from the day he went to jail. The charge? Walking shirtless in a Dallas road at 3 AM with a bag of crystal meth on him.

The me, and the release, provided in this auto/tweetography, in my public diary lacking circumstances but full of feeling regardless, "is indeed here both the actor and the spectator, the narrator and the listener, in a single person" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 40). This is part of a series of dichotomies at stake in this work: front stage/backstage. Multimedia. Self and audience. As Page and Thomas (2011) suggest, digital naratology, content, and online discourse are hybrid in nature. It makes sense that a hybrid medium requires a hybrid method of analysis.

***

My dad sat in jail for six weeks. He only had my brother's phone number memorized, so he was the point of contact. And in typical addict fashion, my father blamed us for his misfortunes, said if only we bailed him out things would be different and better.

So when he stopped showing up on the Las Colinas County Inmate Database, my brother and father's extended family ran around, frantic, and I was the only one to pick up the phone to try my father's cell phone number. He answered.

In the two hour conversation that followed, my father died.

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[73] Green, J. (2006). *An Abundance of Katherines*. New York, NY: Dutton Books/Penguin USA. I've always found some kind of solace in this quote. When things hurt so bad I couldn't place words on them, I could mentally circle back to this quote to realize I wasn't alone.

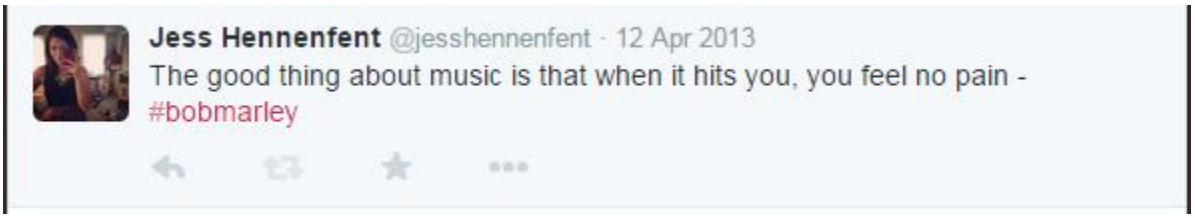
They say your brain will block out the really traumatic things that happen to you, but that wasn't the case with this phone call from April 12. I sat on the edge of my bed, my knees to my chest, wearing a blue tank top and black Nike running shorts, listening to my father describe the horrors of prison. He cried and said he just wanted to be in Athens with me and my brother and my dog, eating at our favorite pasta restaurant so we could be like we used to be. While in jail, his drug dealer had ransacked and robbed his motel room. And then as quickly as the tears came, the rage crash-landed, as he cursed my brother out and bemoaned his existence. He told me I was the better child and of course I would have bailed him out. And when I calmly told him I wouldn't have, that he was over fifty years old and needed to stop his lifestyle, someway, somehow, he pulled the final card.

I have nothing to live for he said. *If only you had bailed me out I could have salvaged this. I just took the whole bottle of pills*.

I had a tumultuous relationship with my parents, but I had watched my mother die after withering away to nothing. I had watched my father carry on with a flagrant disregard for his own life and the lives of those around him for years – from doing lines of coke in our basement to buying drugs at a strip club the night of my undergraduate graduation. But nothing, nothing in my life, could have prepared me for listening to my last living biological parent commit suicide while I was the phone with him.

I screamed at him; I screamed so hard my throat turned to sandpaper. Thick, angry teardrops welled up in my eyes and plummeted onto my cheeks. *How could you? How could you be so selfish?*

And that's when he started laughing. *Oh Jessica Leigh. Stop being so dramatic. I was only kidding.*



I can't tell you why I didn't block him out of my life after that phone call. Despite how horrendous that day was, he was still my father. I desperately wanted to believe, even after the worst, that he could save himself. And I've said it before, and I'll say it again: he was my last living biological parent. Severing that relationship was never going to be easy, and I was reluctant to let go of that last tenuous bond[74].

So I hung up on him, fell to the floor of my room, and screamed. There's a point when tears aren't enough to get it out, so you have to scream. You scream and you scream and you scream and the howls that come out of your body are primal, sound inhuman, and are filled with the anger and trauma and disappointment that this is your life, and frankly, it's not at all fair. My roommate and lifelong best friend sat next to me, rubbing my back, before I screamed so hard I began to hyperventilate. I gasped for air and gulped and felt the world closing in on me all sides and that made sense, because after all, isn't that what just happened?

So the best friend, a severe chronic asthmatic, hooked me up to her nebulizer, and the oxygen returned to my lungs and I shook violently, trying to get what had just happened off of me, like my dog does when he comes back in after walking in the rain.

[74] That is, until things kept adding up and adding up until, well, not to be cliché – the straw broke the camel's back.

