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Hannah E. Conway   April 10, 2018

Reconciling Narrative and Online Identities: Stories of Technology in the *New York Times*
Modern Love Column

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Abstract

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Social psychologists have written extensively about how our life stories are the foundation of our identities. **"**Reconciling Narrative and Online Identities" investigates how the advent of cyberculture and technology has introduced a new way of telling our life stories, and subsequently, has transformed our identities. It uses personal essays published in the *New York Times'* Modern Love column as insight into how this construction of virtual stories impacts the offline lives of their narrators—and how people write about this change.

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INTRODUCTION

At a Café in Copenhagen

There was nothing about Helene that was inherently strange, and it took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that my discomfort arose from the fact that there was initially nothing about her that reminded me of my mom—the only other person who has managed to mollify my dad through compassion and intimacy. Sitting across from her at Café Reuzberg, I smelled notes of amber and patchouli, brazen scents in comparison to my mother's delicate rain oils, which I had come to recognize as my greatest comfort, lingering on my sheets for days after she had scratched my fevered back in bed. What my mom was in Easter pastels and blonde hair, painting my bedroom a ballerina gown blush, Helene was in juniper greens, her ring finger revealing a large jade stone as it raked through her dark hair.

It was December 2016, and though we were meeting at a casual coffee shop within the Copenhagen city center, finally meeting Helene felt like a formal interview. I rushed home after class and put on mascara and dark maroon lipstick and even brushed my teeth. I walked laps around the block, trying to kill time and steady my breathing. I didn't know what she looked like, but when I peered through the window of the coffee shop, I deduced that she was probably the only one in the café middle aged and unaccompanied. I took another lap around the block before I walked down the stairs of the entrance and opened the door. She stood up at the sight of me.

Helene is my dad's ex-fiancé. They met at a bar on Ios, Greece, in June 1986. At the time, he was restless and decided to escape the toxic fumes of LA's entertainment industry and spend the summer exploring Europe. Helene describes the encounter as relatively unromantic as far as *the first time we met* stories go. "It was just a bar. I thought he was good-looking. And he was easy to talk to." He was 23. She was 21. He grew up in the States. She, Copenhagen. He

proposed after five days. They spent all of June together and parted ways at the Athens port. He continued to travel across the continent in her absence until he took a ferry across the North Sea to stay with her parents in Copenhagen. Then, she traveled with him to the States. On December 20, 1986, my dad put all his stuff in storage and hopped on People's Express Airline from LAX to JFK. He transferred planes, landed at London Heathrow, and took another ferry across the North Sea back to Denmark to live with Helene.

We can't choose our parents, but we can choose to try and understand their pasts, which is what I suppose I was attempting to do when I found myself in my dad's old city, Copenhagen, and decided to message Helene on Facebook.

Hi Helene,

My name is Hannah, and I am Dan Conway's daughter. I'm trying to get to know my Dad a little bit better, especially the life that he had here in Copenhagen, and I was hoping you could tell me what he was like when he was my age. I'm also just interested in learning about Danish culture and lifestyle. I'd love to meet you!

—Hannah

She agreed to meet me. My conversation with Helene fluctuated between moments of laughter and solemnity, but it was imbued with an overtone of uneasiness on my side. I asked her questions about him: What was he like? What did you love about him? What drove you crazy? She shuffled around in her purse and pulled out a gallon Ziploc bag, filled with prints from *back then*. She took them out, and one by one placed them on the table on the table in front of us. Dad sitting on the thick steps of a whitewashed house in Santorini. Dad sitting on a rooftop in Holte, Copenhagen. Dad sitting on a bench in Boston. Dad with his dad in Willamstown, Massachusetts. Dad wearing a fedora on Venice Beach, palm trees in the background. For the next two hours, every time I looked down, my own eyes were reflected back at me. He looked

young and happy. And he was. Partly, because he was in love with the woman whose glassy, green eyes were studying me each time I looked back up.

We talked for two hours, and when it was time to go, I half-hugged her goodbye, thanking her for receptiveness—"I hope we'll meet again one day"—and walked back to my apartment, thinking about the fact that whatever life my dad might've led with Helene probably would have been equally as interesting and beautiful as his life is now. That whoever their daughter was, whatever her name might have been, she would have her own memories—her own stories of picking out the Christmas tree with him, her legs dangling over his shoulders at basketball games. Maybe, I thought, she would have the same eyes, too.

As far as I know now, there was no big falling out between my dad and Helene—no singular Machiavellian scheme committed by either of them. They both credit their eventual break-up to being too young and from vastly different places, though they tell different stories about their past selves.

My dad moved back to Los Angeles from Copenhagen in October 1987. He was cleaning out his office desk when he found a scrap of graph paper scribbled with the handwriting of the woman who sat beside him on his People's Express flight to JFK, his layover en route to Copenhagen in December 1986. When they exited the aircraft together, she gave him her contact information and briefly introduced my dad to her parents—my grandparents. Boarding his next flight to Europe, he held onto the paper. Almost a year later, five minutes after he called her, my mom rode her bicycle across the street to meet my dad.

This is a love story, a breakup story, and a story of online connection. It's also a story that is excerpted from a larger piece I wrote for a creative non-fiction class I was enrolled in when I studied abroad—a story that haunted me both in its writing process and its aftermath. I

visualize this story as an asterisk (*), born at the intersection of three different internalized and evolving life stories: my father's, Helene's, and my own. Different narrative identities had been constructed between Helene and my Dad, and subsequently, different stories were relayed to me. Facebook acted as the bridge between all three of us, cutting through a generation and twenty years of lost time, while also leading me to theorize how my Dad's relationship with Helene might have been different had technology been an acting force in the 1980s. Perhaps, if they had video chatting and immediate texting, it would have encouraged them to try a long-distance relationship, instead of my Dad moving to Copenhagen, in which case he wouldn't have met my Mom on the plane, and, subsequently, I wouldn't be alive.

Overview of Thesis

Our lives unfold not only through the stories we choose to tell about ourselves, but also through the stories that are told about us. From sitting around a dining room table at supper to the fleeting moments before class starts, narratives pervade our social interactions and notify others of our past lives, current states, and imagined futures. The oral and written stories we share are often imbued with emotion and meaning and can be clouded by nostalgia, tainted with regret, deepened by perspective, lightened by time, and cathartic for the teller. Contemporary psychological theorists uphold the notion that storytelling and memory are constructive in their work to affirm, confer, and cohere the concurrent identity and well-being of the narrator.[1] There is validity in their studies as they relate to oral and written narratives—storytelling is a primal act that reinforces emotional regulation and affirms identity. But there is a gap in this research in relation to our globalized, online world, where technology has granted individuals a newfound

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[1] Martin A. Conway, "Memory and the self," *Journal of Memory and Language* 594, no. 628 (August 29, 2005): 595.

ability to construct virtual stories of the self. Therefore, this project seeks to establish how the Internet has started to influence and control our narrative identities and life stories, particularly as this relates to stories of love. Its primary undertaking is the analysis of technology as a theme in personal essays published in the *New York Times* Modern Love column.

Current theorists in psychology such as Dan McAdams and James Pennebaker posit the power of storytelling and narrative to give rise to agency, meaning making, and identity formation. In order to provide context for the enduring valence of narrative work, I must situate its various components within the work of those who argue for its agentive capacity. My argument for virtual narratives as bearing on human identity, therefore, starts with an overview of the theoretical framework and literature posited by those narrative social psychologists whose research on narrative psychological approaches to questions of identity render their work central to the field at large.

In further explaining the need to negotiate narrative identities and online identities, this project advances by putting the work of media studies scholars who have examined the sociological and psychological effects of living an interconnected, cyberspace world in dialogue with creative nonfiction essays published by the Modern Love column in the *New York Times*. It progresses with an analysis of these writings in order to see how the virtual construction of stories influence identity and love. Begun in 2004, the "Modern Love" column asks writers to submit "deeply personal essays about contemporary relationships" with the qualification that "essays should spring from some central dilemma the writer has faced in his or her life…[and] it helps if the situation has a contemporary edge.[2]" Since then, the column has received over

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[2] How To Submit Modern Love Essays," *The New York Times*,
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/21/fashion/howtosubmit_modernlove.html.

80,000 submissions and has published almost 700 essays, yet no scholarly research on the writings or what they represent has been published to date.

My focus on Modern Love stems from a combination of personal interest in the column, its longevity, and its authenticity at demonstrating how people love in the 21st century, the latter a function of "having an open e-mail address and inviting unsolicited submissions rather than trying to come up with ideas in editorial meetings," says its editor, Daniel Jones.[3] Honoring Jones's aim to "cast out a net and see what people are concerned with and writing about," my intention is to situate each essay included in this thesis within the cultural context and societal implications of what it means to live in world in which the Internet is shaping our lives physically and emotionally.[4] These implications take the form of chapters, in which eleven Modern Love columns are catalogued, summarized, and analyzed. Each chapter uses relevant essays from the column to raise certain questions fundamental to this thesis: How does the illusion of control that the Internet provides affect stories of the self? How has the Internet changed the way we find love? If forgetting is crucial to growth and development, what happens to an individual's identity when a worldwide database remembers every facet of one's digitally recorded past? Lastly, how has the Internet compressed temporal identity, especially in its ability to reactivate and maintain dormant social ties? By using Modern Love essays to answer these questions, I suggest that the virtual versions of our life stories have reconfigured our narrative identities by bringing forth an *illusion of control*, *screened intimacies, an inability to forget,* and the possibility of *reconnection.*

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[3] Daniel Jones (editor, Modern Love, *New York Times)*, in discussion with the author, February 2018.
[4] Ibid.

CHAPTER ONE:

NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND STORIES OF THE SELF

Storytelling as a Primal Act

"Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating," writes Richard Kearney,

professor of philosophy at Boston College, in his book *On Stories*.[5] Tracing the importance of

storytelling in history from the founding myths of Western civilization to Artistotle's view that

engaging in storytelling enables us to occupy a "shareable" world, Kearney contends that

"[storytelling] has been recognized from the origin of time as an indispensable ingredient of any

meaningful society…[and] the narrative imperative has assumed many genres—myth, epic,

sacred history, legend, saga, folktale, romance, allegory, confession, chronicle, satire, novel."[6]

He maintains the viewpoint that stories have always aimed to "assuage" our greatest fears and

provide a space for asking big questions and also attends to the idea that the core of human

existence constitutes us as beings who "are constantly interpreting themselves—pre-reflectively

and pre-consciously—in terms of beginnings, middles and ends.[7]" Kearney asserts, therefore,

that narratives are the inscription of our personal lives, and on a broader level, our national

identities.

Narrative Identity

The ways in which individuals inscribe their lives through story define who we are. In his

discussion of the self-narration process humans continually engage in, neurologist Oliver Sacks

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[5] Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (Taylor and Francis, 2001),1, digital file.
[6] Ibid., 6.
[7] Ibid., 129.

writes, "it might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities."[8] Concurring with Sacks's explication of self-narration, Paul John Eakin highlights the relation between narrative and identity, foregrounding his book *Living Autobiographically* with the proposition that "when it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely *about* self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self.[9]"

Eakin's proposition of narrative as part of the self is related to the life story model of identity as postulated by McAdams, who embarks on explicating this model by first defining identity as "an integrative configuration of self-in-the-adult-world" [10] and then defining narrative identity as "an individual's internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self."[11] McAdams posits that this integration of our identity through life stories and narrative occurs during late adolescence and early adulthood, the time period when we begin to make sense of our lives. Fundamental to his study of narrative work is his articulation that "the stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large."[12] McAdams, therefore, sees storytelling as a reconciliation between the self and society, noting that "the self comes to terms with society through narrative identity."[13] This belief is fundamental to formulating this project's guiding assertion that virtual stories impact our identity. If McAdams's aforementioned statement is true in that individuals learn to accept

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[8] Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat: And Other Clinical Tales* (New York, NY: Summit Books, 1985),110.

[9] Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically* (n.p.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 2.

[10] Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 102, https://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/docs/publications/430816076490a3ddfc3fe1.pdf.

