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THE AVAILABLE MEANS OF IMAGINATION:
PERSONAL NARRATIVE, PUBLIC RHETORIC, AND CIRCULATION

By

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B.A., Middle Tennessee State University, 2009
M.A., Miami University, 2011

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English/Rhetoric and Composition

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University of Louisville
Louisville Kentucky

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PERSONAL NARRATIVE, PUBLIC RHETORIC, AND CIRCULATION

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A Dissertation Approved on

July 18, 2016

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DEDICATION

For Georgia Wilkerson
who funded my dreams, even when she didn't understand them.

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Dr. Bronwyn Williams not only shaped this project with his ideas and input, he also trusted me enough as a burgeoning scholar to know what the project *should* be, and I would like to thank him for his support and occasional cheerleading in word and deed. I want to thank Dr. Karen Kopelson for putting up with an excruciatingly bad seminar paper that was my opening foray in the ideas presented here and for her realistic view of the project along the way. I want to thank Dr. Mary P. Sheridan, for the attention she asked me to pay to my terms, and Dr. Beth Boehm, for suggesting Savannah Dietrich as a case study (and a fruitful one it proved to be). Thanks to Dr. Jason Palmeri for offering helpful advice for navigating the whole process. I'd also like to thank my family, Stephen, Deborah, David, and Ashton, for being interested and invested just because I was interested and invested. Finally, much thanks to my husband Ben, who talked these thoughts to death with me, who helped me find the right word, who everyday fights my imposter syndrome by believing that I am incredibly smart.

ABSTRACT

THE AVAILABLE MEANS OF IMAGINATION: PERSONAL NARRATIVE, PUBLIC RHETORIC, AND CIRCULATION

Stephanie D. Weaver

July 18, 2016

This dissertation examines the digital circulation of personal narratives by non-celebrity individuals that become part of larger public and political debates. I posit the “available means of imagination” to describe the ways that narratives – cultural, fictional, and personal – influence our ability to understand the many facets of a given public debate before tracing the interactions among narrative, emotion, and circulation in a series of case studies using new materialist methods. I argue that emotion plays a key role in structures of participation of social media and in how we subsequently engage with contemporary political issues, especially with regards to what we choose to circulate.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters, including three case studies. Chapter 1 offers an overview of rhetorical approaches to the public debate, circulation – digital or otherwise – and narrative. The second chapter, which covers Liza Long’s article “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother,” establishes the relationship between emotion and circulation, arguing that Long’s post traveled widely because of the wide range of emotions it evoked. Chapter 3 analyzes the circulation of the story of Savannah Dietrich, a teenage sexual assault victim who violated a court order by posting the names of her underage

attackers on Twitter, via its uptake into preexisting ideologics, demonstrating the ways rhetors may adapt another's personal narrative to serve as evidence of their own claims while also having their own interpretations of the story mitigated by their worldviews. Chapter 4 examines the case of GamerGate, a movement purportedly devoted to ethics in games journalism which began with programmer Eron Gjoni's blog post about his relationship and break-up with game designer Zoe Quinn. This case provides further insights into how a personal narrative may be interpreted to fit a preexisting world view, as well as demonstrating how competing narratives develop surrounding the same event, including accounts of the motivations of participants, critiques of opponents, and moves to bolster the ethos of the group with which the rhetor identifies.

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CHAPTER I
EXPLORING THE CONNECTIONS AMONG PUBLIC RHETORIC, CIRCULATION,
AND NARRATIVE

Shortly after the school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, mother and blogger Liza Long wrote an article regarding her experiences with her own mentally ill and sometimes violent son, Michael. This article appeared initially on both her personal blog, *The Anarchist Soccer Mom*, and *The Blue Review*, “a journal of popular scholarship published by the Boise State University College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs,” but was soon republished on sites like *The Huffington Post*, *Salon*, and *Slate*. Over the course of a couple of days, the article attained “viral” status, saturating social media feeds and prompting a wide number of responses; while some complained that Long’s post further demonized persons with mental illness, including her own son, others argued that a focus on mental illness detracted from the more pressing debate regarding gun control. These latter responses suggest that Long’s article, with its argument for more facilities and treatment options for mentally ill and sometimes violent people besides incarceration, offered a position in the discourse surrounding the Sandy Hook Shooting that would have otherwise gone by without wide consideration by the larger public.