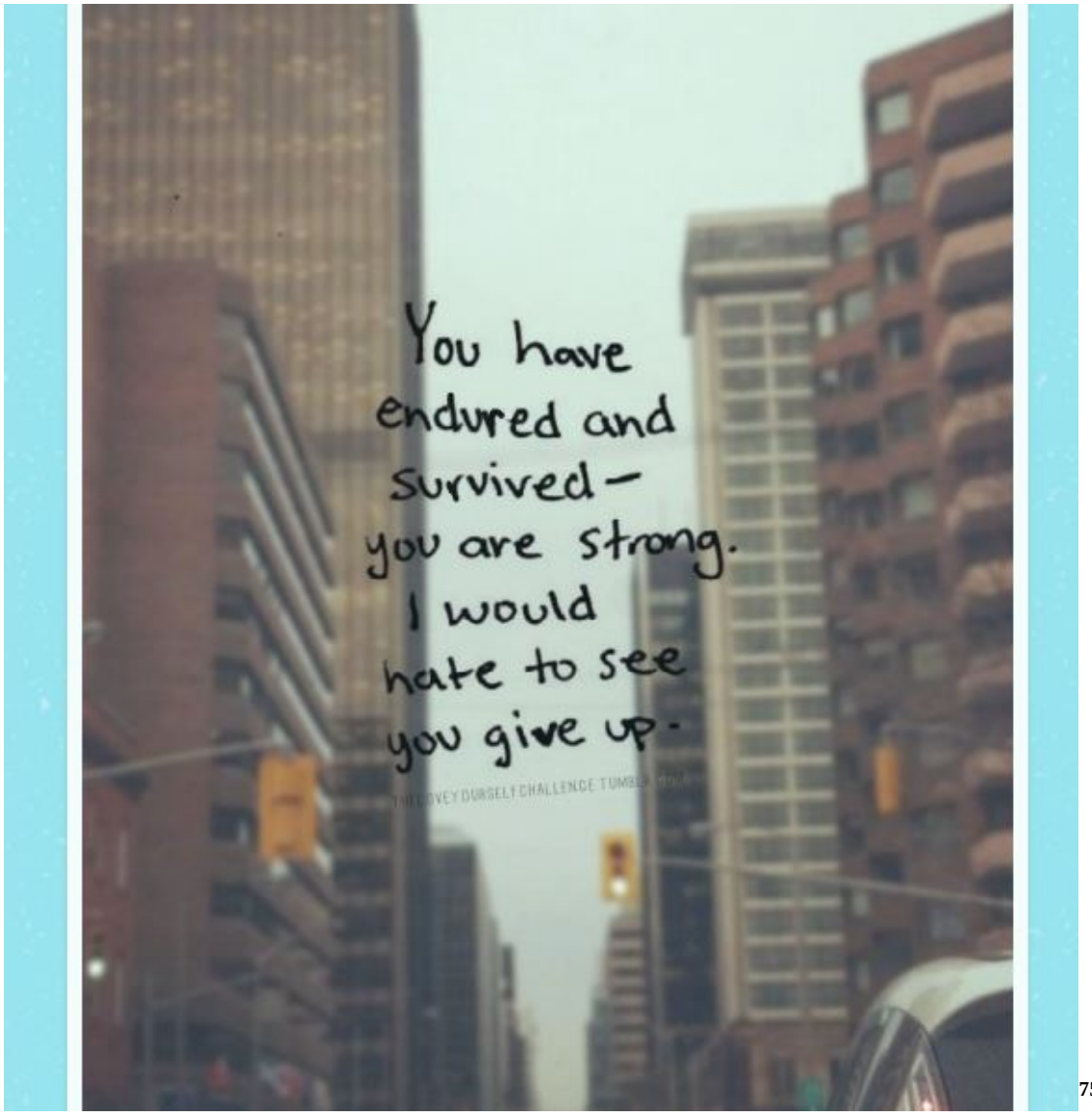
Derek and Kate are supposed to be here in two hours she said. *Do you want me to call and cancel our dinner party?*

And I unhooked myself from the nebulizer and shook my head. *No. I still have a life to live, and it's a damn good one.*

What we study doesn't always have to be negative. It may be rooted in tragedy, but life and the will to live rise out of such circumstances. The front stage is not necessarily about hiding what happens in the backstage – sometimes it's a resounding

dialogue, a response to the bad. Sometimes the front stage is about honoring the lives we have, living in the moment, and paying gratitude forward.

Cavarero (2000) proposes that memories make us narcissistic, but I think they make us whole. What I remember about one of the worst days of my life isn't necessarily that my father pretended to commit suicide while on the phone with me. I'll never forget that, sure, but when I remember that day, and when I revisited these social media posts to write this thesis, I am reminded that friends are the family you choose. I've grown up into a life with so much positivity. I am reminded that rock bottom is the sturdiest foundation for the rest of your life. I am reminded that I am human, and I am lucky.



75

[75] I think in addition to the extra space allowing for more confessions, Tumblr isn't as mainstream as Facebook or Twitter. Users have smaller groups of followers, and all those followers are on there to create their public diaries too.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

Identity Bending

In the middle of writing the proposal for this thesis, my stepmom confessed to me that my father used to get high and tell her how he sexually abused me as a young child.

Among other things, he said, he used to make me watch him take showers. And my mother would help.

I didn't ask what among other things meant. I still don't want to know.

At the time, I almost threw this whole project away, frustrated, angry, and jaded about the narratives we tell. I felt betrayed by him (again). I felt betrayed by my mother, and by my stepmother for even telling me and breaking the naivety I had lived in. I also felt betrayed with myself – and my memory. How could I deceive myself like that? What was the point of a narrative, anyway? Were any of them true?

For an excruciatingly painful couple of days, the information ate at my very constitution, wavering the allure of what I had once found so fascinating and so powerful.

But then I realized it didn't matter.

***

Things began to come back after my stepmom admitted this to me – things I had long since blocked out or cast off as normal. None of these were direct memories of molestation, but there were very solid, very concrete memories of things and events that

one hundred percent, absolutely crossed the border of what constituted a normal father/daughter relationship.

But it didn't matter.

If it was true, if my father had sexually abused me and, to this day, I remain largely and blissfully ignorant, having blocked it out in the depths of my memory, it changed nothing about who I had grown up to be. I had still been through hell and back, beaten to a pulp by the circumstances of my family but made stronger by my scars. After all, scars only show us where we've been. They do not dictate where we're going. Philosopher and writer Hélène Cixous sums up my feelings on the subject best, when she writes in *Stigmata*: "The scar adds something: a visible or invisible fibrous tissue that really or allegorically replaces a loss of substance which is therefore not lost but added to, augmentation of a memory by a small mnesic growth. Unlike scar, stigmata takes away, removes substance, carves out a place for itself" (2000, xiii).