[11] Dan P. McAdams, "Personal Narratives and the Life Story," in *Handbook of personality: Theory and Research Third Edition*, ed. Oliver P. John, Richard W. Robins, and Lawrence A. Pervin (n.p.: Guilford Press, n.d.), 242.

[12] McAdams, "Personal Narratives," 243.

[13] Ibid.

and live in the society they inhabit through a narrative identity, then the concurrent shifts toward

a more technological and mediated society must also shift the *way* we develop a narrative

identity in these new domains.

In "Personal Narratives and the Life Story," McAdams segments the narrative study of

lives into six common principles: "the self is storied," "stories integrate lives," "stories are told

in social relationships," "stories change over time," "stories are cultural texts," and "some stories

are better than others."[14] The first principle, "the self is storied," maintains that humans are

storytellers from a young age, organizing remembered episodes of the past into life periods,

general events, and event-specific knowledge. McAdams indicates that the recalling of stories

privileges personal meaning over facts, as memories are brought back in a way that serves the

present goals of the narrator.[15] The second principle, "stories integrate lives," refers to the way

autobiographical reasoning is constructed in a way that serves the narrator's life purposes.

"Stories are told in social relationships" maintains that "narrative expression of the self cannot be

understood outside the context of its assumed audience." Simply, stories are told in different

ways for different listeners.[16] The fourth principle acknowledges that memory is fallible; stories

change over time depending on the current life of the listener. Principle five underscores the

importance of culture as a mirror to the story that is being told. Lastly, principle six contends that

"some stories are better than others," in that some stories "suggest a moral perspective."[17]

My primary engagement with McAdams's work draws on the fifth principle, that each

narrative account reflects the culture of its teller. In particular, the Modern Love column serves

to represent the change in how people find love and maintain it in the 21st century.

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[14] Ibid," 242-252.
[15] Ibid, 244.
[16] Ibid., 245.
[17] Ibid., 246.

Narrative Coherence & Storytelling as Redemptive

The ability of a story to integrate an identity heavily relies on its narrative coherence. Beyond the principal notions that a story exists to be told, one of the primary elements of storytelling is that the storyteller must be communicative and understood by his/her listener.[18] Narrative coherence refers to both "the structure or form of a story" and the "story's content."[19] In a clinical setting, there is substantial evidence that the creation of a coherent account of traumatic experiences has long-term effects on emotional well-being.[20] Narrative coherence allows stories to integrate lives, in that they "bring together different self-ascribed tendencies, roles, goals, and remembered events into a synchronic pattern that expresses how the individual person, who seems to encompass so many different things, is at the same time, one thing as well."[21] In addition to granting humans the ability to organize their life events into synchronic patterns, stories also grant humans the ability to organize their life events in a "diachronic integration," providing causal accounts as to how one has evolved from point A to point B to point C in their life.[22]

A core tenet of McAdams's work is his claim that coherent stories can be "generative" and "redemptive," citing everything from spiritual autobiographies of seventeenth-century Puritans and African American slave narratives to the popularity of self-help books in contemporary culture to indicate the extent to which the redemptive narrative is woven into the fabric of American identity.[23] McAdams defines the redemptive self as "a psychological

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[18] Dan P. McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19, no. 2 (2006): 109.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Robyn Fivush, "Children's recollections of traumatic and nontraumatic events," *Development and Psychopathology*, no. 10 (1998): 712.
[21] McAdams, "Personal Narratives," 244.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Dan P. McAdams, "2007 Division One Award Addresses American Identity: The Redemptive Self," *The General Psychologist* 43, no. 1: 21. Italics added.

narrative…that functions to support or reinforce some of the most well-meaning efforts of caring, productive, and principled American adults to make a positive difference in the world."[24] His apparatus for measuring positive difference is *generativity*, a term described by American-German psychologist Erik Erikson to mean adults' concern for and commitment to the well-being of future generations.[25] The primary contention of McAdams in regard to generativity is that "generative men and women tend to tell a certain story about their lives, a story that emphasizes the themes of suffering, redemption and personal destiny."[26] Telling stories that lend themselves to those aforementioned motifs—suffering, redemption, personal destiny—is a generative process because the denouement often results in a lesson emphasizing resiliency in the face of misfortune. Redemptive stories shift from bad to good and are reconstructed retroactively. An example of one might involve a partner's unfaithfulness that eventually leads to a new, healthy relationship. Ultimately, highly generative adults have an arsenal of redemptive stories embedded within their narrative identities. According to McAdams, the stories set up by highly generative adults often involve a moral imperative: "*if I am especially favored in a difficult world, then it becomes my calling to exert some positive impact on that world.*"[27] This redemptive story relies on morals and self-fulfillment, but McAdams is aware of its shortcomings, particularly in regard to its American exceptionalism mindset and its neglect of the possibility that narratives of tragedy can also be beneficial. He ultimately argues that "knowing who we are as Americans should involve knowing the strengths and limitations of the stories we live by, and knowing that others may live by stories very different from our own.[28]"

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[24] Ibid.
[25] Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society (2nd ed.)* (New York, NY: Norton, 1963).
[26] McAdams, "2007 Division," 21.
[27] Ibid, 23.
[28] Ibid, 26.

For McAdams, the act of storytelling is constructive, so long as we are aware that each story contains its limitations and belongs to its narrator.

Regulating Emotion Through Written Narrative

The narrative form is often bifurcated into subgenres: oral and written, both of which allow the narrator to engage in the reflexive processes of mediation, integration, and revelation of past events. This process is especially constructive in regard to trauma. Even a cursory look at the psychological literature provides substantial evidence that traumatic experiences are directly related to illness rates, and that having any sort of trauma and not working through, or talking about, the experience elevates the risk for illness. More recently, however, theorists have found that expressive writing can stand in the place of oral disclosure, resulting in many positive health-related outcomes, including "significant drops in physician visits."[29] Conducted by James Pennebaker, the expressive writing task of this study, called the writing paradigm, involves participants writing about assigned topics for 15 to 30 minutes every day for three days. In the control group, the participants are presented with "superficial" topics to write about, whereas those in the experimental group are assigned the following prompt:

> For the next three days, I would like for you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie this trauma to your childhood, your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives. You may also link this event to your past, your present, or your future, or to who you have been, who you like to be, or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or on different topics each day. Not everyone has had a single trauma but all of us have had major conflicts or stressors—and you can write about these as well. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar. The only rule is that once you begin writing, continue to do so until your time is up.[30]

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[29] Cindy K. Chung and James W. Pennebaker, Expressive writing and its links to mental and physical health," in *Foundations of Health Psychology* (n.p.: Oxford University Press, 2007), 264.
[30] Ibid., 265.

Through this study, Pennebaker addresses expressive writing as a domain that should earn a place within the discourse predominating the field of narrative studies, especially due to its effects on health-related outcomes. This is especially true when participants are encouraged to freely choose their writing topic, as "forcing individuals to write about a particular topic or in a particular way may cause them to focus on the writing itself rather than on the topic and the role of their emotions in the overall story.[31]" He found that students who engage in the process of writing about emotional events experience an increase in grades in the months following the study, and that adults who have been recently laid off were hired more quickly after writing. Pennebaker found that most studies involving talking alone to a tape recorder or a therapist provide similar biological, mood, and cognitive effects, reinforcing the importance of storytelling as a vehicle to change one's perspective.

In order to evaluate the success of the writing paradigm, Pennebaker developed the LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry Word Count), a coding scheme to analyze the emotional, cognitive, and structural components that comprise the participant's written speech samples. Analysis of language using the LIWC is split into dozens of categories, spanning negative emotion words (e.g., sad, angry), positive emotion words (e.g., happy, laugh), causal words (e.g., because, reason) and insight words (e.g., understand, realize).[32] Research using the LIWC found that the more patients used positive emotion words, the more their health improved. However, participants who used either very few or a high rate of negative emotion words were more likely to remain sick, in comparison to those who incorporated a moderate amount of negative emotion words in their writing. Additionally, at the foreground of Pennebaker's research is the realization

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[31] Ibid., 268.
[32] Ibid., 276.

that it is possible to "determine the degree to which people have come to know their emotions and experiences by the language they use."[33] Those who incorporate a pattern of reflective insights ("I now realize that…") or ("I understand why…"), and causal words are more likely to experience higher grade point averages, find jobs, and gain improvements in memory.[34] Pennebaker's writing paradigm ultimately furthers the larger cultural and therapeutic benefits of narrative work.

Modes of Expressive Writing: The Memoir Boom

If the aforementioned theorists account for the ways in which narrative work serves as constructive to identity formation, then it is imperative to look at the myriad modes of writing in which revelations of personal experience can take form. Over the past two decades, the memoir form has gained prominence in Amazon carts and on bookshelves, ranging from feel-good sensationalist celebrity accounts to narratives of domestic abuse. In an indication of the memoir's influence on the first decade of the twenty-first century, the *New York Times* bestseller hardcover nonfiction list for the week of December 19, 2010, lists seven memoirs in the top 15 entries.[35] As of December 2017, Jeanette Wall's *The Glass Castle* (2005)*,* a nonfiction bildungsroman that chronicles her dysfunctional childhood, spent more than seven years on the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction bestseller list, a particularly long time in the changing and chaotic publishing industry.[36]

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[33] Ibid., 277.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Julie Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 207.
[36] "Paperback Nonfiction," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Books: Best Sellers, https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2012/03/18/paperback-nonfiction/

Some theorists posit that because memoirs are committed to capturing the passage of time, the appeal of the memoir genre is starkly related to globalization, and the "growing sense of the speed of change and the declining importance of distance on our planet."[37] Other theorists think that the memoir industry operates on "too much focus on the self…[and] too much representation of victimization,"[38] or that some bad writers turn to memoir writing because it is easier than fiction.[39] In reflecting on what she calls "the memoir problem," American historian Paula S. Fass postulates that the mainstream obsession with the memoir form is a "response to a heightened sense of the transience of all contemporary experience and a testament to the fragility of human enterprises."[40] Simply put, the memoir form privileges the individualized self instead of a faceless society, and it privileges "not the author's developing self, but the individual and historical events through which the author has passed."[41] However, it is imperative to note that criticisms of the memoir form as self-indulgent and narcissistic are at odds with the generative viewpoint that psychologists such as McAdams and Pennebaker foreground.

Modes of Expressive Writing: The Personal Essay

While both use story to make sense of and reflect on a life, the personal essay, another mode of expressive writing, is shorter than the memoir, and places more emphasis on the author's perspective or opinions on one event or topic. As the mode of expressive writing explored most in this project, the personal essay can be considered a subcategory of the essay at large.[42] At the core of the personal essay is its intimacy, and it operates on the "supposition that

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[37] Paula S. Fass, "Review: The Memoir Problem," *Reviews in American History* 34, no. 1: 108.
[38] Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing*, 1
[39] Ibid., 14.
[40] Fass, "Review: The Memoir," 111.
[41] Marlene Kadar, ed., *Reading Life-Writing: An Anthology* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), xiii.
[42] Phillip Lopate, comp., *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), xxiii.

there is a certain unity to human experience."[43] In the introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, Phillip Lopate characterizes the personal essay through its pervasive conversational element, which uses language that is casual and everyday, rather than formal and impregnable. Lopate cites this "conversational dynamic" as necessary to "establish a quick emotional intimacy with the audience."[44]

Importantly, Lopate views the evaluation of the personal essay as a vertical dimension. As readers, we watch to see if the essayist can go deep enough into his or her psychic defenses to "handle the topic honestly."[45] Essayists who are able to accomplish this are subsequently able to kindle self-recognition in the reader and illuminate larger truths about the human condition. Lopate would object to any suggestion that the form breeds narcissism if done correctly. In fact, he suggests the undressing of the soul in the personal essay "is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist's self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor."[46] He cites E.B. White as a writer who challenges the problem of egotism within the personal essay:

> I think some people find the essay the last resort of the egotist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form for their taste; they feel that it is presumptuous of a writer to assume that his little excursions or his small observations will interest the reader. There is some justice in their complaint. I have always been aware that I am by nature self-absorbed and egoistical; to write of myself to the extent I have done indicates a too great attention to my own life, not enough to the lives of others. I have worn many shirts, and not all of them have been a good fit. But when I am discouraged or downcast I need only fling open the door of my closet, and there, hidden behind everything else, hangs the mantle of Michel de Montaigne, smelling slightly of camphor.[47]

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Lopate, *The Art of the Personal*, xxv.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Lopate, *The Art of the Personal*, xxvi.
[47] E.B. White, *Essays of E.B. White* (n.p.: Joanna Cotler Books, 1978).