Long's case is both typical and unusual. Writing about one's reaction to a national news event like the Sandy Hook Shooting is nothing new for the genre of the blog. However, most personal narratives on blogs go largely unnoticed apart from the select readership a blog may have cultivated. That Long was able to catapult her concerns into the national spotlight speaks to a unique set of circumstances, a kairotic combination of content, circulation, and audience. As personal narratives from marginalized positions are often able to introduce audiences to unfamiliar perspectives but frequently suffer from a lack of circulation, Long's case, and other examples of non-celebrity individuals attaining this level of notoriety, deserve attention from rhetoricians as examples of successful circulation. While wide circulation may not be enough to establish political change, it is the first step in incorporating these non-dominant positions into a public's available means of imagination – that is, the variety of narratives and associated subject positions that one can imagine in a given situation. In this dissertation, I propose a theory of the available means of imagination that offers a new way of approaching the circulation of narrative texts online and their potential influence on public rhetoric by allowing rhetoricians to side-step questions of agency in political change in favor of examining the characteristics of successfully circulated texts through new materialist methods. After reviewing relevant scholarship in the areas of public and political rhetoric, circulation, and personal narrative, I examine three case studies in which personal narratives by relatively unknown individuals influenced mainstream media and public debate after attaining wide circulation. But before we can examine these kairotic combinations of content, circulation, and audience, we must first consider the multiple facets of public rhetoric and circulation in the time of social media, especially the complicated nature of

emotion and emotional appeals in relation to political positions rhetors view as viable for creating political change.

Public and Political Rhetoric

As has been pointed out by numerous scholars, the history of public rhetoric is, by and large, the history of rhetoric: ancient rhetoricians were primarily concerned with issues of the *polis*, while nineteenth century rhetorical education – as limited as we may now perceive it to be – focused on developing young men into suitable gentlemen for civic engagement. Consequently, most theories of rhetoric have some bearing on public discourse, and as such, I cannot hope to offer a comprehensive account of public rhetoric scholarship. Instead, I have selected to focus on those areas of inquiry most important for understanding the role of personal narrative and circulation in public rhetoric: theories of publics and audiences, the role of emotion in public and political rhetoric, and public rhetoric online.

Publics and Audiences in Public Rhetoric

The term *public* is fraught with complications, as scholars have struggled to define its parameters since Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Rather than engage in these discussions, I instead focus on the aspects of publics pertinent to questions of circulation, beginning with the role of attention in forming publics. Both Michael Warner and Gerard Hauser argue that attention is a constitutive feature of publics; "Publics," Warner writes, "lacking any institutional being, commences with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention,

and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated" (88). Likewise, membership in a public commences at the moment the individual extends her attentions: "Whenever attention to social exchange alters or reinforces personal views, collective participation in rhetorical processes *constitute individuals as a public*" (Hauser 34; emphasis in original). The level of engagement can be minimal, as "our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to and performs their extension," and arguably "sharing" via social media is more than enough to indicate this cursory processing (Warner 89).

Warner argues that "writing to a public helps to make a world insofar as the object of address is brought into being partly by postulating and characterizing it" (92). However, a rhetor may not simply call a public into being but must work with a preexisting social identity that is "recognized as a real path for the circulation of discourse." As "that path is then treated as a social entity" (Warner 92), a particular route or means of circulation becomes recognized and reified as a social identity (Fraser 68). As Warner writes, "there is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation [...] its circulatory fate is the realization of that world" (114). For rhetoric scholars, Warner's argument resonates with many of our theories regarding audience, insofar as we might understand the imagined path of circulation as the imagined audience while the "circulatory fate" defines the addressed audience. What Warner does not address is the recursive construction of these imagined and actual circulatory paths; as rhetors construct texts for imagined publics, the history of the circulation of previous texts shapes their understanding of the needs, values, and ideologies of their intended

public. Thus, the “lifeworld” of circulation is also an understanding of how a public characterizes its world. These worlds, however, are not without contention; rather it is through conflict that these worlds are negotiated. As Nancy Fraser puts it, “There is no way to know in advance whether the outcome of a deliberative process will be the discovery of a common good in which conflicts of interest evaporate as merely apparent or, rather, the discovery that conflicts of interest are real and the common good is chimerical,” indicating that there are many kinds of worlds that public may come to agree on (72). Hauser agrees that “disagreement is inevitable in serious and enriching conversation,” but notes that interlocutors must agree that “they are in the same world,” demonstrating one possible manifestation of the stasis of definition and suggesting that shared commonplaces may be a key feature of a public (66). The need for shared commonplaces is supported by Warner’s argument that no single text creates a public but rather “the concatenation of texts through time”: “Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public” (90). However, a single text can serve to manifest a public; publics often become apparent through their responses to a single text, event, or individual. Over time, these manifestations may reveal the evolution of a public as its responses to texts adapt to shifting ideologies, values, and topoi.