And if the abuse wasn't true, if my father's lies from his coked-out narratives of things he would never say sober – which also included graphic tales of unprotected sex with underage girls and other men – his lies did not, and would not, become my truths.

Ellis and Bochner (1999) warn about this in their work on autoethnography: "Believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore, well, that's when the real work has only begun" (p. 738).

It's sad to say that I've gotten used to being stretched so thin by pain that I can feel air whooshing through my pores. It doesn't make it hurt any less, but it does remind me to keep breathing, for it will be over soon. This too shall pass.

I've struggled with the decision to so publicly mark my father as pedophile – or even simply one who talks about wishing he had been one – but I knew it was central to this narrative about narrative, with I as the researcher and subject. Because while I grappled with the pain of my father's stories, what did become immensely clear to me was the power that exists in all narratives.

Helen Kennedy (2006) suggests it is important to not lose "sight of identity as embodied experience, of the real struggles of real people whose identities are fiercely contested or defended – in other words, without losing sight of identity-as-practice" (p. 39). Rob Cover (2006) agrees, but suggests that underneath the fluidity there is some degree of an essentialist core to identity and narrative that may vary from person to person. This core includes "common axes…such as gender, ethnicity, ability, and age but might also be compromised of spurious experiences, which are less easily catagorizable [*sic*]" (Cover, 2014, p. 59). Even though what he lists are socially constructed concepts, individuals adopt what those constructs mean for *them* and hold close what truths come out of that. What we do in the backstage is often circled around these axes, and whatever "spurious experiences" we adopt can be formed into our individual truths. That phrasing is harsh and not fully explained in Cover's work. I understand he's grappling with the trickiness of memory, but there some things, some memories, and some life experiences that individuals can hold as absolute truths – for them. It varies from person to person.

For me, I was long afraid of adopting my father's traits as my own truths. I thought maybe I was cursed, bound to them by the cruel strands of fate or genetics. But then I realized – I'm not him, and I never will be. I would be lying to you if I said the thought didn't cross my mind from time to time, and it is always omnipresent for a split

second whenever I decide to have even the most casual glass of wine. This is not a spurious experience. It's not a "spurious experience" when I distinctly remember the two glasses of milk my father drank with every meal in rehab. It's not a "spurious experience" when I remember standing by my mother's bed in the hospice, twelve hours before she died, kissing her cheek that was as rough and droopy as elephant skin, and knowing even then I would never see her again. These "spurious experiences" are actually the things that form the teeny-tiny essentialist core that exists within all of us. We may be able to mold and change and makes Cover's axes fluid, but the experiences we hold as truths can be solid. This dichotomy is what allows us as individuals to remain in varying states of flux. This is what perpetuates our own narratable selves. Our teeny, tiny cores of truths are the stories we recount to others as who we are, where we've been, and where we're going.

One of my hopes thus far is to have presented a truthful as possible account of my stories, on and off social media. But, I am engaging in performances in front of you, my audience. Thus, this thesis is still a performance – it is my performance as a graduate student, trying to complete her master's degree, and of a woman trying to make sense of a life that has never made a whole lot of sense. It is me trying to show that the extraordinary exists behind even the most ordinary of posts.

There are things I have deliberately withheld because I found them too cruel, crass, or disturbing to present. I have painted you pictures of my father, brother, and mother, as well as myself – as I see them. Maybe those presentations were unjust. But as previously mentioned, there are truths that I hold dear to myself. They may not be Truths with a capital T, but they are truths to me, nonetheless. By showing you these truths, I

hope you are able to accept my performance as an attempt to be legitimately sincere, to merge my academic and personal stories together to accomplish two goals for me. Cavarero (2000) posits that "someone's life story always results from an existence, which from the beginning, has exposed her to the world – revealing her uniqueness" (36). Our truths grow out of this uniqueness, and we cannot deny what makes us human and distinctive. I am Jessica Leigh Hennenfent, and as I write this, alone on the beige couch in my apartment in a purple tank top on an usually warm late January day while eating a pint of Ben and Jerry's Half Baked ice cream, I hope you have come to understand my truths and the motivations for how I present them to the world. This kaleidoscope of performances that I have presented to you form a picture of me, which in and of itself may be a performance. But hopefully, the multitude of what I have portrayed presents you with a representation that is as transparent as possible, one that is only opaque under the guise of a graduate student writing a thesis. I have elected to willingly bring forth the details that I have long since hidden under the conventions of my front stage social media performances, and there is sincerity in that.

This is what Helen Kennedy (2006) refers to when she says, "identity is a matter of constant becomings, which Braidotti refers to as the practice of 'as-if': 'the affirmation of fluid boundaries, a practice of intervals, of the interfaces, and the interstices'" (p. 31). Our truths are wrapped up within these axes. Our identities are as fluid as we choose to make them, and stories are the containers for our memories. Smith and Watson (2013) suggest the following:

> In online self-presentation as in offline life narration, then, the "I" of reference is constructed and situated, and not identical with its flesh-and-blood make. Moreover, that "I" is constituted through discursive formations, which are heterogeneous, conflictual, and intersectional, and which allocate subject

> positions to those who are interpellated [*sic*] through their ideological frames, tropes, and language. Those subject positions in turn attach to salient cultural and historical identities. Both offline and online, the autobiographical subject can be approached as an ensemble or assemblage of subject positions through which self-understanding and self-positioning are negotiated. (71)

Most everything is a performance, but you find the person in their axes, their truths, their motivations. The explanation of motivations may still be a performance, but that may be the closest one can come to understanding and witnessing the backstage.