While White acknowledges the foundational solipsism of the personal essay, he uses the patriarch of the form, Michel de Montaigne, to justify his engagement with it. Lopate writes that the trick to managing the egotism of the personal essay is to realize that "one is not important, except insofar as one's example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish."[48] Contrary to Pennebaker, Lopate's explication of the personal essay situates the role of the reader, rather than the teller, as its principal subject and beneficiary. In this regard, it's the reader's loneliness that is assuaged in the personal essay, rather than the perspective and emotion of the writer.

Although the personal essay has been around since Montaigne, its modern prevalence on websites such as xoJane, Thought Catalog, and Jezebel began, according to Jia Tolentino, staff writer for *The New Yorker,* when social media platforms allowed a space for people to write and broadcast stories of their personal lives in public. Tolentino contends, however, that it was the "invisible hand of the page-view economy" that allowed web sites to generate ad revenue in proportion to page clicks that caused a proliferation of editorial contracts to include the personal essay within their budgets.[49] Tolentino also notes that the commodification of personal experience was primarily a space for women, who "wrote about the most difficult things that had ever happened to them and received not much in return."[50] The economy of the personal essay, as regulated on the Internet, therefore, introduced a dangerous territory within the construction of stories, whereby flashy emotions could go viral for free. This is a common online occurrence— identities are constructed, emotions are commodified, and stories of the self are regulated.

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[48] Lopate, *The Art of the Personal*, xxxii.
[49] *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-personal-essay-boom-is-over.
[50] Ibid.

This project considers the *New York Times* column Modern Love a space for both essayists and readers to fulfill Lopate's guideline of elucidating human traits and easing feelings of loneliness, a power on which its editor, Daniel Jones, comments when he notes he has "heard from people who have grown up with [the column] over the years, who started reading the essays in their teens, and have since used them as touchstones for situations they have found themselves in."[51] Because I organize my study around essays solely involving the theme of technology, this thesis is not a comprehensive evaluation of the column as a whole, nor is it an evaluation of the aptitude of each writer. Though cognizant of Tolentino's viewpoint that the surge of the personal essay commodifies personal experience, I make no claims for or against the therapeutic benefits of narrative work as it relates to this column, as I believe such statements are individual and belong to the column's author. However, this project does use the personal essay as form to gauge *how* people are writing about current technology and its effects.

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[51] Daniel Jones (editor, Modern Love, *New York Times)*, in discussion with the author, February 2018.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE STORIES WE CONSTRUCT ONLINE

The trend of the circulating personal essays online gives rise to the overall question of how humans have started to use the virtual realm as a medium to not only share stories of the self, but also construct them. With the rise of the Internet and the proliferation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Tinder, people are participating in a new kind of storytelling, one that complicates the constructive elements of narrative work. Returning to *On Stories*, Richard Kearney acknowledges this change in storytelling, but doesn't view it as harmful to the form:

> In terms of recent controversies, I personally endorse the affirmative view of narrativity advanced by theorists like Ricoeur, Taylor, Rorty, MacIntyre or Nussbum. Or indeed by more popular authors like Christopher Vogler, author of *The Writer's Journey*, who argues that the advent of cyber-culture should not be seen as a threat to storytelling but as a catalyst for new possibilities of interactive, non-linear narration. The fact is that no matter how much technologies transform our modes of storytelling, people will always 'enjoy going into a story trance and allowing themselves to be led through a tale by a masterful story weaver.'[52]

The rise of interactive, non-linear narration in our daily lives is largely due to the development of technology; even a cursory look at people in a public setting reveals the impact that technology has on our lives. According to statistics published in September 2017, Facebook has 1.37 billion daily active users, and 2.07 billion monthly active users.[53] This number is slightly lower, though still of large magnitude, for Instagram, a subsidiary of Facebook, which has 800 million users. The websites are meant to be an extension of a real-life social network;

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[52] Kearney, *On Stories*, 128.
[53] Facebook, "Stats," Facebook, https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/

Facebook's slogan promises to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together."[54]

Facebook equips people with the ability to curate a virtual story about themselves. Upon creating an account, users build a profile and timeline by filling out their name, birthday, work and education, places lived, contact and basic info, family and relationships, important life events, and other trivial details: favorite sports, music, movies, TV shows, books, companies, and restaurants. At the top of the webpage, users are asked "What's on your mind, [Insert Name Here]?" creating a forum for people to share their thoughts, emotions, and daily musings. Perhaps more importantly though, Facebook also allows people to construct an audience to listen to this story, as people can freely choose whom to friend or unfriend from their social network, letting some people hear certain things while restraining others. From all corners of the website, Facebook allows for one's virtual story, and subsequently, one's identity, to be micro-managed at all hours of the day, and it is only one of many social media websites that afford its users this ability.

Psychology theorists such as McAdams and Pennebaker contend that stories always work as vehicles for identity formation, meaning-making, and personal agency. However, what is missing from current literature is sufficient recognition of a technological domain in which virtual stories of self can develop, and an exploration of how people reflect on their identities being part of this new context. Legal scholar Massimo Durante gestures to the convergence of offline and online realities, writing:

> In the physical reality, we construct our identity (narratively understood as an open text) within different environmental and social constraints, *i.e.*, within different contexts, that

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[54] Mark Zuckerberg, "Bringing the World Closer Together," Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/bringing-the-world-closer-together/10154944663901634/.

are mainly already structured and given and cannot really be fashioned by our narratives. In contrast, in the digital reality, social networks for instance are platforms (as in the case of Facebook) that enable users to take advantages of networked affordances in order to construct, in informational terms, not only their identities but also to participate in the co-constructions of their networked contexts of communication.[55]

Durante's guiding assertion is that social media networks are "contexts of communication in which young people tend to form their identity more than contexts in which they communicate on the basis of an already established identity," and he suggests that an individual's informational presence in the online world is by no means only a "virtual" presence, but instead has real-life consequences.[56] This gives rise to what he notes as an "intersubjective regime of accountability," a measure of the way in which our online selves are "kept in touch" with reality, to the "extent to which we are called upon to justify, in real life, what we have done in the net."[57] In this sense, accountability in the online world serves as a *principle of reality*."[58] Through this measure of accountability, Durante offers further elaboration on the consequences of the online construction of personal identity, describing the "tension between trust and privacy" that occurs when we disclose personal data online. He makes an important distinction regarding this tension, writing "the identity construction is not simply determined by the disclosure of information (that bears on trust) but is revealed by a multifaceted selection of information (a combination of disclosure and closure) that bears on trust and privacy." This relationship between trust and privacy parlays into Durante's discussion on the relationship between online and narrative identities. He postulates that there is an inherent struggle between *competing instances of the self* whenever a narrative identity is expected to be interpreted and understood online. To explicate

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[55] Massimo Durante, "The Online Construction of Personal Identity through Trust and Privacy," *Information*, 2011, 595.
[56] Ibid., 611.
[57] Ibid, 596.
[58] Ibid., 596.

this belief, he provides a hypothetical study of a case in which one person is asked to write about

her personal history from a selection of data, highlighting that the significance of this selection

resides in the author's need to choose the "most relevant and trustworthy personal data." The

result is two narrating instances of the same self:

> An *autobiographical Self*, whose tale is significant for what the author chooses to select and to narrate: the set of relevant and reliable information. The author is inevitably concerned with tracing a sharp line between what data have to remain private and what data can become public.
>
> A *competitive Self*, implied in the *autobiographical Self*, whose negative tale is significant for what the author excludes. The narrating instance of the competitive self is driven by strong forces, which are not always entirely governed by the author. Often, these forces are at play to prevent people from narrating what is most painful or harmful in their personal history. As we will see below, young people in particular tend to reveal only what they consider *harmless* to them. In this respect, what they narrate is a patchy, variable map of their relative certainties and fragilities, whilst their competitive self prevents them from reporting what can really endangers the integrity and the consistency of their self-narration.[59]

Because one story cannot be reduced to another, there will be an enduring need to

reconcile one's autobiographical self with one's competitive self, which entails both

communicating with others and communicating with *the other* that inhabits the individual. This

process of communication thereby involves the construction of "a trustful and shared context of

communication, where narrative identity is expected to be interpreted."[60] This a complex

phenomenon, and one that this project takes to be true—technology enables individuals with the

ability to mold and alter the meaning of their information.

I use Durante's work as means of converging the terms "narrative identity" and

"technology," because I think it is critical to bring the online construction of identity into the

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[59] Ibid., 605.
[60] Ibid.

field of narrative studies at large. Before the Internet, we developed a narrative identity when we attempted to integrate the reconstructed past with the imagined future for purpose and clarity. However, the Internet as a platform complicates this process, allowing for the formation of a virtual story of self that could be either a direct reflection of our identity or a warped one, misrepresenting the present. If we maintain the views of social psychologists that stories are the foundation of our identity, then it is imperative to consider *how* the virtual version of our stories might impact our identities, and *how* we might write about the tension that exists between our autobiographical self and our competitive self.

My analysis of the Modern Love column is informed by Kearney's view that the advent of cyberculture has transformed our modes of storytelling, and it advances by attempting to reveal the ways in which in this transformation impacts identity. In suggesting that virtual stories of the self can have an impact on identity, I am aware of the vastness, complexity, and intangibility of technology, as well as the myriad ways people engage, or don't engage, as users of it, whether this hinges on access or choice. I am also aware of the complexity and intricacies of identity as shaped by historical factors, family dynamics, race, gender, class and political contexts, and I understand that technology might have different impacts on different identities. In the chapters that follow, however, I look only at the reflections of people whose stories in Modern Love incorporate technology, and I analyze these stories for insights into how the newfound construction of virtual stories might impact the offline lives of their creators. For purposes of this project, I accept Dan McAdams's definition of identity as "an integrative configuration of self-in-the-adult-world."[61] Other aspects of the essayists' identities, apart from

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[61] McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," 102.

what's revealed in the texts, were not disclosed to me. Lastly, I recognize that there are other ways technology might impact the identity of its user beyond the four indices I focus on in the following chapters, brought forth by common themes in the texts with which I directly engage, and I understand that the act of writing with the intention to publish is a different process than writing in a diary, which may have also resulted in some truths being distorted or withheld. This project, however, is solely interested in using the Modern Love column to incite a discussion about the relationship between virtual stories and identity, without extinguishing other documented influences or possibilities.

CHAPTER THREE:

ILLUSIONS OF CONTROL

Identity as a Curated Brand

> "In looking for love, tech gives us access, protection and the power of curation.…But actually, as with so much of tech, it's mostly the illusion of control."[62]
>
> —Daniel Jones

The Modern Love column in the *New York Times* was first published on Oct. 31, 2004, with an aim to "create a forum that explored love in all its messy permutations—romantic love, yes, but also friendship, family."[63] Thirteen years and 80,000 submissions later, Modern Love still anchors human stories within the Fashion & Styles section. The popularity of the column is reflective of the emotional undercurrent present in each essay—during the weekend, the term "modern love" is often the most searched term on nytimes.com, and the 2006 essay "What Shamu Taught Me About a Happy Marriage" became the most e-mailed article in the history of the newspaper, at the time.[64] And in 2016, the *New York Times* partnered with WBUR to create a Modern Love podcast that includes readings of select essays by notable celebrities, such as Uma Thurman, Molly Ringwald, and Jason Alexander.

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[62] "This Valentine's Day, Considering Tech That Keeps Couples Together," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/14/technology/personaltech/valentines-tech-couples-together.html.
[62] Awkward and Amazing: Modern Love at 13," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2017, Style, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/style/modern-love-anniversary.html
[64] Michelle Koidin Jaffee, "Labor of Love," *UVA Magazine*, http://uvamagazine.org/articles/labor_of_love.