As we adopt these theories of publics into public rhetoric, one important issue for rhetoricians to consider is the relationship between *publics* and our heretofore theorized *audiences*. Warner’s characterization of the relationship between publics and those who would address them brings to mind Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s argument regarding the recursive and cross-constituting nature of the audience invoked and the audience

addressed. Arguably, the move away from *audiences* to *publics* mirrors the shift from *rhetorical situation* to *rhetorical ecologies* as a result of the rise of circulation studies outlined below. However, I argue that it is productive to consider publics through the lens of our theories regarding audience, namely Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *universal audience* and Kenneth Burke's *identification*.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *universal audience* theorizes the inventional role of the invoked audience in the composition process, indicating that "this refers [...] not to an experimentally proven fact, but to a universality and unanimity imagined by the speaker" (31). They explain, "Philosophers always claim to be addressing such an audience, not because they hope to obtain the effective assent of all men – they know very well that only a small minority will ever read their works – but because they think that all who understand the reasons they give will have to accept their conclusions." Rhetors, then, construct what they presume to be best reasons based on what they imagine the universal audience accepting as best reasons, and each universal audience is unique to its rhetor: "Everyone constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow man, in such a way as to transcend the few oppositions he is aware of. Each individual, each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience" (33). It is Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's explanation of the interaction between concrete audiences and the concept of universal audience that is most useful when considering publics: "We believe, then, that audiences are not independent of one another, that particular concrete audiences are capable of validating a concept of the universal audience which characterizes them" (35). When rhetors find that their conception of the universal audience has led to success with a concrete audience, they more staunchly

adhere to that conception. Similarly, a rhetor who wishes to address a public may find that her conception of the social identity of this public leads to an amenable circulatory fate for her argument, reifying the social identity of this public in her own mind as well as among its members.

Burke's theory of identification also helps us understand the relationship between a public's social identity and a rhetor wishing to persuade members of that public. Burke argues that "you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language, by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his [...] And you give the 'signs' of such consubstantiality by deference to an audience's 'opinions'" (55). Because this demonstration of consubstantiality is necessary to persuasion, "the rhetorician may have to change an audience's opinion in one respect; but he can succeed only insofar as he yields to that audience's opinions in other respects" (56). However, these displays of consubstantiality, as Burke calls it, are only part of the nature of identification, as his example of the shepherd and the butcher demonstrates. Through this example, Burke argues that identification can happen through material means if not ideological ones; while the shepherd may care for the sheep until they are sold to the butcher and find what the butcher does distasteful, as long as the shepherd profits from the butcher's practices, the shepherd and the butcher are both identified with the slaughter of sheep. As Jenny Rice explains, "Though the shepherd and the butcher have very different goals, they identify with a common act. The obvious difference is that the shepherd and the butcher do not feel the same way about their relations" (48). Warner's conception of attention as the only requirement for joining a public seems to work

similarly: no matter how one feels about what one is paying attention to, one has, for better or worse, joined the public of that text.

While other scholars may find it productive to continue to maintain the distinction between publics and audiences, I find it more useful to consider the two in tandem as it opens up new ways of understanding the interactions between individuals and groups, especially in an online context. Warner initially argues that online discourse moved too rapidly for any kind of meaningful public to be generated. Byron Hawk argues that publics may emerge online “but this process requires some alterations to Warner's sense of time, especially punctuality, in order to make the case” (168). Additionally, understanding how publics emerge online requires rethinking attention as well as punctuality; Internet users are inundated with texts vying for information often before they can reach or as part of the texts they want to see. For example, Facebook gives a list of “Trending” topics as a sidebar on each user’s homepage. If I glance at this list to see an entry on Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, is this enough attention to make me part of the celebrity news public for which entries like this are intended? Or must I actually click on the link? Furthermore, as we will see in the next section, the giving of attention is an emotionally and ideologically determined act, suggesting that this most basic requirement for joining a public is more complex than publics scholars have given it to be.