The details foster this close relationship with the backstage as well. A clearer picture emerges from the little, seemingly inconsequential details. They help get to the truths because it shows what someone remembers. It shows what matters to someone, and what matters to someone reveals a great deal about their character. For instance, after a recent break up of mine, I was feeling sad and angry and hurt, and like I was incapable of getting off my couch and out of my sweatpants. But I knew I had to, so I painted my nails, something I had fallen out of doing during my relationship. It made me feel better, and this tiny detail was the ribbon that tied my appearance together in public. It helped me present a socially acceptable, calm, happy, and together person. And by presenting myself that way, I was able to mentally reinforce it to myself and tell myself I was awesome, and that everything was going to work out. It is in these details we find the truths. These notions are what lead me to the concept of identity bending.

I define identity bending as selective truth contortions one engages in, specifically on a social networking site, to portray a desired image that adheres to the norms and codes of the audience and of that particular site. What I mean by this is that we are not the same people online as we are offline, but we are also not the same people across online platforms. This is simultaneously an expansion and compression of Goffman's

dramaturgy theory. It is an expansion to account for new media technologies that Goffman could have never foreseen, as well as a compression to solely look at dramaturgy through social networking. The front stage/backstage dichotomy is too neat, as are most dichotomies in terms of social media. Additionally, in dichotomies, there are inherent hierarchies. In identity performance, with its front stage/backstage duality, it is extremely likely to privilege one over the other. With identity bending, I seek to find a more fluid term for who we are and our actions on the identity spectrum. While both identity bending and identity performances are deliberate, identity bending accounts for the specific demands by the new media platform and the users of that site.

On Facebook, I bend my identity to express more in longer narratives. On Twitter, I bend to express my identity in 140 characters or less. This is also in contrast to the Tumblr posts you've seen throughout this thesis, in which I am able to be the most emotional and revealing of all. Garde-Hansen (2009) agrees with these differences, and proposes that how one remembers and archives a post on social media varies from platform to platform.

On Facebook, I must acknowledge that it is not appropriate to reveal too much. I keep my political and religious beliefs off that site to avoid getting into any online arguments. I never join in when I see one such disagreement occurring, even if I have a strong opinion about the subject. However, on Twitter, my follower list is smaller and more selective. Additionally, because of my Twitter account's public settings, people can follow me who are extremely interested in what I post. Thus, I can be more political and feminist on Twitter without having to worry about offending (specifically) more conservative relatives of mine. And on Tumblr, where I have the smallest number of

followers of all my active platforms, I am much more emotional with my posts. I do not mind nearly as much if people gauge what is going on in my personal life – I still would not post every single little detail, but I feel comfortable posting *more* details. The ways these platforms are constructed and coax information out of me dictate how and why I share what I do on each site.

By virtue of literally coming of age with these technologies, there is a generational difference between my age group and the ones before me (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). By investing so much time into the internet in my formative years, I view the internet (and social networking) as extensions of myself. But because these outlets are still governed by social norms and site conventions, I bend my identity where appropriate.

Because of the prevalence of social media in the twenty-first century, I suggest we engage in identity bending because it would be too exhausting to constantly be performing. I may think I'm in the backstage when I'm alone at home, but as soon as I even pick up my iPhone and open the Facebook application, I am back on the front stage. Our social networking profiles are continuous, as there seems to be no ends in sight for social media. Ergo, the selves one presents online are highly selective, interminable extensions of one's self.

Narcissism

Imogen Tyler (2007) proposes the following:

> According to recent cultural criticism, Narcissus has replaced Oedipus as the myth of our time. Narcissism is now seen to be at the root of everything from the ill-fated romance with violent revolution to the enthralled mass consumption of state-of-the-art products and the "lifestyles of the rich and famous"…The claim

> that consumer-oriented and media-saturated cultures have given rise to an "immense narcissim" has been repeatedly asserted within social and cultural criticism for the last forty years. (p. 343-344, Benjamin qtd. in Tyler, 2000, p. 233)

I will not disagree that narcissism prevails in contemporary Western culture. I will, however, contest that I think we, as a society and as academia, are far too quick to slap the label of vanity on anything and everything without fully examining why.

In terms of the content we post on social media, I turn to what I have presented on my digital front stage thus far. When I posted:

and

I wasn't calling for attention. Just because we put something out into the world does not mean its creation was fully, one hundred percent intended to bolster ego through likes and comments. When I posted the above Facebook status about my dad, I was asking for

thoughts and prayers, yes, but because (no matter what you believe in) my family was between a rock and a hard place in that rehab center. We needed all the help we could get, divine or not. And when I tweeted family time was not fun anymore, I knew it was the holidays and my followers could relate or sympathize. However, I also needed an outlet for the boiling rage I felt inside at having driven a thousand miles to stay locked up in a hotel room and barely see my father.

While the millennial generation may be one that has grown up being comfortable with putting information about themselves out into the world, I propose that the motivations are not entirely rooted in narcissism. Yes, who doesn't appreciate it when their status gets many likes or retweets? But for some posts, part of the motivation may evolve out of Cavaerero's (2000) concept of the narratable self. In order to make sense of our lives and our experiences, sometimes they have to be projected outwards from our minds. In this case, one can look critically and externally upon their thoughts, understand, and adopt (or reject) them as part of their identity. This is what I felt when posting my updates and tweets. By outwardly projecting what was going on with my father backstage (and remaining within the boundaries of social norms), I could put Kirtley's (2012) critical distance between myself and my experiences. And in that distance, I could begin to makes sense of something that never made much sense.

As previously mentioned, I will not disagree that narcissism is a problem of twenty-first century Western culture. How else can one explain selfies in inappropriate places like Auschwitz or status updates that come every three minutes about someone's dinner plans or cooking adventures? For instance, even for myself, when I post:

I am fueling the fires of narcissism. I post these because I know they will be popular, and I'll receive accolades for my performance. Narcissism is at work in playing to our audiences online, but as I discussed earlier, there are also internal benefits for the poster, other than a simple ego boost.