With a new essay released every Friday, Modern Love has become what its editor, Daniel Jones, notes as a "time capsule of what's happening in relationships and how they're changing."[65] If we maintain Dan McAdams's viewpoint that personal narratives are in part controlled by the social and cultural norms in which they reside, then it is evident that each Modern Love essay serves as its own blueprint for how people love in the 21st century. Since Modern Love's conception in 2004, technology has developed rapidly, thereby changing our modes of communication and, naturally, altering the ways we construct our identity, tell stories, and love. This project attempts to demonstrate how technology has inserted itself as a character within a selection of Modern Love essays, and the way in which its presence complicates the identity and life story of the writer.

According to narrative psychology, the stories humans tell of their lives, whether oral or written, are inextricable from their identities as a whole. However, with the introduction of the Internet came the introduction of a new space where stories of the self could be more strategically curated and told; specifically, a space where one could construct an online persona that could honestly align with (or distort) one's offline identity, or serve as a time capsule of a former identity that no longer prevails. The need to negotiate two identities—one online and one offline—thereby complicates our life stories.

Identity construction has always been a public process—in localized, face-to-face interactions identity is constructed under a set of constraints. In particular, "the presence of the corporeal body in social encounters prevents people from claiming identities that are inconsistent with the visible part of their physical characteristics, and the shared knowledge of each other's social background and personality attributes renders it difficult for an individual to pretend to be

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[65] Ibid.

what he or she is not."[66] However, the advent of the Internet, and subsequently, the detachment

of the corporeal body from social encounters, has radically shifted identity production, making it

possible for people to more convincingly assume different personas, reinvent themselves, or only

show the highlight reel of their lives. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, aid in this

construction of identity and selective self-presentation, allowing users to "display pictures in

their online albums, describe their personal interests and hobbies, and list their friends and social

networks."[67] Instagram, a photo-sharing app that allows users to share photos and videos either

to public or private followers, has further complicated the self-presentation to include the

creation and maintenance of an "aesthetic," whereby all of one's pictures have a similar edit and

color palette that affirms one's branded identity. Just a cursory search of "Instagram aesthetic"

on Google brings up 21,700,000 results, including articles titled "How to Create A Striking

Instagram Aesthetic," "Instagram Feed Ideas That Make Your Profile Unforgettable," and "How

to Create an Instagram Theme (And Why You Should)."

In the early days of the Internet, our offline identities—who we actually inhabit in our

waking lives—controlled and designed our online identities. But, it seems that now our online

identities have begun to control our offline lives. People go places just to take a picture and post

it online. There is a tacit Instagram etiquette in place—one should not post more than once a day.

And advertising dollars are increasingly going towards social media campaigns. The following

two Modern Love essays and my analysis of them demonstrate the effects of what Daniel Jones

notices as the degree to which young people who've grown up with social media "bring a sense

of audience to nearly everything that they do…[and] see their life as a performance, one that is

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[66] Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grassmuck, and Jason Martin, "Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2008, 1817.
[67] Ibid, 1818.

constantly reviewed by friends, family, aunts, cousins, strangers."[68] This chapter, therefore, enlists the Modern Love narratives that talk about self-branding and performance to illuminate the intricate webs of online identity, illusion, and control. It proceeds by suggesting that the stories we construct of ourselves online—the characters we inhabit through our keyboards and phones—feed back into how we interact with others, and ourselves, in our offline lives. As such, the illusion of control afforded by the Internet translates to a loss of control in reality.

"My So-Called Instagram Life" by Clara Dollar[69]

In February 2017, Modern Love put out a call for essay submissions from college students, an attempt to encapsulate what it is like to love in the college sphere. One of the finalists for the 2017 Modern Love College Essay Contest was Clara Dollar, then a senior at New York University, who submitted an essay titled "My So-Called (Instagram) Life." The essay stories the caricature of herself that she "meticulously cultivated" online and the repercussions that resulted. She starts the essay with what she calls an observation from a guy in her TV writing program, who told her she was "like a cartoon character…always wearing the same thing every day." She reflects on his sentiment:

> He knew the caricature of me that I had…meticulously cultivated. The me I broadcast to the world on Instagram and Facebook. The witty, creative me, always detached and never cheesy or needy.
>
> That version of me got her start online…but over time (and I suppose for the sake of consistency), she bled off the screen and overtook my real-life personality, too. And once you master what is essentially an onstage performance of yourself, it can be hard to break character.

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[68] This Valentine's," *New York Times.*

[69] Clara Dollar, "My So-Called (Instagram) Life," *New York Times*, May 5, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/style/modern-love-my-so-called-instagram-life.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

Dollar's story is, at its core, a story of self-branding. Self-branding places emphasis on the construction of identity that is to be consumed by others, and "on an interaction which treats the audience as an aggregated fan base to be developed and maintained in order to achieve social or economic benefit."[70] And it's a phenomenon that has recently infiltrated the public lexicon with words such as aesthetic, hashtags, and microcelebrity dominating the discourse surrounding social media platforms. Dollar's focus was on Instagram, where upon developing a newfound crush, Joe, her Instagram account began to target only his reactions. She uses words such as "broadcast" and "performance" to emphasize the formulaic nature of her quest for approval. Picture after picture, she consistently developed a brand: "funny…unromantic, a realist," wherein in the morning she would post a photo that was "silvery and eye catching," but not truth. Her brand was an illusion. The result was the feeling that she was walking around in a mask she couldn't take off. For the sake of consistency and continuity, she could not escape her brand:

> I built her without blueprints, not knowing that she would become a wall with no doors. She has stopped me from online dating, because that would mean I care about romance… She has stopped me from being publicly heartbroken, from sobbing on the orange subway seats… because that would mean I'm not cool.

Dollar's repetition of the phrase "she has stopped me" demonstrates the stifling effect that her Internet persona had on her daily life, and the metaphor of "a wall with no doors" signifies the trap she felt herself to be in—the trap of her self-brand. In this regard, her virtual identity was controlling her narrative identity. It was the story of herself that she spent eight years building, and eventually it became the story of herself she and others started to believe. Not only was her virtual identity inextricable from her life story, but it was rendering her incapable of true development and progression. She tells her readers that the "cool girl" she showcased on

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[70] Ruth Page, "The linguistics of self-branding and micro-celebrity in Twitter: The role of hashtags," *Discourse & Communication*, 182.

Instagram almost stopped her from writing this essay, because the act of publishing it would be a public admission that she was hurting. But she instead ends her essay with a line of redemption: "I wrote it anyway…and that's a start." It was only through returning to a traditional mode of storytelling by writing "My So-Called (Instagram) Life," a written narrative rather than a virtual construction, that Dollar was able to start the process of regaining the more genuine sense of self she longed for.

Two months after her essay was published in the *New York Times,* Dollar took to another platform to describe its aftermath, specifically drawing on the reaction she got from her readers, some of who messaged her on social media acknowledging that they had been in a similar situation and thanking her for her emotional vulnerability in sharing her story. Moreover, she opened up on the obligation she felt to change herself after publishing, stating that "[her] essay for Modern Love, an admission of pain and passive aggression, was also a very public promise, whereby she "vowed to be expansive, to let [herself] be more than the 'witty, creative me, always detached and never cheesy or needy.'"[71] Taking this reflection into consideration, it should be noted that there is a semblance of what McAdams would call a redemption narrative present in Dollar's story. Her redemption resides not only in her ability to retroactively write about moving from a stage of hurting to a stage of healing, but also in her ability to bring into the limelight a universal truth about being a millennial—it's hard to remove the filters of social media and be one's most genuine self. In this sense, "My So-Called (Instagram) Life" is also a generative narrative. Clara Dollar is aware of her story's impact on the well-being of other millennials. She writes:

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[71] Clara Dollar, "My Modern Love Essay About Instagram Went Viral. So Why Did Everyone Call Me Brave?" Thrive Global, https://www.thriveglobal.com/stories/10560-my-modern-love-essay-about-instagram-went-viral-so-why-did-everyone-call-me-brave.

> What was intended as a pressure-free pledge to myself quickly morphed into a pact with everyone who felt a solidarity with my essay. I was unexpectedly married, and with that all my "I's" became "we's." *We* won't reject facets of ourselves. We will be everything we are. When an opportunity to be honest, to make our lives harder at first and then much easier, presents itself, we will be this type of brave. It did not take much fussing with the curtain of my social media before I found a chance to test myself, to see if I really could be brave…For years, Instagram had me sprinting to catch up to my own representation of myself, but only because I let it. Now it's giving me options, letting me order off menu. Through hundreds of private messages, it's giving me the option of being brave.[72]

Clara Dollar adopts the term "we" to talk about the relationship between herself and her readers, and the pact she made to both herself and them to work against the illusory form of control that the Internet offers to its users—a control that resulted in them rejecting key facets of their identity in order to maintain consistency and "sprint to catch up to" the online selves they constructed on social media platforms. Dollar's use of the word "solidarity" suggests that she is not alone in her story, which ultimately circles back to Lopate's belief in the value of the personal essay to allay feelings of loneliness in the reader. The solution that Clara Dollar proposes is honesty on social media platforms, suggesting that it is not the platform itself that is controlling our identities, but rather how we choose to engage with it. Although she suggests acts of honesty as a counter-story for the illusion of control narratives pervading our online interactions, I am skeptical of our ability to capture all facets of a complex identity in the online sphere. No matter how many statuses, photos, videos, emojis, and tweets are added, the online medium will always showcase a reductive form of one's identity.

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[72] Ibid.

"Cropped Out of My Own Fantasy" by Sage Cruser[73]

While Dollar's essay demonstrates the detrimental and stifling effects of presenting a fantasized version of one's life online, in a Modern Love column published on Oct. 21, 2016, titled "Cropped Out of My Own Fantasy," Sage Cruser writes about the effects a virtual identity can have not just on an individual, but also on the authenticity of a relationship as a whole. She reflects on a photo she took with her ex-boyfriend, which is now stored in a folder on her desktop computer, labeled "Do Not Open":

> That picture had been everywhere: on Facebook (where I'd made it my profile picture), in his office…and on his grandparents' coffee table... It was taken about six months into our relationship, during our "honeymoon" phase…people had gushed to us about it, saying things like, "That's a perfect picture" and "You guys are such a beautiful couple."

> What they didn't know was how… hard we had worked to get the shot right. The camera was set to timer mode, so we'd press the button, rush into position and attempt to look natural for the snap…with the help of some tasteful editing, the final version looked effortless and pure.

The aforementioned paragraphs show how carefully Cruser built the public visual representation of her relationship. She wanted the public to perceive her relationship as "effortless" and "pure," citing her ability to hide the negative aspects of her relationship on Facebook and showcase not only how she wanted others to see her and her boyfriend, but also how she herself wanted to see the relationship. And this preoccupation with the exhibit of her relationship extended beyond photos—she notes "we labored over his Facebook status to make it casual but warm." Cruser's obsession with presenting her relationship online resulted in her falling in love with the man she wanted him to be and the woman she wanted to be, rather than who they both actually were. She writes that she wanted her love to look like what she convinced herself she had: "the Facebook

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[73] Sage Cruser, "Cropped Out of My Own Fantasy," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/23/fashion/modern-love-cropped-out-of-my-own-fantasy.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

statuses…the narrative of our relationship I'd woven in my head." The latter clause of that statement reflects the power of technology to influence the narratives that humans tell themselves about their life, which in turn become their identity—a power that was strong enough both to convince Cruser that she was in a happy, stable relationship and to fail to take seriously that her boyfriend, just a day before the start of their relationship, had ended another long-term relationship. Any thoughts she had of being a "placeholder for him" were repressed by her need to prove to everyone on social media that her role in his life was a healthy choice, not driven by need or compensation. The course of their relationship was predicated on the illusion she presented online, until her boyfriend woke up her one night with the declaration he couldn't imagine a future together, vague in his reasons for ending the relationship, but ultimately alluding to the idea that he never loved her. She was shocked, as were her family and friends— the audience for whom she had been performing this act.

Within two hours of breaking up, they both changed their profile pictures, and the following week, her ex-boyfriend opened a profile on an online dating website, which included an image in which she had been cropped out. She writes, "mere inches from his head… I had been sliced out of my fantasy." The word "fantasy," as used in the aforementioned quote and the title of the essay, is despondent in its delusion and improbability. Social media distorted her identity to the extent that she believed and inhabited the untrue—that he actually loved her.