Emotion in Public Rhetoric

One recent development in public rhetorical theory is a renewed interest in the role of emotion in public deliberation beyond surface appeals to pathos. While appeals to pathos continue to play an important role in political texts, scholars have begun to inquire

into the emotional positions that are at work prior to the reception of a text that interact with these pathetic appeals in persuasion, noting that these emotional states are often identified with particular ideologies held by individuals. As Laura Micciche puts it,

Isn't the very process of deliberation already an emotioned one, already bound up with attachments we have to a way of seeing or conceptualizing an issue? In other words, how we think about what constitutes evidence and grounds for an argument -- indeed, how we come to decide that an issue deserves to be "argued" -- already shaped by our emotional investments in how things ought to be. (3)

Sharon Crowley exemplifies this turn in her analysis of the argument styles of the Christian Right and their liberal opponents. Drawing on psychological studies of emotion and attention, Crowley writes,

One of the one hand, we pay attention to events or objects that arouse more intense emotional reactions, thus singling them out from the array of other potential stimulants in the environment. On the other hand, belief can affect the attribution of emotional responses to objects or events [...] The relative intensity of an emotional response can either alter or reinforce belief. Thus emotion and belief can constitute a feedback loop. (83)

The importance of this feedback loop in public deliberation is "the resulting affect may seem to underwrite the empirical truth of whatever conclusion is drawn," (88) such as when a person expresses her adherence to a choice because it "feels right." The networks of affect that Crowley describes are part of the larger working of ideologics, which she defines as "connections made between and among moments (positions) that occur or are taken up within ideology" (60). She contrasts ideologic with reason, positing that ideologic allows us to account for arguments based on "belief, passion, values, and desires" as opposed to empirical evidence.

Crowley is not the only one to argue for different understanding – one that highlights the underlying patterns – of the emotional aspects of public debate. While

Crowley turns to psychology, Catherine Chaput draws on economic analogies to argue that "just like economic value, rhetorical value is achieved through the circulation of its many transhistorical and transsituational exchanges and just as money measure economic value, affect measures rhetorical value" (14). Chaput writes that "affect, in the form of something as taken for granted as a gut sense, exerts pressure on our decision making and does not crumble under the deliberative weight of better arguments or more information" (8). Chaput goes on to argue that under neoliberalism, which takes advantage of affective energies, we must consider "rationality" anew; she illustrates this point by describing an individual who opposes Obama's tax redistribution plan because it would benefit lazy people and burden hard working citizens. When he is confronted with arguments that tax redistribution would affect only the wealthiest, he counters by renouncing his concerns with his own economic self-interest and instead couches them in terms of the national economy. Chaput writes,

He does not dislike Obama because he is thinking only of his economic self-interest, or because he's unhappy about the way economic self-interest is discursively represented by the Obama campaign, or because he lacks information, or because he's irrational. With a clear voice, a sincere tone, and after carefully listening to Pelosi, the man maintains his distrust of Obama because of deeply affective energies attached to notions about economic competition that literally prevent him from communicating with those who do not share his understanding of how the world works, precluding him, in fact, from connecting with others and entertaining new possibilities. (17)

One important implication of this reexamination of emotion is that we must reconsider our conceptions of agency. Chaput argues that "conceptualizing discursive practices as a form of labor rather than a form of political signification [with its attendant questions of political agency] sidesteps anxiety about well-chosen language and emphasizes the life-affirming activity involved in deciphering issues, inventing new paths

through those issues, and communicating new ideas to others” (2). That is, the time and effort that individuals invest in political discourse can be valuable to them without material manifestations of political change; individuals may *feel* like agents just through participation in the discourse.

While Hauser and Warner agree that attention is all that is required for membership in a public, Crowley and Chaput’s examination of the role that emotion plays in attention indicates that the simple act of paying attention has its own ideological constraints. If, as Crowley argues, emotional connection is key in drawing one’s attention to discourse, Burke’s notion of identification becomes an interesting aspect of the constitution of publics. Arguably, the appropriate connections between emotion and attention for a particular public are part of the “commonplaces [that] are known to all who participate in the communal discourse in which they circulate” (Crowley 71). As Micciche argues, the performance of emotion, even genuinely felt ones, is a rhetorical act insofar as “only through collective, implicit assent in communal life does emotion have meaning, for here is where identification of emotion is ascribed to expression and perception” (11). As such, the feeling and consequent performance of the appropriate emotion in reaction to a text is a manifestation of one’s ideologic as well as a performance of identification with that ideologic.