This is why I argue that for some posters, it may be about making sense of an experience more than the experience itself. Sometimes, that critical distance is necessary, and there are no rules about how far that length has to be. In all cases it is worth looking behind the scenes. Why did that person feel compelled to take a selfie at Auschwitz? Why does someone "blow up" everyone's news feed with seemingly pointless updates? It's easy to say "narcissism" and move on. Social media are continually evolving, and I hope this is the first in-depth study in a line of many to examine backstage motivations for digital front stage actions – or every day, normal people doing seemingly normal things.

In 1976, Tom Wolfe published an article in *New York Magazine* entitled "The 'Me' Decade." In this piece, Wolfe blasts feminism as a partial cause for the rise of narcissism when he says:

> The great unexpected dividend of the feminist movement has been to elevate an ordinary status – woman, housewife – to the level of drama. One's very existence as a woman…as Me…becomes something all the world analyzes, agonizes over, draws cosmic conclusions from, or, in an event takes seriously…perhaps there are women who want to humble men or reduce their power or achieve equality or even superiority for themselves, [but] the unconscious desire is nothing more than: Let's Talk About Me. (Wolfe, 1976, p. 134-135)[76]

I elected to use feminism as another theoretical guide to this paper by examining the ordinary on the front stage. As mentioned earlier in my theoretical framework section, at the heart of feminism lies the belief that women's (and all "otherized" groups) experiences are important empirical and theoretical resources (Olesen, 1994). Wolfe's point is accurate only in the sense that yes, feminism is all about celebrating the ordinary. However, why shouldn't the ordinary be celebrated? Criticisms of social media feeds say that it is full of narcissism. But really, there are several updates from different

[76] Well, I think Mr. Wolfe missed the point of feminism, but that's another thesis for another time.

individuals, each celebrating the ordinary in their lives. Who are we to judge someone else's opinions of what's worth acknowledging?

In regards to the millennial generation, the "me" generation, the digital natives – whatever you would like to call us – I propose that even in the most ordinary status or tweet there is a story, and that story is worth being told.

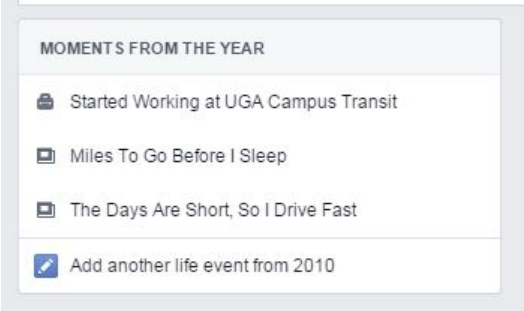
A Stage – and a Graveyard

In most of the screenshots of my Facebook posts, you've most likely noticed a figure whose face has been blacked out. One, this was so I could produce ethical research and protect his identity from being included. Two, this blacked out figure is my most recent ex-boyfriend, and also the most current reminder that once something is put out there onto social media, it is almost impossible to make it disappear[77].

On Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, it was incredibly easy to travel back in time on my own feeds to collect the screenshots I included in this thesis. Not all of it was pleasant. According to Ellis and Bochner (1999) "narrative…seeks to keep the past alive in the present" (p. 745). Additionally, "the self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult. So is confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering" (p. 738). But the ease at which I could bring these memories and posts back to life is not unique to me as a life narrative researcher Facebook[78] makes it incredibly easy for one to never forget their past:

[77] Until something like Xanga's archive purge happens.

[78] The advent of the "timeline" feature made this even easier.



This image is from my Facebook, and as I scrolled back in time, through my posts, these yearly milestones would show up on the left side of the page. Through Facebook's coaxed affordances users are prompted (nay, encouraged) to never forget their pasts.

Social media, in addition to being narrative outlets, are graveyards. Eventually a current narrative becomes a memory of things past, but social media will make sure it is never truly forgotten. Garde-Hansen (2009) agrees, and suggests that "in our fast-paced world of work and play, such sites appear to ensure that personal and collective memories are maintained and preserved" (p. 136). She further positions that "nothing is forgotten…as nothing need be erased" (2009, p. 144).

In ways, this is beneficial. As Ellis and Bochner (1999) suggest, this keeps our narratives alive. It is good to remember, and it is good to honor the past. What is life if I can't laugh at the silly picture from my MySpace, where I'm wearing all black and have bangs that cover my eyes? This kind of honorarium leads to the rise of applications like "TimeHop" and the popular Thursday event and hashtag "#tbt"[79]. These technologies show us how our identities have been in flux over time.

But there are downsides as well. As Garde-Hansen (2009) points out, this could be a "stumbling block to getting that great job in the future" (p. 144). Certain posts can also cause one to lose esteem or respect in the eyes of superiors, such as teachers, adult

[79] Throwback Thursday

relatives, or bosses – and even among their peers and other contemporaries. But there are emotional consequences as well. As I blacked-out the face of that ex-boyfriend in each screenshot I used in this paper[80], I felt wistful twinges of longing and heartache. But he was not the only ghost of relationships past that came back amidst my search for data for this thesis.

Though the Facebook block feature prevents someone from contacting you on Facebook, the ghost of their former presence remains. See the below image:

[80] I kid you not – we broke up the day I began writing this thesis.

[81]

Blacked out comment number one is from a different ex-boyfriend. Because I had to completely black out his name to protect his identity, you can't see that his name is grayed out, and I am unable to click it. So even though Facebook prevents us from being able to interact with one another, the memory is still there, forever. I've since reached a point in my life where seeing this post (from almost four years ago) doesn't hurt me, but it does make me remember why he is blocked on my Facebook in the first place, even though it has been so long. Facebook is littered with tombstones from that (and other) past relationships.

My father was no exception. As I scrolled back through time, I could see where he used to publicly proclaim how proud he was of me and how much he loved me:

---

[81] Yes, this is the same Eels song that has the verse from Footnote 72 that sums up my relationship with my father. This Ex introduced me to this song, and we both fell in love with (probably because we both had horrible relationships with our fathers).