Both "My So-Called (Instagram) Life" and "Cropped Out of My Own Fantasy" are essays about ostensible identities created through social media—virtual identities so entrenched that they influence the offline lives of their creators, despite being an inaccurate reflection of reality. For Dollar, the "consistently" cool girl persona she adopted online became a "house" that was "nearly impossible to knock down," and for Cruser, the public exhibit of her relationship

became what she believed to be true. Such is the power of stories of self—even when created and told online, even when inherently fraudulent, they become entangled in one's offline identity. Any semblance of control that one is given in an online environment, whether through confirming or rejecting friends, privacy settings, or curated photos and statuses, is ultimately pinned against the backdrop of the continual tension between self-transparency and opacity, between trust and privacy, and between the need to negotiate one's prevailing, online story with offline truths.

The result of this tension is the "illusion of control" narrative arc that editor Daniel Jones mentions, an illusion happening not due to the platforms themselves (hypothetically, on social media networks, we can share more about ourselves with more people than ever before), but rather because these platforms give us the option to more strategically curate and construct the version of ourselves we want other people to see. This cycle is continually and positively reinforced by an audience through comments, favorites, reactions and likes, until it eventually becomes something "that's on your mind as this sort of rush of 'I did this in the moment, but how is it playing for the crowd?'"[74] Consequently, digital natives begin to live their lives *for* their crowd; they develop a need to maintain consistent identity for their audience, and they develop a self-brand they can't escape.

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[74] Daniel Jones (editor, Modern Love, *New York Times)*, in discussion with the author, February 2018.

CHAPTER FOUR:

SCREENED INTIMACIES

> What's particularly misleading about online dating is how everyone on the site is trying
> to seduce you. They're trying to seduce everyone. They're all saying, "Date me!"
> —Daniel Jones

The management of an idealized self is particularly salient in the case of dating apps, matchmaking platforms whereby strangers connect with one another to achieve intimacy, whether fleeting or committed. In the realm of dating, both casual and long term, Tinder, Coffee Meets Bagel, eHarmony, OkCupid, Bumble, Grindr, and other dating websites have become the virtual landscapes wherein intimacy has been gamified. I use the word "gamified" to demonstrate the newfound application of game-design elements being applied to the search for love in the digital age, where profiles are limited to a virtual interface, and users can strategize on the best ways to win over potential love interests. Readers of the Modern Love column see this happen in Roger Hobb's essay, "Instant Message, Instant Girlfriend," in which he remarks "it was as if the Internet had allowed [him] to turn flirtation and seduction into a video game."[75]

If we understand the definition of intimacy as a feeling of being understood by one's partner, "developed through a process in which an individual discloses personal information, thoughts, and feelings; receives a response from the partner; and interprets that response as understanding, validating, and caring," then there will always be a needed reconciliation between

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[75] Roger Hobbs, "Instant Message, Instant Girlfriend," *The New York Times*, May 25, 2008, Modern Love, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/25/fashion/25love.html

openness and autonomy, whether intimacy is forged online or offline.[76] However, participants of computer-mediated communication (CMC), although experiencing the same pressure and desires, have greater control over self-presentational behavior, due to a computer's emphasis on "verbal and linguistic cues over less controllable nonverbal communication cues."[77] This is a common theme among essays published in the column.

"Words With (I Wish We Were More Than) Friends" by Justin Race[78]

In "Words With (I Wish We Were More Than) Friends," Justin Race, who, at the time of the story, recently moved to Reno, Nevada, writes about the conversational threads that occurred when he played "Words With Friends," a multiplayer word game akin to Scrabble, with a stranger who recently moved from America to China. He talks about the ease and excitement with which they conversed:

> We were playing two games at once… two entirely different conversational threads—one serious and the other playful. We kept this up for six straight hours…I had to slide my couch closer to an outlet because my battery was at 2 percent. Like any good first date, I didn't want it to end…
>
> I had to start getting this down on paper. When a game ended, our chats from that game ended with it. Every 45 minutes or so, everything would disappear, and I wanted to preserve all of it, proof that such things are possible.

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[76] Jean-Philippe Laurenceau, Paula R. Pietromonaco, and Lisa Feldmen, "Intimacy as an interpersonal process: The importance of self-disclosure, partner disclosure, and perceived partner responsiveness in interpersonal exchanges.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1239.

[77] Nicole Ellison, Rebecca Heino, and Jennifer Gibbs, "Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 11, no. 2: 418.

[78] Justin Race, "Words With (I Wish We Were More Than) Friends," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/31/fashion/modern-love-words-with-friends.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

Despite Race's desire towards the woman on the receiving end, an undercurrent of dejection flows through this story, in part a result of the fleeting nature of his dialogue, which would disappear somewhere in the virtual cloud, rendering all evidence of their relationship nonexistent. But he notes that it was this same fleeting nature that allowed him to fall for her in the first place. They continued to play games, for hours at a time, until other factors in their lives got in the way. She was no longer on break from her job as a teacher, and his parents started to experience health complications that required his attention. The time frame of their last game stretched out over weeks, neither willing to concede.

Race ultimately concludes his essay with the acknowledgement that his happiest memories in Nevada were of him sitting on his couch, tapping his finger on his computer screen to communicate with a woman he knows intimately, and yet not intimately at all. He ends with the statement, "I know she gets mildly aroused talking about compound miter saws and has a weird thing for hands… But I don't know what she looks like when she sleeps. I don't know the sound of her voice…I don't even know her last name." His intimacy relied solely on linguistic cues. It was, quite literally, confined to a word game. Race's essay underscores the precariousness of attempting to forge a connection online, and his essay largely elicits a sense of longing, especially when he writes "it's strange to miss someone you have never actually met." This essay works to show both the illusiveness and unfulfilled desire that comes with online relationships. Even the title, "Words With (I Wish We Were More Than) Friends," epitomizes the sanitized intimacy that computer-mediated interaction offers; his feelings of yearning are parenthetical to the name of the game, "Words with Friends."

"Words With (I Wish We Were More Than) Friends," as well as the rest of the essays explored in this chapter share a central arc with the *illusion of control* narrative that pervades

Chapter Three. However, while essays in Chapter Three exemplify the power of the self-brand to seep into, influence, and stagnate one's offline identity, the essays in this chapter exemplify how the illusion of control that the self-brand offers can parlay into how we interact with other online identities, how we find and keep intimate relationships, and how various virtual interfaces allow for this to occur. Race astutely observes that "it was the baked-in distance" that allowed for fantasy, a control that permitted him to shift from his shy romantic disposition into one in which he was outgoing and talkative. In light of this, I suggest that the illusion of control occurring online acts as a safeguard for vulnerability and disclosure through its relative anonymity and facilitation of self-expression, which allows one to behave in ways inconsistent with offline identity, and not condoned in one's usual social sphere, where there are costs to revealing aspects of oneself that may seem taboo.[79] These qualities of Internet interaction generate what I call *screened and sanitized intimacies*, whereby "screened" refers to the commanding presence of an electronic device, and "sanitized," a term coined by Modern Love essayist Caitlin Dewey, refers to the power of the electronic device to render oneself as pure, calculated, and constructed. The following essays showcase *screened and sanitized intimacies.*

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[79] John A. Bargh, Katelyn McKenna, and Grainne M. Fitzsimons, "Can You See the Real Me? Activation and Expression of the "True Self" on the Internet," *Journal of Social Issues* 58, no. 1 (2002): 35.

"Even in Real Life, There Were Screens Between Us" by Caitlin Dewey[80]

In "Even in Real Life, There Were Screens Between Us," a Modern Love article

published on April 28, 2011, Caitlin Dewey reports the online, long-distance relationship she

developed with Will after meeting him at a Web journalism conference. She writes:

> In the safety of my apartment, I could see Will, but I couldn't touch him. I could summon
> him when I wanted to talk... I could call him after a few drinks, when I felt sufficiently
> talkative and social; I could avoid him if I had videos to edit... I could say whatever I
> wanted and risk awkwardness, because at the end of the conversation, one click of the
> mouse would shut him out of my room.

Dewey is afforded a sense of control over her verbal and linguistic cues, only "summon[ing] him

when [she] wanted to talk." On a psychological level and in reference to narrative identity work,

Dan McAdams says that "the sharing of one's innermost self" is the cardinal feature of intimacy,

and maintains "that an idealized model for intimate exchange is what Martin Buber called the "I-

Thou encounter," referring to an interpersonal experience in which the self and other share with

each other personal thoughts and observations "in such an intensive manner that each becomes

visible to the other in his or her wholeness and unique individuality."[81] He goes on to say that

"intimacy assuages loneliness and offers the opportunity to further extend one's understanding of

self and other."[82] If one accepts McAdams's claim that intimacy refers to a phenomenon that

requires continual visibility, then it is evident that Dewey's relationship with Will didn't meet

the terms of intimacy. Visibility was controlled "in the safety of her apartment" where she could

decide whether or not to talk to him depending on her mood and sobriety. In this regard,

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[80] Caitlin Dewey, "Even in Real Life, There Were Screens Between Us," *The New York Times*, Modern Love, April 28, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/fashion/01Modern.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.
[81] Dan P. McAdams, "Attachment, Intimacy, and Generativity," *Psychological Inquiry* 11, no. 2: 18.
[82] Ibid.

intimacy became deceptive, and, perhaps most importantly, fleeting. Visibility operated as a light switch rather than something continual—she could escape the intimacy with the click of a mouse.

In a decision to test out the validity of the perceived intimacy she had established online with Will, Dewey decided to drive 540 miles to spend the weekend with him. Although she was initially relieved—she writes "Will was almost exactly as I expected" and "we kissed on the cold, blustery sidewalk" her initial satisfaction with him lessened as the weekend continues. She reflects on this, writing "we struggled for things to talk about. In real life, Will stared off at nothing while I talked. In real life, he had no questions about the drive or my work or the stuff that waited for me when I went back to school." In this paragraph, Dewey uses anaphora, the repetition of "in real life," to signify the inconsistency between the perceived intimacy she and Will established in the virtual world, versus the hallow, false intimacy they had in person, and her inability to negotiate the two. They struggled to converse to the extent that Will "read his e-mail while [they] waited for food." She ends the story by concluding that she felt more comfortable in her own room, wherein Will could be confined to a laptop screen.

Dewey's essay chronicles one of the more insidious premises of online relationships— what she calls "safe, sanitized intimacy." The idea of safe intimacy infiltrated her relationship in nuanced ways, including her ability to micromanage her identity and time in a way that "worked in [her] favor." Problems therefore arose when she and Will could no longer choose to be invisible when they wanted to. The result was what she said felt like a "a constant dance..of intimacy and distance, of real life and Internet make-believe." Her essay ultimately further illuminates the ongoing tension between disclosure and secrecy as propagated by the illusory veil of control that technology offers. Once both she and Will stepped out from behind their

computers, they lost their ability to micromanage the terms of their relationship; their intimacy was no longer safe.

"Downloadable. Unsustainable, Too" by Chris Osborn[83]

In another essay, titled "Downloadable. Unsustainable, Too," Chris Osborn also writes about his first-time meeting a partner from an online relationship. He tells the story of Amy, with whom he had been conversing for five years online over blogs and Skype. They eventually decided to meet in Atlanta, where he remembers they held hands through Piedmont Park, kissed on the floor of her childhood bedroom, and took a nap at a cemetery in Macon. He notes their decision to meet up also ended up being the decision that ended their relationship, writing, "we both knew we couldn't move close. But we also knew, after this, that we couldn't just go back behind our computer screens." For Osborn and Amy, the demise of their relationship was not the loss of control they experienced when they stepped out from behind computer screens, but rather the fact that, due to time and circumstance, they could not preserve or nurture the visibility that McAdams says is necessary for a healthy intimacy to flourish. A computer screen wasn't enough to sustain their intimacy.

Upon Osborn's departure from Atlanta, he resolved to cease all communication with Amy, a decision that makes his perception of her feel "like a ghost in static now." He continues:

> I have kept all the evidence: old e-mails and chats, text messages, her songs. My memory of her feels contained within servers and hard drives, locked away and inaccessible. In my mind's eye, I keep parsing through the same remnants of my time with her, the same jpegs, the same docs, the same pieces to construct a patchwork past of those four days.