Identification and Ethos in Social Media

The interactions between emotion and identification online become especially apparent in the context of social media. As digital democracy scholars such as Manuel Castells and Geert Lovink have found, sites like Facebook and Twitter have become

instrumental in how users experience public debate and political action, both their construction and reception, and serve as a primary means of circulation for digital texts. Moreover, social media has affected how individuals, both public figures and private persons, present themselves to the wider world. As part of their larger outline of the multiple facets of political rhetoric online, Barbara Warnick and David S. Heinemann examine the use of social media by political candidates in the 2010 midterm election, finding that while candidates continued to perform identification with their voting base, social media and the voters who use it often determined what that performance should look like. Warnick and Heinemann write, “Social media require that candidates become more open about those categories of their life that are deemed relevant by voters and by the organizing principles of the sites they use. Their success in approaching consubstantiality has much to do with their command of the expectations of both the audiences and those virtual spaces in which they meet them” (102). Candidates who treated social media as an extension of their campaign website, largely posting the same information, fared worse among voters than did candidates who posted more personal/personable information like family photos or anecdotes from the campaign trail, suggesting that social media is shaping the kinds of evidence voters are evaluating in determining a candidate’s credibility, and perhaps indicates that the structures of participation of social media spaces – which privilege “authenticity” – have predisposed users to expect different kinds of evidence or to evaluate this evidence differently.

What does or does not count as evidence of credibility to different groups is affected by and in turn affects circulation. In some cases, ethos precedes, capacitates, and accelerates circulation, but in others circulation precedes ethos, especially in communities

of group-authorship, such as wikis or forums. Within these communities, users build their credibility through what might be viewed as a system of meritocracy insofar as individuals are evaluated apart from identity markers or social attachments. Laura Gurak and Judith Donath find that one's contributions to the community – especially contributions that are “of the kind admired by the group” – are the primary factor in establishing ethos (Donath 31), a point that Axel Bruns later expands upon. Bruns writes that “participants who consistently make [...] unusable contributions will [...] themselves drift to the outside of the community, although those found to be usually worthy contributors will rise to greater prominence among their peers” (25). Bruns goes on to say that “leadership is determined through the continuous communal evaluation of the participants and their ideas, and through the degree of community merit they are able to build in the process,” calling these communities “*ad hoc* meritocracies” (26).

These arguments about the Internet as a meritocracy have been used to support notions of the Internet as an ultimately democratic space where one's ethos built on one's contributions is enough for a person to accomplish rhetorical tasks. What Bruns fails to take into account, however, is ideological structures guiding what users find “usable,” “productive,” or “valuable,” as well as the forms such contributions must take. For example, Wikipedia, while presenting a space for the democratization of knowledge, has long been criticized for the overwhelming majority of white, male editors, which contributes to the dominance of a Western notion of “objectivity” as intrinsic to good knowledge production and curation. This problem becomes particularly noticeable in the controversy that may surround issues of gender and sexuality, such as the banning of a number of feminist editors for their contributions to the “GamerGate Controversy”

Wikipedia page (Hern). In addition to these ideological constraints, Bruns neglects the role that circulation may play in making one solution to a community problem appear as the only solution; as Gurak puts it, “Postings that appeal to community standards and are perceived as important, true, and credible will [...] be reposted widely and quickly. Those participants who do not agree are left on the side, and there is nothing inherent in the structure of the Internet itself to suggest otherwise” (259). Posts that reflect community values will be widely circulated, and with this circulation, they will reify that these are, in fact, the values of this community, thereby diminishing the ethos of dissidents within the community.

The interactions between ethos and circulation may become especially convoluted as texts travel globally. Mary Queen’s study of representations of Middle Eastern feminist groups by Western women “reveals the complexity of the intersections among global and digital production and consumption of meaning, as well as the process through which the global circulation of digital representations becomes rhetorical and, ultimately, political actions” (472). Focusing on the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), Queen examines the ways in which RAWA identified itself with Western neoliberal feminist principles, making it popular for Western circulation, before noting examples of Western-authored texts that were eventually attributed to RAWA, giving them additional ethos as representing the perspectives of RAWA (and therefore, problematically, Afghan women in general). Queen’s study demonstrates the importance of considering not just online texts but also their circulation and reappropriation as we consider their rhetorical effects. Sara Ahmed’s notion of *stickiness* helps explain the ways in which texts may accumulate affective value(s) – perhaps never intended by the initial

rhetor – through the course of their circulation, influencing audience perceptions of both the texts and the rhetor(s) attached to them, including, as Crowley notes, the most basic act of paying attention. As such, we much consider that texts that might have no meaning for an audience in its initial publication, perhaps because of the initial rhetor, may suddenly attain meaning in the course of its recirculation due to the new affective values that have been accumulated in the course of its travels.