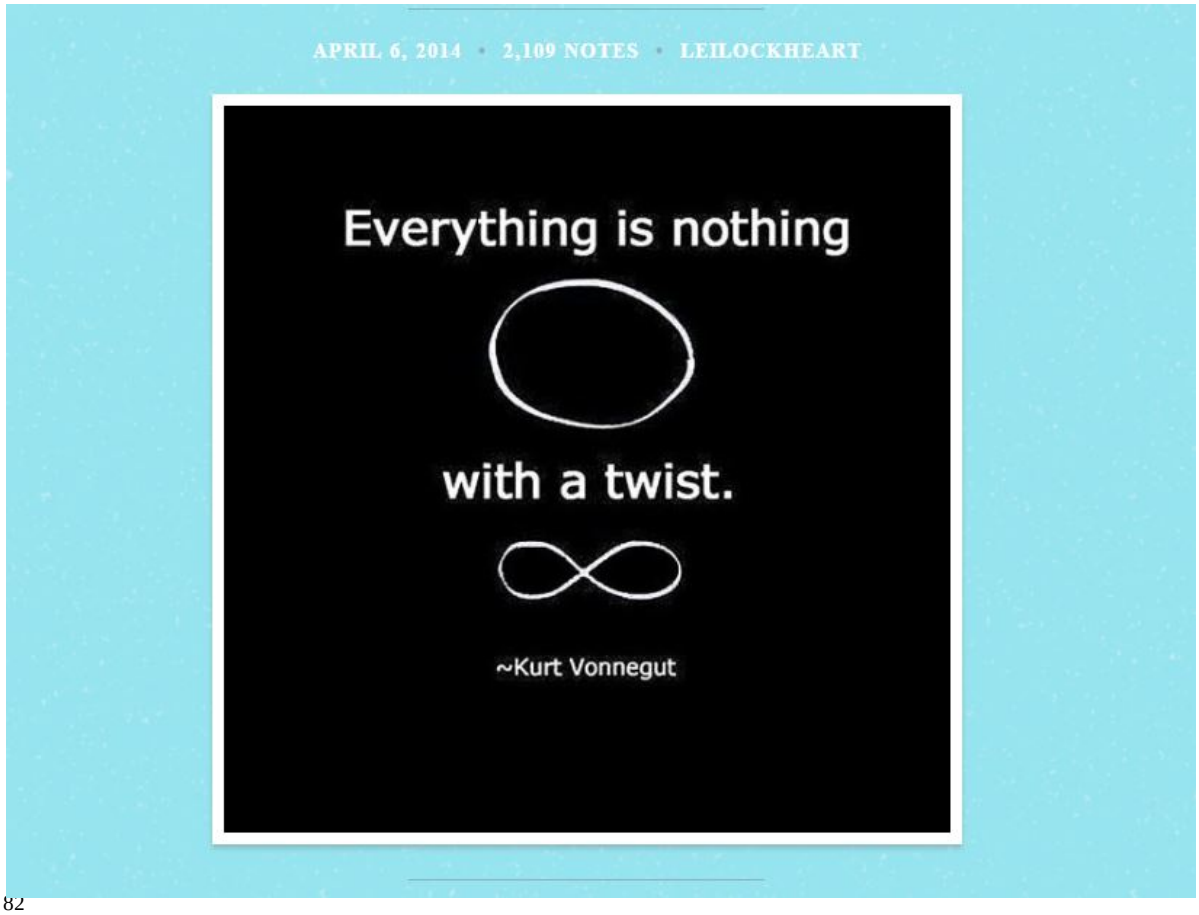
Everett, M. (2005). Things the Grandchildren Should Know. On *Blinking Lights and Other Revelations* [digital download]. Los Angeles, CA: Vagrant Records

The third comment down is his. Once again, I can't show the grayed-out, unclickable name because I chose to attempt to protect his identity. But the comment forever remains, and these ones were more painful to relive.

Consequence seems like an unnecessarily harsh term, but they do exist in terms of the narratives we post online. Memories are not always happy or well-received, and at the time of posting, one may not know if they'll one day look back on that post less fondly than they'd like.

Millennials do come to understand their lives through social media. That includes the joy, the pain, and the mundane. We are "narratable selves" who desire to hear our stories told by another, but that other can be a social networking platform (Cavarero, 2000). We can externally take in and process the things that have happened to us through a critical distance and come to understand what matters, what doesn't, and who we are.

This discussion section is that kind of text, the text of the process of a narratable self. It has been my process to make sense of what I have laid out before you. It has provided me distance over time to separate myself from my research and my memories. By critically examining my life, I have come to the three conclusions of identity bending, the limited powers of Narcissus, and the strange notion that a stage can also be a graveyard.

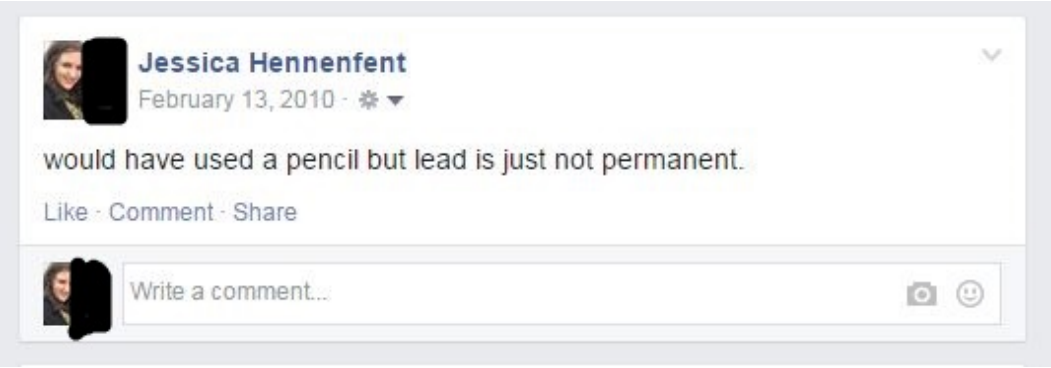


[82]

[82] What matters to you? What keeps you going? There is quite a fine line between everything and nothing.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION



[83]

Dear Dad,

Tonight, I cooked with garlic.