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[83] Chris Osborn, "Downloadable. Unsustainable, Too.," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/14/fashion/modern-love-downloadable-unsustainable-too.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

There something harrowing about the left-behind evidence of their relationship—his ability to parse through e-mails, chats, text messages, jpegs, and documents and, subsequently, conjure up a semblance of Amy's identity, an identity which probably no longer prevails in the present day. This suggests that there is a possible persistence to the identities we develop online, contingent on technology's ability to render "time as an eternal present that endangers both the coherence of the narration of personal identity across time and the right to be forgotten."[84] I address the implications this has on our identities in the following chapter.

There are similarities in Dewey's and Osborn's essays in that the introduction of the corporeal—face-to-face interaction—deflated the delusion of their online interactions. Although Osborn's essay casts Amy as someone he truly loves and is haunted by, the virtual intimacy that they built together could not withstand reality; it was rendered unsustainable. While the sanitized intimacy that characterized Dewey's and Osborn's relationships happened over Skype and blogging, respectively, the recent proliferation of dating, the recent proliferation of dating apps has rendered online intimacy more immediate and more accessible. Participants of dating apps create profiles, where the incorporation of photos, texts, music, and emoji ultimately replace body language, facial expressions, and "spoken narratives," fundamentally allowing for a greater number of misrepresentations and fabrications of identity.[85] On Tinder, and this is true for most dating apps, the first impression of a potential match is gathered solely on the main profile photo, and users can either "swipe left" or "swipe right" depending on physical attraction. It is only until mutual attraction has been met—both users swiping right—that a conversation can be initiated. Users are never made aware of who has rejected them. Users of Tinder therefore

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[84] Durante, "The Online," 610.
[85] Stephanie Laudone, "Whose Space? A Content Analysis of Identity Presentation in an Online Community," *American Sociological Association*, 2007.

operate in a reduced cue environment, where "cues are static and not dynamic," contributing to individuals' increased control over their self-presentation and identity.[86] By choosing the main profile photo, they are manipulating the representation of their appearance, and by adjusting their sexual orientation and age preferences, they are participating in a world of intimacy that is reduced by a filtering process, sped up by a swiping process, and fantastical in its essence. Editor Daniel Jones reflects on this process, remarking that it is analogous to shopping online:

> When shopping online, you buy more stuff because it's so easy. Then you probably fantasize a little more about your new shoes or flying drone as you await their arrival, which means you're going to be disappointed more often because the shoes don't fit, or the drone is poorly made. So you return them and start over—same as with the average online date. In the store, meanwhile, all of that trying on and rejecting would have happened in real time, much like getting to know and rejecting people at the bar or a party happens in real time, leaving you little time to fantasize.[87]

The result is that dating apps heighten fantasy, and, subsequently, heighten disappointment.

"Swiping Right on Tinder, but Staying Put" by Davis Webster[88]

 In May 2015, the *New York Times* published "Swiping Right on Tinder, but Staying Put," an essay about one weekend in Colorado in which the author, Davis Webster, was snowed in, and subsequently, spent most of his time conversing with someone he matched with on Tinder. Webster writes about the appeal of Tinder, citing that "in a generation in which the content of a text message is often less important than how long you waited to send it, Tinder allows intimacy without any stakes…if you don't make concrete plans on the first day, the

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[86] Janelle Ward, "What are you doing on Tinder? Impression management on a matchmaking mobile app," *Information, Communication & Society*, 2017.

[87] Daniel Jones, "This Valentine's Day, Considering Tech That Keeps Couples Together," *New York Times*, February 14, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/14/technology/personaltech/valentines-tech-couples-together.html

[88] Davis Webster, "Swiping Right on Tinder, but Staying Put," *The New York Times*, May 7, 2015, Modern Love, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/style/modern-love-tinder-swiping-right-but-staying-put.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

conversation is over by the second." Webster highlights the reduced cue environment of Tinder as a platform where one does not have be truly responsible, or even answerable, to one's actions and words. He spent the weekend talking to his match on Tinder, telling her that he was "reading in front of a nice fire" instead of what he was actually doing, "drinking beer and screaming at 'Gilmore Girls,' his favorite pastime…as [he] pulled her tighter into [his] electronic embrace…[he] fell asleep listening to the imaginary fire crackle and hiss." The construction of his virtual identity, thereby, was controlling part of his life story, prompting him to tell lies and operate instead as a character that he wanted her to believe to be true—a character of fantasy.

Webster concludes his essay with the declaration that "in real life, we could be held accountable for our words and affection," which "proved to be a burden" neither could bear. His essay, therefore, largely reinforces the appeal of relative anonymity that one can fashion online, and the precarious way in which the online landscape is employed as a haven where one is not held liable for what they say or do. The consequences for operating in a space in which liabilities are loose are twofold; anonymity permits the proliferation of inappropriate comments and invasion of privacy without consequences, but it also creates a situation in which there are no consequences for ghosting, the practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly and without explanation withdrawing from all communication.[89] There is also a third consideration for dating apps in which nothing happens at all. Readers see this happening in the essay "On Tinder, Off Sex," whereby the author, Ali Rachel Pearl, asks a Tinder match "how it works" and he responds, "you match with a bunch of people, no one ever messages each other, and no one ever has sex."[90] Although all four of the narrative accounts in this chapter so far are

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[89] *Oxford Dictionaries, s.v.* "ghosting," accessed March 25, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ghosting.

[90] Ali Rachel Pearl, "On Tinder, Off Sex," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2015, Modern Love, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/fashion/on-tinder-off-sex.html.

different in story, they are all situated within the persisting tension between invisibility and visibility. They share a narrative arc to the extent that the computer screens of the authors offered a safety net against the hard work of intimacy. Once the safety net, or even the thought of it, is relinquished, and offline identities are exposed, the stakes become too high for true intimacy to occur.

"Finally Stepping Out From Behind The Computer" by Anita Felicelli[91]

While the majority of online relationships told in Modern Love aren't success stories, it would be remiss of me to talk about screened intimacies without acknowledging the essay that describes a journey to marriage in which e-mail played a large role. "Finally Stepping Out From Behind a Computer Screen" by Anita Felicelli encapsulates all aspects of mediated intimacy. Felicelli met Steven at a writing festival in Iowa. Shortly after, they began exchanging daily e-mails for five years. Eventually, they moved in together, but not for romantic reasons—instead, to start a small publishing house together. Felicelli reflects on technology's role in her relationship:

> When e-mailing back and forth, we were perfect, constructed versions of ourselves with no chemistry. What we didn't know was how much we still didn't know about each other. Living together, I found out just how sports crazy Steven is, how he checks espn.com 50 times a day and drafts multiple fantasy football teams. He found out that I stream "Pretty Little Liars," spend too much money and avoid doing the dishes. We fought. We made up. Our small press thus far has been a bit of a bust.

The first sentence augments illusion of control that technology affords its users, and the rest of the paragraph showcases its effect. It was not until they experienced continual face-to-face

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[91] Anita Felicelli, "Finally Stepping Out From Behind the Computer," *New York Times*, January 31, 2013, Modern Love, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/fashion/stepping-out-from-behind-the-e-mail.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

interaction that their relationship became intimate, through disclosures that were non-verbal, such as her tendency to spend too much, and his obsession with sports. This is consistent with how McAdams derives his definition of intimacy—true visibility. However, despite their physical interaction, Felicelli acknowledges that e-mail was what had "cemented" their relationship, and Steven claims that "correspondence over those many years bound [them] together...Really knowing each other occurred through the written form, even though falling in love happened in person." Five years of e-mails maintained a friendship, but one e-mail composed by Steven contained the question, "Do you want to start a press with me?" This in turn led to Steven moving to Mountain View, California. Ten years after their initial e-mail, they got married, and although they've never had a successful publishing house together, they now have a daughter. Despite their sexual intimacy beginning in person, rather than online, their story is a tribute to the power of technology to shape a life story. Referring back to McAdams's work on life stories and his assertion that "stories integrate lives," the origin story of their marriage—the Modern Love article—is constructed in a way that affirms technology's purpose and role within their relationship.[92] Technology allowed for their relationship to be diachronically integrated — their series of emails provides a causal account from how they went from being strangers at an Iowa writer's conference to married with a daughter.

As Felicelli underscores in her essay, solidifying a meaningful and long-lasting relationship online is possible. In reflecting on the popularity of online dating, editor Daniel Jones salutes its power to equip people with the freedom and choice to find someone. However, he recognizes that the idea of gamifying intimacy can be destructive, saying, "when we set the parameters of who we think we are going to love, we are given a weird sense of control,

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[92] McAdams, "Personal Narratives," 243.

especially because we usually aren't so good at predicting who we are going to love. We are really bad at saying 'I want someone with all these characteristics' and have that work out."[93] As a result, trying to find love online makes fantasizing more likely, due to both the ongoing interaction between two curated selves, and the time dilation (e.g., not needing immediate verbal responses) that allows the interaction to fester into imagination.

Although technology has made the idea of intimacy more accessible, the methods in which people develop relationships online, through the facilitation of invisibility and lack of accountability, further the consequences of illusory identity for users of technology, and the enduring need to reconcile the competition between online selves and reality. Daniel Jones indicates that this reconciliation often leads to stalled time and fantasy. Ultimately, as this generation continues to navigate this new way of meeting, knowing, and loving one another, we need to accentuate the importance of increasing visibility when two online identities converge to form an intimate relationship.

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[93] Daniel Jones (editor, Modern Love, *New York Times)*, in discussion with the author, February 2018.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE INABILITY TO FORGET

Informational Overload

The Internet is a space in which people are constantly inundated with information and visual images. In "Remembering Me: Big Data, Individual Identity, and the Psychological Necessity of Forgetting," media studies scholar Jacquelyn Burkell explores the repercussions of having a continual digital record of oneself, particularly in regard to its effects on personal narratives. Burkell maintains that a key psychological necessity is the act of forgetting, a process which is "threatened by digital systems that remember everything about us."[94] Burkell's argument rests on Martin Conway's premise that personal narratives aim to demonstrate coherence and correspondence, "coherence in the sense that the story is consistent with and supportive of the current version of 'self;' and correspondence in the sense that the story reflects the content and meaning of autobiographical memory."[95] A crucial part of achieving coherence and correspondence is the interplay between autobiographical memory and the self, in which memories congruous with the present self-image are reinforced. This process of biological memory is selective—what is remembered is what is usually relevant to one's identity at the time, and what is forgotten or fades away is usually irrelevant.

Burkell posits that the ability to forget is threatened by the permanence and seemingly complete nature of digital records, which are comprised of both self-disclosed personal details and information provided by others: "photographs, posted by friends and tagged and indexed so

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[94] Jacquelyn Burkell, "Remembering Me: Big Data, Individual Identity, and the Psychological Necessity of Forgetting," *Ethics and Information Technology* 18, no. 1: 17. Include here Conway's seminal article: See also Martin A. Conway, "Memory and Self," *Journal of Memory and Language* 53 (2005), 594–628.
[95] Ibid, 18.

that they are associated with a personal profile, widely visible comments that can constitute an ongoing semi-public discourse, and annotations on photographs or other digital artifacts."[96] This, along with additional details about our lives that are being recorded and traced online (e.g., purchasing history, website visits, cell phone locations), results in what Burkell calls a "digital shadow…[that] resembles the 'tyrannical' all-inclusive autobiographical memory of those living with hyperthymesia than it does the typical autobiographical memory that supports a strong and integrated sense of self."[97] As people are continually reminded of what is no longer relevant to their identity, this archive of information poses a threat to the necessity of forgetting in regard to identity formation.