Circulation

While circulation has been considered in conjunction with a number of rhetorical concerns, it has more recently become an area of inquiry unto itself. In her 2013 article “Iconographic Tracking,” Laurie E. Gries identifies circulation studies as “an interdisciplinary approach to studying discourse in motion” in which “scholars investigate not only how discourse is produced and distributed, but also how once delivered, it circulates, transforms, and affects change through its material encounters” (333). The exigency for this research, much of which has been published since 2002, is two-fold. The publication of an abbreviated version of Michael Warner’s “Publics and Counterpublics” in a 2002 issue of *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* as part of a forum on the essay prompted communications scholars to study circulation as constitutive part of publics, and the articles in a recent special issue of *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* on circulation indicate that this is still very much the case. For rhetoric and composition scholars, circulation studies is largely taken up as part of new media studies more generally; James E. Porter’s 2009 call for the study of circulation as an aspect of digital delivery is characteristic of this turn. Scholars have examined the circulation of images

(Gries; Hariman and Lucaites; Inabinet; O'Rourke), video (Atkinson; Dubisar and Palmeri; Lewis), and sound (Foley; Hawk) as well as alphabetic text (Black; Collins; Edbauer; Queen; Ridolfo; Trimbur) in both digital and physical spaces.

Following Warner's claim that publics are constituted by the circulation of texts over time, several scholars have sought to reconfigure our understanding of public rhetoric, largely by rethinking the *rhetorical situation* first posited by Lloyd Bitzer. Ronald Walter Greene argues that "the rhetorical situation fails to provide a model for a public because in order to be a public, discourse needs to keep circulating beyond its concrete situation" (437). Likewise, Chaput argues that the rhetorical situation is unable to account for "capitalism's ability to cross boundaries, change its identification strategies, and thrive within the overdetermined spaces of contemporary neoliberalism" (10). Jenny Edbauer posits *rhetorical ecologies* as a new framework for "theorizing public rhetorics (and rhetoric's publicness) as a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" (9). By moving away from the limitations of the rhetorical situation, scholars can more fully account for both the initial publications of text and their various re-publications, appropriations, and remixes as well, as Edbauer demonstrates through her examples of the "Keep Austin Weird" campaign and its spin-offs. Chaput argues that "Edbauer's rhetorical ecology allows us to replace our liberal belief in the social world as a collection of sites that add up to some rational whole – the rhetorical situation – with a neoliberal understanding of the social as a living totality of events that flow, change, and cohere in both predictable and unpredictable ways – a rhetorical circulation" (12)

Scholars have also turned to Burke's notion of identification to understand circulation, demonstrating that circulation often reaffirms and reconstitutes group identities. In his examination of the circulation of Jacksonian political cartoons, Brandon Inabinet argues that the "simple solutions, even ironically violent ones," presented in the lithographs serve to shore up identifications thrown into turmoil by economic panic (661). Lynn C. Lewis highlights the roles that speed plays in the creation and perceived value of memes, arguing that the use of typed identities (just as one might find in political cartoons) contributes to the viralness of memes through audiences' identification with and against them. In her extended examination of the Star Wars Kid meme, Lewis finds that audiences identified both negatively ("look at this dumb nerd") and positively ("this is something my friends and I would do") in their responses. Often these identifications become apparent in the commentary that individuals supply as they recirculate a text, as Joel Penney and Caroline Dadas find in their examination of Twitter use by Occupy Wall Street protesters.

Other scholars note the ways in which re-publications and reappropriations often bring the text that may be considered alternative or radical back in line with dominant ideologies regarding race, class, and gender. In her analysis of *The Account of Hester Ann Rogers*, the published version of the journal of a devout Methodist woman and close friend of John Wesley, Vicki Tolar Collins finds that the supplementary materials included in subsequent editions of the book serve to reaffirm dominant beliefs that the place of a religious woman is the domestic sphere, while the core text by Rogers suggests otherwise. Likewise, Jason Edward Black's analysis of the appropriation of Chief Seattle by white environmentalists highlights the "substantive maneuverings, retrofits, and

commodifications" involved in rhetorical circulation and demonstrates the ways that circulation by colonizers may negatively affect the ethos of the colonized rhetor by usurping the original context of the text (637). Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma argue that these "cultures of circulation," whether understood as radical or supporting the status quo, "are created and animated by the cultural forms that circulate through them, including – critically – the abstract nature of the forms that underwrite and propel the process of circulation itself" (192). Expanding on Warner, Lee and LiPuma go on to write,

The circulation of such forms – whether the novels or newspapers of the imagined community or the equity-based derivatives and currency swaps of the modern market – always presupposes the existence of their respective interpretive communities, with their own forms of interpretation and evaluation. These interpretive communities determine the lines of interpretation, found institutions, and set boundaries based principally on their own internal dynamics.