I don't remember much about what you taught me, because I had to teach most of it to myself. But when I couldn't cut those cloves of garlic and the smell wafted to my nose, I remembered that second house in White Picket Fence Suburbia, the one on Oak Hampton Way, where we went after mom died. I remembered how you would always roast garlic; sometimes, if only to make the house smell good. It was your favorite smell, after all.

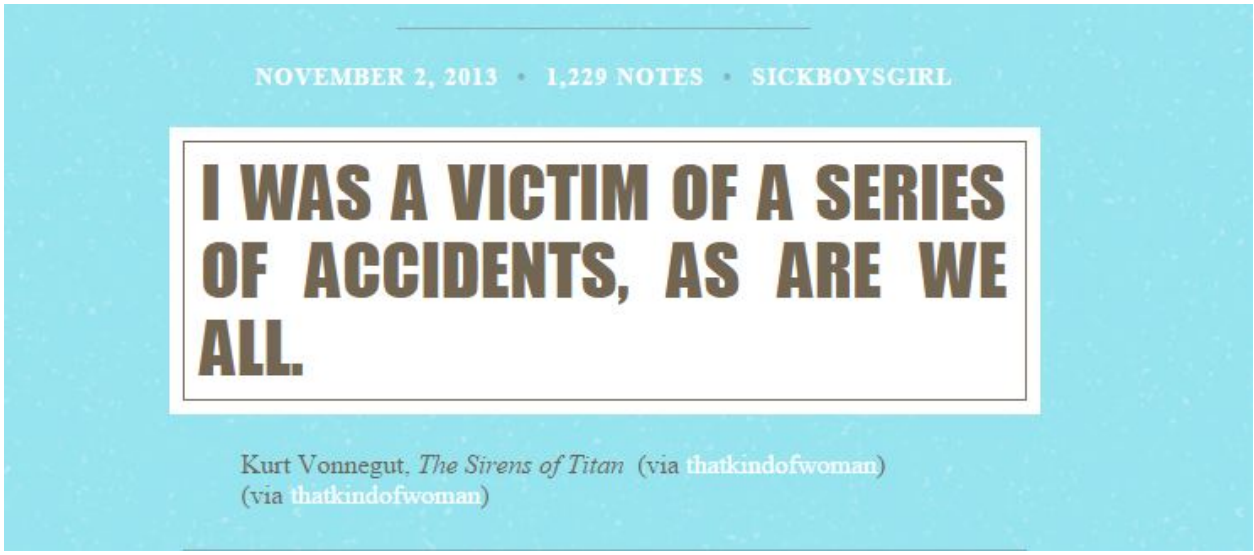
I don't remember how old I was – I had to have been at least in my teens – when I stood in that kitchen with you, the lights dimmed low because they hurt your eyes otherwise, which always caused shadows to dance along the rust granite backsplash. You told me that if I ever had trouble peeling garlic to smash it with my palm. I haven't

[83] HelloGoodbye. (2004). Dear Jamie…Sincerely, Me. On *Unknown Album* [digital download].

thought about that in almost ten years. It's true that scents can trigger our most powerful memories.

It used to scare me that I would find characteristics of yours in my adult behavior. Off-hand witty comments when watching TV shows; the crazy stupid love for bleu cheese; sitting facing the doors at restaurants so you could always see who was walking in; overly peppering the strangest foods (for you, soup; me, mac and cheese); the enchantment with crime TV shows; coffee; obsessive compulsive disorder; Bourbon, neat.

I never wanted to be anything like you, and I still don't. But I guess you and me both:



Only you weren't strong enough to face it. I'd like to think I am. I wake up in the morning, and I thrive. It's hard for me to talk about you. It's easier for me to say both you and mom are dead, when in reality, I have no clue where you actually are. After I blocked you on Facebook and ceased all communications, you became dead (to me). Really, you did kill yourself on April 12, 2013. You've been dead to me for a long time, and I understand why it has to be that way. But in light of recent discoveries, I don't know if you and I will ever have a relationship again. Really, we haven't had a healthy

one in a long time – if ever. I don't know how I could talk to you, let alone look at you. In most conclusions, people write about how they've reached a place of forgiveness and have put it all behind them. But this isn't that type of conclusion. I haven't forgiven you – yet. I know I will one day, but that day is not today. It's something I actively work on, and writing this thesis helped a lot. But I can't package this up all nice and neatly with an affirmation of forgiveness, because I don't forgive you. Not yet.

I know life is never easy and everyone has their hardships. For long time I wished I could have had just one or two fewer trials and tribulations – but then my narrative would have not been the same.

I am an amazing, wonderful, smart person who grew up to do incredible things despite my odds. I may have grown up with financial privilege – for which I am thankful for because I never wanted for food or a roof over my head or novelties – but the odds were always stacked against me. People who know my full story wonder how I didn't wind up selling drugs on the street corner or some other equally disturbing fate. I became who I am today despite you.

I won't show you this letter, or this thesis, and from what I hear from my brother, you're not in your right mind for long enough to even try to find it anywhere. Despite it all I still wish it could have been different. It feels like needles are being stuck into every pore of my skin because I grieve for you and for mom, and I grieve for the family we never were but that I so wish we could have been.

Two researchers I really like and respect, Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (1999) say that this kind of life narrative research I've done has "therapeutic value" and that "though therapy might not be the major objective in [the] research, it is often a useful

result of good writing" (p. 754). This thesis finishes a degree, but it also provides me a kind of closure. It has allowed me to look at these events after some distance. It has allowed me to make sense of something that never made a whole lot of sense. And it has allowed me to finally begin to learn how to move on.