In addition to the inability to forget, another issue surrounding the relationship between digital records and narrative identities, Burkell contends, is the loss of control that occurs when separable instances of one's life can be reconfigured to construct many different life narratives. Everything online represents a piece of data that is searchable, allowing for a digital record that "could support multiple (and inconsistent) interpretations of a life by focusing on different aspects of the record…[in addition to] the specter of a life lived today being interpreted in light of the standards, values, and morals that characterize some future moment."[98] These digital records could be used to both prove anything and tell any life story, thus threatening the sincerity of a personal narrative. This chapter takes Burkell's view on the nature of digital records as its guiding objective. I proceed by following two Modern Love essays in which the narrative arc centers around the consequences of the seemingly infinite information that is indefinitely stored and at the disposal of our keyboards.

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., 20.

"Traveling the Too-Much-Information Highway" by Heather L. Hunter[99]

Heather L. Hunter is a self-proclaimed "blogger" and "emotional exhibitionist." Her essay, "Traveling the Too-Much-Information Highway" was the second one to be published by Modern Love on November 14, 2004. Despite some of its outdated details, Hunter's essay exemplifies the Information Age—even the title encapsulates the degree to which the expansion of readily accessed and remembered information can complicate the mind of its user. Hunter's essay begins with a story of her connecting with a "Musician" through a blog platform, a friendship that eventually progressed to romance when they met in person, after which they agreed to engage in a nonexclusive relationship because of his busy schedule. Hunter continued to monitor the Musician's blog, however:

> One afternoon…I started clicking through some of the newer blog links on his site and quickly found myself caught up with one in particular, the diary of a young photographer. Accompanied by striking photos of its pretty Web mistress were scandalous tales of her Manhattan dating life…I was immediately hooked. I was also struck by an odd feeling of familiarity while reading about this girl's social engagements. And then, I saw it: the Musician's name—my musician—mentioned as her date for the previous evening.

Consequently, as a result of online blogs, Hunter became privy to regular updates between the Musician and his newfound romantic interest, reading about their "candlelit dinner" and questioning why his fear of public displays of affection suddenly dissipated in her presence. Hunter is cognizant of the way in which "blog-stalking [her] ex-lover's love wasn't the healthiest approach," leading to a comparison game in which she was made feel less "stylish," less "intelligent," and less "charming," but she is also aware that there is something "compulsory" about being able to open Internet Explorer, comb through daily entries, and subsequently gain

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[99] Heather L. Hunter, "Traveling the Too-Much-Information Highway," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2004, Modern Love, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/fashion/traveling-the-toomuchinformation-highway.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

access to an overload of information about someone else's life. A few weeks later, the Musician

broke it off with his other love interest, and Hunter received an anonymous e-mail message,

calling her "nothing more than the Musician's groupie." She concludes the essay:

> I was tempted to ferret her out, to learn her story. Very tempted. It would only take the
> click of a mouse and a simple Google search to satisfy my curiosity. But this time, I'm
> happy to report that reason trumped compulsion—I knew I had to close and permanently
> delete the e-mail... My sanity required it.

Hunter was tempted to learn "the story" of the other girl, but Burkell would probably argue that

in actuality, she was tempted to reconfigure and interpret the girl's blog in light of what Hunter

would perceive to be her values and morals—aspects of her personality that Hunter would

probably uphold as negative, given the situation. Lastly, the final sentence shows the possible

effects that information overload, as afforded by Google, can have on one's psyche. Had Hunter

not worked against habit, she claims she would have derailed her own sanity, which was

contingent on how her mind interacted with a screen. Hunter and her essay "Traveling the Too-

Much Information Highway" ultimately suggest that users of the Internet should consider re-

directing their compulsive habits, born of immediate access to excess information, towards habits

of control. For Hunter, this includes deleting hurtful emails, while for others this might mean

blocking access to certain websites and profiles.

"The Internet Still Thinks I'm Pregnant" by Amy Pittman[100]

While Hunter's essay demonstrates the consequences of an individual initially unable to fight the urge of having too much information at her disposal, the following essay reverses the relationship, and demonstrates what can happen when the Internet has too much information on the searcher. On September 2, 2016, the Modern Love column in the *New York Times* published a personal essay written by Amy Pittman, then a reimbursement analyst at Tri-State Memorial Hospital in Clarkston, WA. The essay, titled "The Internet Thinks I'm Still Pregnant," describes Pittman's miscarriage and its aftermath, ultimately reinforcing some of the threats and consequences of a digital record detailed by Burkell.

Pittman starts the essay by declaring she "found out [she] was pregnant the normal way," foreshadowing something atypical in the rest of her pregnancy. After describing the scene of discovering she was pregnant. Pittman begins to emphasize the role technology plays in her life on a daily basis, and how that role extended to being a part of her attempt to conceive, revealing that she "tracked [her] mood on the period tracker along with [her] core temperature, the viscosity of various fluids, how often [they] were having sex, if sperm was present, etc." It was of habit, then, that when her pregnancy test finally came back positive, she would share the results with her period tracker. As a result, the period tracker app suggested she download a pregnancy app, which, in exchange for her e-mail address, age, and date of her last period, allowed her to virtually see the size of her baby's hands, and read blogs from other mothers. Shortly thereafter, she miscarried. Midway through the essay she writes:

> I hadn't realized, however, that when I had entered my information into the pregnancy app, the company would then share it with marketing groups targeting new mothers.

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[100] Amy Pittman, "The Internet Still Thinks I'm Pregnant," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2016, Modern Love, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/fashion/modern-love-pregnancy-miscarriage-app-technology.html Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

> Although I logged my miscarriage into the app…that change in status apparently wasn't passed along.

> Seven months after my miscarriage...I came home from work to find a package on my welcome mat. It was a box of baby formula bearing the note: "We may all do it differently, but the joy of parenthood is something we all share."

The Internet had been aware of all the trivial details of Pittman's life, yet it missed the mark in regard to the fact that she was no longer carrying a child. Her digital shadow "remained a piece of living data to someone," echoing Burkell's work on the inability of online records to forget. The personal narrative that the Internet constructed for Pittman was not coherent; it was not accurate or consistent with her current version of herself, nor did it reflect the content or meaning of her autobiographical memory. In actuality, her miscarriage led her to cry unexpectedly "or [talk] too defensively when someone who was unaware asked if [her] husband and [her] were going to try and have children." But, according to her digital shadow, Pittman was currently a mom. Marketing companies issued her baby formula without second thought, a strategic marketing ploy and devastating reminder of her loss—she didn't have a baby who might eventually need baby formula. This is representative of the inaccuracies that flourish on the Internet. Even in an age when humans are continually told to update their digital timeline, the digital shadow has a freezing effect. Durante indicates that this digital shadow threatens the "contextual integrity and coherence in the construction of identity."[101] Pittman's essay reflects both the danger of the Internet's inability to forget and, in turn, ability to control, however inaccurately, life stories. The data, details, and virtual narrative that Pittman provided to the pregnancy app—that she was pregnant—could be used not only to support an inconsistent and inaccurate reality, but also to commodify a false identity.

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[101] Durante, "The Online," 603.

In considering the communication of personal data, it is imperative that we adopt a more vigilant cultural attitude towards the idea of the digital shadow, especially as it relates to young people who often "underrate the effects of their implicit consent to the disclosure and use of personal information, since they do not always perceive that such information will be evaluated, across time, within different contexts of interpretations."[102] As both the digital and real-life timeline of one's life progresses, it is critical that memories harmonious, rather than inconsistent, with the present self-image are reinforced, or else the self and autobiographical memory may become disconnected in a way that will cause delusions and confabulations.[103] Ultimately, as people are continually reminded of what is no longer pertinent to their current identity, this permanent archive of information presents a danger to the necessary concepts of narrative coherence and forgetting.

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[102] Ibid.
[103] Conway, "Memory and the self," 595.

CHAPTER SIX:

RECONNECTION

Temporal Identity & Keeping in Touch

As evidenced by Chapter 4, it is clear that the Internet has transformed the ways we find

intimate partners, but it has also transformed the ways we maintain and reconnect with old,

dormant ties. As defined by communications scholar Kelly Quinn, relationship reconnections are

"reactivations of former relationships that have become dormant or inactive over time: social ties

that once existed but no longer do."[104] She notes that this process can only occur with

relationships that existed at one time and then lapse, which makes those in mid-life or old age

particularly susceptible to reconnection. This is an unfolding process—the search capabilities

and friend recommender algorithms offered by social network sites often extend from one

individual to a larger context, such as identifying individuals who may share an educational

institution or hometown.[105]

There is an array of ways reconnections can shape a life story and identity, perhaps the

most salient being their ability to set new parameters in regard to time. Quinn states that

reconnection functions as a compression of temporal identity. Relationship reconnections have

always been an integral way for humans to reinforce their continual identity over time (e.g., class

reunions); however, the introduction of social network sites offers a new means of integrating

contexts of the past and present, allowing people to be made aware of and comment on certain

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[104] Kelly Quinn, "WE HAVEN'T TALKED IN 30 YEARS! Relationship reconnection and Internet use at midlife," *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 3 (January 3, 2013): 398.
[105] Ibid, 407.

life updates and profile details at a more accelerated rate.[106] Readers see this happen in the

Modern Love essay "Dear Birth Mother, Please Hit 'Reply,'" when writer Kerry Herlichy says

"on Facebook, I can breeze through my past and present life. I can discover that Christine from

seventh grade made a salad with roasted shallots for dinner… If I feel like reaching out, I'll click

to indicate I like Sue's newsfeed or write a supportive snippet to Julie."[107] In addition to cutting

through the past and present, another facet of reconnection online is its asynchronous nature,

which "reconfigures the reconnection process" by allowing for endless time to process emotion

and appropriately present the self.[108] In these regards, the facilitation of old bonds through the

Internet technology provides a bridge from past to present selves.

This chapter situates two Modern Love columns within the context of reconnection, and

ultimately positions the possibility of rekindling ties as a leading value of technologies and social

media networks. Furthermore, this chapter serves to support this thesis's larger argument of how

the virtual versions of our stories impact our identities by spotlighting technology's ability to

expand the perception of connection and therefore promote an elastic social identity.

"A Husband Lost, A Daughter Found" by Tré Miller Rodríguez[109]

Modern Love's "A Husband Lost, A Daughter Found" indicates that its author, Tré

Miller Rodríguez, owes much to Facebook for allowing a "digital dance" to occur between her

and her biological daughter, Laurie, whom she had put up for adoption when she was a teenager.

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[106] Ibid.

[107] Kerry Herlichy, "Dear Birth Mother, Please Hit 'Reply'," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2009, Modern Love, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/fashion/09love.html.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Tré Miller Rodríguez, "A Husband Lost, a Daughter Found," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2013, Modern Love, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/fashion/09love.html. Please note that this is the reference for all quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

Though Rodríguez received letters from Laurie's adoptive parents every year since her birth, when she was 17, Laurie decided to reach out to Rodríguez on Facebook. Rodríguez writes:

> I devoured all 793 of Laurie's Facebook pictures, replied to her chat, and our digital dance began. Every two weeks we exchanged gushy, 300-word Facebook messages with new stories, questions and answers. I sensed where we were heading (phone calls, a reunion, Skype) and felt more than a twinge of anxiety. What did she expect from me? What kind of person did she hope to find?

The "digital dance" between Rodríguez and her daughter was the foundation of reconnecting the most elemental human connection, the mother-child bond. I hesitate to use the word reconnection here, because it doesn't seem all-encompassing enough. What really occurred between them is a transformation from the unknown to the known, a process that was particularly healing for Rodríguez as she grieved her husband's recent death. After transitioning from Facebook messages to phone calls, her daughter, Laurie, asked Rodríguez to fly to North Carolina for a sleepover on her 18th birthday. The prospect of their reconnection influenced Rodríguez in myriad ways, prompting her to quit smoking and drinking beer, lifestyle changes that "counteracted [her] grief triggers," which reinforces the concept espoused by Quinn—the asynchronous nature of their interaction afforded Rodríguez enough time to create an appropriate presentation of herself to her daughter. But perhaps more importantly, their reconnection enabled her to expand the definition of her own identity to include the word *mother*. She notes their similarities: their handwriting, the cadence of their laughs, sleep postures. After their sleepover, Rodríguez became an active, maternal figure in Laurie's life, attending her graduation and prom, traveling with her, and serving as an adviser for her dating life and teenage insecurities.