While it reasserts the world-making properties of circulation and publics that Warner presents with an eye toward the economic as well as the textual, Lee and LiPuma's statement also reasserts the need for rhetorical scholars to consider the relationship between publics and audiences, as these interpretive communities they describe do much of the work attributed to audiences.

Rhetoric scholars have posited a number of heuristics and methods for the study of circulation. In order to examine the representations of Middle Eastern women most commonly taken up by Western feminists, Queen posits a methodology of *rhetorical genealogy*, which she defines as "a process of examining digital texts not as artifacts of rhetorical production, but rather, as continually evolving rhetorical actions that are materially bound, actions whose transformation can be traced through the links embedded

within multiple fields of circulation” (476). Queen focuses on the “multiple processes structuring representation, rather than seek[ing] to identify the original intentions or final effects of structured (and thus already stabilized) representations.” Rhetorical genealogy calls particular attention to ideological structures of participation that govern the circulation of particular representations and the elision of others.

Rather than focusing primarily on the ideological constraints on circulation, Jim Ridolfo’s heuristic of *rhetorical velocity* allows scholars to also taken into account the materialities of circulation as well. In his and Danielle DeVoss’s 2009 article, rhetorical velocity is defined as “a conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party.” They outline rhetorical velocity as concerned with both how best to get the original text to an audience (What file format is going to be easiest for others to access? How should I tag this video to make it search friendly?) and how best to allow that audience to then remix the text (What file formats are easiest to manipulate? How might I organize the information to make it easy to excerpt?). While the initial set of questions has been a long time concern of delivery in the context of public rhetoric, the latter is largely specific to digital compositions and remix-oriented culture. Ridolfo argues that text-based analysis, while useful, is not sufficient for scholars to gain a complete picture of circulation. He adds to “delivery” and “circulation” the category of “distribution” in order to more fully flesh out the representation of the relationships among the rhetor, the audience, and the text that one may perceive when one includes ethnographic research methods such as interview and observation.

While Ridolfo argues that ethnographic methods are better suited for determining the process of digital composers, Gries supplies a method of data collection that supports an understanding of representation, circulation, and rhetoric as constantly in flux. Drawing on principles of new materialism, Gries proposes a recursive approach to data collection and coding in digital environments that requires researchers to return to the digital search after their data coding indicates new potential search terms in order to more fully document the various remixes, appropriations, and re-publications of a text. Some researchers, both inside and outside the academy, have begun using large collections of publicly available data on social networking sites to track the circulation of news stories, hashtags, or conversations. For example, *Medium.com's i [heart] data* collection features a number of studies responding to questions pertinent to rhetoricians. In his examination of the social media discussion surrounding the July-August 2014 conflict between Israel and Gaza, collection editor Gilad Lotan demonstrates that, rather than receiving a wide selection of opinions, social media users are most likely to see texts with which they already agree. Fellow contributor Suman Deb Roy seeks to elucidate the characteristics of a Facebook trending news story by examining the trending patterns of news stories related to the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong beginning in September 2014. These popular studies indicate the potential of big data analysis for a better understanding of circulation and public rhetoric, especially with regards to the role of mainstream media and international events.

Narrative

As much of this scholarship on circulation suggests, we must consider the circulation of individuals stories in the context of the circulation of larger cultural narratives and genres. At the same time, these two categories are often cross-constituting insofar as larger cultural narratives are often buoyed along by individual stories and individual stories are both invented and interpreted with regard to larger cultural narratives. Much work on the role of narrative in rhetoric and/or the rhetorical nature of narrative has highlighted this interplay between individual texts and the larger cultural stories from which they are drawn.