But, I've reached a point where I no longer need you or obsessively grieve for what I never had. I have friends that have had my back through anything, thick and thin, and I am so eternally grateful and love every second I spend with them. I have a big brother, who may drive me crazy sometimes, but is nonetheless my confidant. And your second wife, my stepmom, even though you two aren't married anymore, has been more a parent to me than I have ever otherwise known, and I love her more than words can even express.

I don't tell you this to upset you. I tell you this, in a letter I'd never send, to get it off my chest. This thesis is the culmination of everything I've worked for academically, as well as everything I have become as a person. I started my master's degree after you were mentally and emotionally long gone, and I left orientation that August day in 2013 and called you and you cried and said you missed me and said you screwed up and I asked when the last time you had a drink was and you said you couldn't answer and I hung up and I cried. For what was supposed to have been the first step towards the most exciting journey of my life became tarnished by you. Do you remember that was the last time I heard your voice?

My hope for this thesis isn't just for me. I want to provoke people to think critically about what roles social media play in their own lives. They frequently gets dismissed as narcissistic hallmarks of an equally narcissistic generation, but they have

been an outlet for me, an extension where I could be a simpler version and adopt that cathartic relief to deal with the chaos in the backstage. There is a lot of good that comes from social media, and there are a lot of things worthy of study. There are myriad political, economic, cultural, and social implications, and we, as researchers, are just beginning to scratch the surface of them. And because this is a field that changes so rapidly, it's an exciting time to be a social media scholar.

Here, in this current research, I'm saying there are more benefits to it than the supposed narcissistic tendencies. What motivates other people to post what they post? How do others engage in identity bending? I hope this thesis serves as a springboard for several studies like this and helps fellow scholars gain insight into social media research. Understanding this identity bending I've engaged in – due in part to you – will perhaps make others examine their own identity bending and in turn, question and seek to understand the identity bending of others.

But that may also be a potential limitation of what I've done here. No one has had these exact circumstances that I've been through. Maybe others aren't as flexible in identity bending as I've been. Maybe someone's inner identity truths are in fact narcissism, or a flagrant disregard for social norms and social networking site conventions. Also, what about the people who typically refrain from posting personal stories on social media and only share links or talk about current events? What can we learn about someone from those actions? It's worth examining in future studies, and if those attributes are the motivations for identity bending (or lack thereof), it can add to this elementary understanding of the concept. Social media are such new phenomena that any and all research we can do on them will provide insight into a rapidly changing field.

I should know. I learned that from you, Mr. Technology Guru.

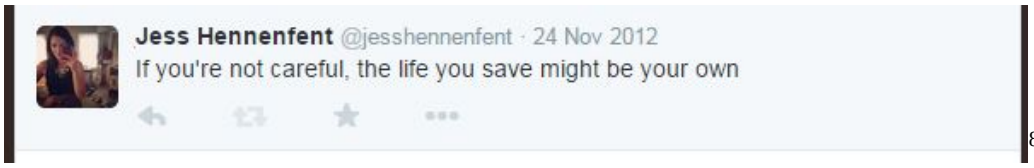
One of the books I read for this thesis – that I think you might have been really interested in – was called Identity Technologies *by Anna Poletti and Julia Rak (2013). In the introduction, they suggest that "designers of computer hardware and software use the idea of affordances to help them design interfaces that can be use efficiently" (p. 5). This is what you did, Dad. Over the years of your life you helped build these very platforms that I study in this paper. You built the pathways so I could one day ask the questions. I know you didn't do this consciously, or specifically for me, but I guess I owe you some thanks (for that anyway).*

I'm more ambivalent now than I was in years before. It no longer bothers me or fills me with constant pain. I've accepted who you are, even if that means I can't be in your life. And knowing what I know now, I'm sorry you were so perverse in the head that you viewed me, your only daughter, as a sexual object. Like I said, I can't forgive you yet, but I will one day. Also, I understand now that your addiction, your problems, they were all you and in no way reflect on me. I actively refuse your narrative, and I will not let it become a part of mine.

And so as the smell of garlic fills my home, the home I've built for myself in the beautiful life I've constructed out of ash and rubble, I almost feel content with it all. I feel a momentary twinge of nostalgia as I follow the wafting scents to a place where we were briefly and ignorantly a happy family, when you clapped the loudest at my piano recitals. I follow the smell as far it goes before it diffuses through my wonderful life, and I know that even though I've bent my identity and blocked you, you will always be there, and I'm

okay with that. Now the smell is gone, and so are you, and I turn to get my dog's leash to walk him and be thankful for what I have.

This thesis has been an emotional journey for me and seems only apt to finish with this letter. Ellis and Bochner (1999) say that with this kind of research, you "come to understand yourself in deeper ways. And with understanding yourself comes a deeper understanding of others. Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and for the world" (p. 738). And I have. I've traveled back to and relived the worst days of my life, but I did so because it would benefit me and benefit others. My identity may remain in constant flux and do more flips on social media than a Cirque-du-Soleil acrobat, but my innermost truths remain. I am a part of everything that has ever happened to me. This thesis held my hand as I walked back into the Hell we had, but I came out stronger. Because, after all, that's just the thing about all narratives:



[84]

[84] Rhimes, S. (writer), & Goldwyn, T. (director). (2005). Winning a Battle, Losing the War [television series episode]. In S. Rhimes (producer) *Grey's Anatomy.* Los Angeles, CA: ShondaLand / ABC Studios.

This is actually a misquote. The real quote from titular character Meredith Grey says, "Victories are counted by the number of lives saved. And once in a while, if you're smart, the life you save could be your own." Regardless, the sentiment stands.

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