Rodríguez salutes the change in her life story that resulted from her daughter reaching out on Facebook, writing "becoming a widow and then a mother, in that order, isn't how I pictured my 30-something life unfolding." Yet she acknowledges that this reconfiguration of identity

allowed her to embrace her life narrative, permitting her to navigate small-talk questions about whether she was married or had children. Rodríguez's essay does its part in exemplifying Facebook's promise to "connect with friends and the world around you."[110] While it's important to note the possibility that their reconnection could have happened through contingency—in an elevator ride or at a crosswalk intersection, for example—such reconnections would be limited in their synchronicity, and would have not allowed Rodríguez to present herself the way she wanted to her daughter.

"A Culture Gap the Size of an Ocean, Bridged by Facebook" by Lori Ayotee[111]

"A Culture Gap the Size of an Ocean, Bridged by Facebook" follows a similar narrative of connection, though it works to demonstrate social media as a primary platform for maintaining a connection rather than reactivating a connection. Its author, Lori Ayotee, recounts her Italian-American Catholic father's decision to join Facebook in order to correspond with Anah, a 26-year-old Saudi Arabian woman he met on his mail route, with whom he had gone out to lunch and whom he saw as "someone who shattered assumptions he harbored about Muslims."

Ayotee's story typifies the generational differences of approaching technology; she uses phrases such as "technophobic" and "antiquated flip phone" to supplement the unseemly nature of her father's query about Facebook. Ayotee writes that she had recently been overseas and had encouraged her father to join Facebook in order to follow her adventures, but he "wanted no part of it." But with Anah, it was different. She justifies her father's mesmerization with Anah,

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[110] Facebook, http://facebook.com.
[111] Lori Ayotee, "A Culture Gap the Size of an Ocean, Bridged by Facebook," *The New York Times*, December 17, 2015, Modern Love, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/fashion/a-culture-gap-the-size-of-an-ocean-bridged-by-facebook.html.Please note that this is the reference for all proceeding quotes under this subheading, unless noted otherwise.

writing of his acknowledgement that he felt connected to her because she felt like a mirror image of his grandparents, who were also immigrants.

Like "A Husband Lost, A Daughter Found," "A Culture Gap the Size of an Ocean, Bridged by Facebook" epitomizes the asynchronous nature of online connections and the ability to slow down time to present one's best self. Ayotee describes the horror her father felt when she tagged him in a "hyperbolically retro" photograph from her childhood on Facebook. She describes his reaction: "'What, you put that old picture up?' he cried. 'Look at my hair!' When he saw that the year of his birth was visible to the world, he panicked: 'What, you put my birthday up so everyone can see it?' I immediately took it down." On Facebook, he immediately made decisions with Anah's friendship in mind, and started messaging her to keep in touch. Ayotee reflects on the effect Facebook had on her father, noting that she "saw a man happily leaping across generational, cultural and technological chasms, all simultaneously" and that her father is "now is one of Facebook's billion users, connected to a world he had never dreamed of and to a friend he never would have imagined." For Ayotee's father, Facebook served as both a bridge between generations and cultures, enabling him to integrate his past (as Anah's mailman) with the changing present (Anah no longer lives in the United States). It allowed for him to keep in touch in a way he had never before experienced.

Typified by Ayotee's story, as the Internet continues to allow people to live more and more in an eternal present, to be apart physically but close emotionally, our social identities are expanding in time, cutting through generations and cultures. In conversation, Daniel Jones reflects on the way technology has changed the way we keep in touch, particularly concerning relationships, and how this impacts our day-to-day lives:

> It used to be just a given that when you were [dating] someone even really seriously in high school, you would break up before you went to college. Now, you move into a new

phase of the relationship where you're Skyping every night. You change how you stay in touch, but that person remains the main person you're in contact with all the time. I'm sure people in the past had long, expensive phone conversations, but there was always something that dissuaded you from that kind of behavior, whether it was cost or inconvenience. And now it's completely encouraged. People huddle in their little cocoons in their dorm rooms and open up their laptops and it's as if they are with that person. Technology has enabled that type of relationship to exist.[112]

Technology has introduced a new means of integrating the contexts of the past and present, bestowing us with the ability to rekindle or maintain ties from past social circles, and therefore expanding our perception of time and making our social identities more elastic. There are consequences for this, however, that we need to be aware of. Though maintaining social bonds is imperative for a healthy identity, constant inundation with news from people from our pasts calls into question our ability to be present in current contexts. Additionally, living in an age of constant reconnection threatens the growth and revitalization process, as it emphasizes the consistency of a past, and possibly no longer irrelevant, self. As civilization becomes increasingly digital, such consequences may fundamentally affect the consistency and coherence of identity, as well as who are able to become as we attempt to grow and change.

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[112] Daniel Jones (editor, Modern Love, *New York Times)*, in discussion with the author, February 2018.

CONCLUSION

In the Modern Love essay, "Swearing Off the Modern Man," Jochebed Smith writes "the modern-day equivalent of 'shouting from the rooftops' is adding a 'life event' on Facebook."[113] In "Someone to Watch Over Me (on a Google Map)," Theodora Stites writes about her favored means of engaging with society: "I prefer, in short, a world cloaked in virtual intimacy…every morning, before I brush my teeth, I sign into my Instant Messenger to let everyone know I'm awake."[114] And in "An Ex Blogs. Is it O.K. to Watch?" Helen Schulman writes of her compulsive need to stalk her ex-boyfriend's blog online: "it was as if we were together again, on a more intimate level than ever before...an intimacy that was unearned…the lack of interface had turned us both into mirror gazers, constantly examining ourselves, until we had finally learned enough to look away."[115] These essayists, in addition to those who were mentioned in previous chapters, illustrate how the Digital Age, with its cache of information and social media networks, has modified the platforms on which our narrative identities are constructed and told.

The incorporated Modern Love essays, which showcase both the influences of virtual stories on the identity of their users and how people write about these influences, have also helped to inform a response to this project's initial questions: First, the ability for users to construct an online identity has brought forth an 'illusion of control' which, subsequently, can feed back into their offline lives. That is to say, self-brands are immersive and have a commanding influence on what we believe, say, do, and who we perceive ourselves to be. Second, accepting McAdams's point that stories are told in social relationships, our virtual

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[113] Jochebed Smith, "https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/style/swearing-off-the-modern-man.html," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/style/swearing-off-the-modern-man.html.
[114] Theodora Stites, "Someone to Watch Over Me (on a Google Map)," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/09/fashion/sundaystyles/09love.html.
[115] Helen Schulman, "An Ex Blogs. Is it O.K. to Watch?," *The New York Times*, August 5, 2011, Modern Love, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/fashion/modern-love-when-an-ex-blogs-is-it-ok-to-watch.html.

stories have altered our social identities through their encouragement of relative invisibility and facilitation of self-expression. This, in turn, has led to contrived perceptions of intimacy and love, as online users are allowed to behave in ways inconsistent with their offline identities. Third, the Internet has brought forth a digital shadow in which every aspect of an identity that is disclosed is remembered and accessible through data. This can lead to conflicting truths of self, knowing unwanted information, and the commodification of identities. Lastly, technology has enabled users to compress temporal identity, and has therefore equipped them with the ability to set new parameters in regard to time and reconnection.

What the authors of the incorporated Modern Love essays have in common, in addition to being users of technology, is their proclivity for the written word. For a reason that transcends the texts directly, these authors decided to look away from their online selves and return to traditional forms of narrative, rather than images, statuses, emoji, and online postings, to tell their stories. In this sense, the methods of virtual storytelling afforded to them by technological networks weren't enough to explain the nature of their identities. If Eakin contends that life writing functions as a "forum for the individual's claim to freedom and dignity," then it's important to consider whether or not life narratives that are constructed virtually confer the same degree of personhood and meaning as life narratives that are constructed orally and in writing.[116] This is especially pertinent when taking into account the enduring tension between online presence and offline reality, as well as the illusory sense of control afforded to users of technology. Perhaps these Modern Love authors felt as if the stories involving their online selves had stifled their freedom and dignity—rendering their complex personhood to be "contained

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[116] Paul John Eakin, ed., *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 5.

within servers and hard drives."[117] In this case, their agency resided in the writing process, a reinforcement of McAdams's suggestion that narratives are often redemptive and generative.

This is a project that is rooted in its current time and place, and the narratives analyzed seemingly act as a cultural mirror for how people love in the twenty-first century. In a phone interview with Daniel Jones, I asked him how, since the column was first published 13 years ago, people have shifted the way they write about technology, to which he responded:

> I'm always getting a lot of submissions that have to do with technology. I remember in the early years—2004, 2005, 2006—it was remarkable to get essays about online dating. It was something that people were ashamed of, and people were writing about it as if it were a curious object. Now, it doesn't need to be the focus of an essay anymore. It's barely mentioned in an essay now because it's so assumed that a huge percentage of people that are reading are not just on one dating site, but many.[118]

The progression of online dating from at once being written about as a "curious object" to now serving as secondary aspect of submitted essays relates to McAdams's guiding principle that the stories reflect the culture they are in—a culture in which Apple, Google, Twitter, Facebook, Netflix, and Amazon are not only conduits for connection and accessibility, but also fundamental to the economy both financially and politically. Undoubtedly, there are "curious objects" of 2018 that will become ubiquitous soon, one of which is the growing invention of virtual and augmented realities, wherein computer-generated environments become immersive—*of the self* as oppose to an *extension of the self*. In 2015, while speaking at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, Google's executive chairman, Eric Schmidt, hypothesized that "the Internet will disappear…there will be so many…devices, things that you are wearing, things that you are interacting with that you won't even sense it…it will just be part of your presence all the

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[117] Osborn, "Downloadable. Unsustainable."

[118] Daniel Jones (editor, Modern Love, *New York Times)*, in discussion with the author, February 2018.

time."[119] What this means, and this should come as no surprise, is that the hyperconnected world of 2018 and the grip it has on its inhabitants isn't going anywhere, save a massive attack on its servers or infrastructure.

We are still in an age when "the stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in the our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large,"[120] but it seems to me that technology will eventually become corporeal, part of the "heads and bodies" aspect of that statement—*part of who we are*—rather than an aspect of culture to which we need to reconcile ourselves. If this is the case, there will be no distinction between one's virtual story and one's offline reality; they will bleed into and inform one another, rendered indivisible by the power of the digital cloud.

As our interaction with technology continues to grow, I speculate that its psychological impacts on our identities as its users will continue to grow, as well. Any semblance of the illusory control we have over our devices will be deceptive—it's the devices that will have control over us. As forecasted by an episode in the newest season of *Black Mirror*, it is possible that in the future the hard work of finding intimacy and love will be replaced by a technological device that uses an experienced-based algorithm to determine the length of any couple's relationship, anywhere from 26 minutes to "the perfect match," which lasts forever.[121] As such, technology will continue to influence and change the way people interact, establish, maintain,

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[119] Dave Smith, "GOOGLE CHAIRMAN: 'The Internet Will Disappear'," Business Insider, http://www.businessinsider.com/google-chief-eric-schmidt-the-Internet-will-disappear-2015-1.

[120] McAdams, "Personal Narratives," 243.

[121] *Black Mirror*, "Hang the D.J.," episode 4, Netflix.

and represent social relationships. It will also continue to be a threat to our right to forget, freezing us in an eternal present.

Though these postulations are distressing, in arguing for the Internet as "the great masterpiece of civilization, a massive and collective work of art," journalist Virginia Heffernan writes: "tweets are not diseased rings of glitchy minds. They're epigrams, aphorisms, maxims, dictums, taglines, captions, slogans, and adages. Some are art, some are commercial; these are forms with integrity."[122] There is comfort in this mindset as is relates to the power of narrative—that stories have always been the foundation of identity—that its role in self-perception, relationships and growth remains stable and enduring, albeit never stagnant. To accept the Internet as a collective work of art is to accept that technology has provided the inevitable, inexorable, and perhaps even necessary shock to traditional methods of composing and expressing our life narratives, one that is now inseparable from our daily ways of grappling with human experience. Whatever its vehicle, and whatever technology's influence on language, storytelling will continue to be, as it has always been, the currency for how we reckon with our lives.

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[122]Virginia Heffernan, *Magic and Loss: The Internet As Art* (n.p.: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 60.

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