The Narrative Paradigm

A primary theory on the relationship between rhetoric and narrative is Walter R. Fisher's *narrative paradigm*. At the center of the narrative paradigm is the argument that knowledge is "ultimately configured narratively, as a component in a larger story implying the being of a certain kind of person, a person with a particular worldview, with a specific self-concept, and with characteristic ways of relating to others" (17). Beginning by outlining a history of the split between logic, rhetoric, and poetics, Fisher paints narrative rationality in stark contrast to technical rationality, arguing that such distinctions are important in public moral arguments as technical rationality, which Fisher regards as the dominant voice in public debate, does not acknowledge reasoning based on values, a major shortcoming when debating the public good. Alternately, Fisher proposes a narrative rationality which is evaluated on "the principles of probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability)" (47). Probability "is assessed in three ways: by its

argumentative or *structural coherence* [Does the story agree with itself?]; by its *material coherence* [Does the story agree with the audience's previous experiences?]; and by *characterological coherence* [Are the characters involved, including the rhetor, acting in ways one would expect?]" (47, emphasis in original). Fidelity, on the other hand, is assessed using what Fisher calls the *logic of good reasons*, a heuristic that questions the validity and ethics of the values inherent in any message (108-10).

A number of scholars have questioned the efficacy of Fisher's theory, offering their own heuristics for understanding the interactions between narrative and rhetoric. Michael Calvin McGee and John S. Nelson, for example, criticize Fisher's "deliberate contrast of reason to narrative, especially in public argument" (139). Rather than distinguishing between the relative dominance or merit of "technical" reasoning versus the narrative paradigm, McGee and Nelson argue that "what we need is to dispel the dichotomy: to understand and improve the place of narrative in rationality and of reasoning in storytelling" (145-6). They draw on Quintilian's statements regarding the "narration of facts" to demonstrate the longstanding connections between rhetoric and narrative (as opposed to Fisher's claims that "technical" reasoning is also "traditional"), noting the frequent translation of *narratio* as "statement" or "statement of facts" (148). John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit likewise turn to Quintilian to argue for a functional approach to narrative, as a structuralist approach may neglect the full range of narratives in favor of those that are clearly poetic in nature (104-5). They argue that the characteristics of various types of narratives – they acknowledge that their categories of dialectical, rhetorical, and poetic narratives are oversimplified but useful for offering a cursory examination – are often the product of their functions:

A rhetorical narrative [understood as the *narratio* of the classical oration] is a story that serves as an interpretive lens through which the audience is asked to view and understand the verisimilitude of the propositions and proof before it. Both content and form of the rhetorical narrative are thus subservient to the demands of the relationship between the specific audience to which it is addressed, the specific context in which it appears, and the specific gains toward which it strives. (94)

Lucaites and Condit consequently find that rhetorical narratives are characterized by brevity, as they “must compel an audience to a favorable interpretation of the proofs for a case without taxing its members to weariness or disinterest with digressions or unnecessary details,” and univocality, as “the reasons and evidence they offer must [...] be directed at proving a single interpretation of a claim to fact, value, or policy” (98). As opposed to Fisher’s principles of probability and fidelity, Lucaites and Condit find that “the ability of a narrative to form an interpretation of the proof and to move to audience to action is [...] functionally contingent upon the speaker’s credibility,” resulting in “an inherent, formal unity of narrator, author, and speaker” (101).

Warnick criticizes Fisher’s paradigm on a number of fronts, arguing that “the narrative paradigm lacks what Fisher calls ‘narrative probability,’ by which I take him to mean internal coherence” (“The Narrative Paradigm,” 172). She finds Fisher’s characterization of traditional rationality too “ambiguous and equivocal” for use in the assessment of texts and concludes, “What is disturbing about narrative rationality is that value choices are ultimately based on the critic’s personal preference but in the interim masquerade as something else – an ‘objective’ critical method that assures its consumers that a greater measure of ‘truth’ will be attained than in other critical systems” (181).

Warnick, among others (Bennett and Edelman; Rowland; Kirkwood), worries that Fisher’s focus on stories that confirm audience’s self-conceptions is, in fact, detrimental

to public moral argument that Fisher seeks to encourage as it leaves little space or impetus for rhetors to introduce stories that fall outside an audience's purview.

One of the points of confusion brought to light in these criticisms by Warnick and others is whether we should understand Fisher's narrative paradigm as descriptive – a model for explaining how a kind of persuasion happens in the world – or prescriptive – a model for how individuals *should* approach persuasion in the world. As Warnick's criticisms indicate, there are aspects of both in Fisher's work: while his case studies of Ronald Regan, *Death of a Salesman*, and Plato's *Gorgias* suggest the former, much of his language regarding the logic of good reasons suggests the latter. As a prescriptive method presented as superior to other forms of reasoning, the narrative paradigm does have questionable aspects; however, it also offers a useful descriptive heuristic for understanding how audiences respond to and evaluate both explicit and implicit narratives. The descriptive value of the narrative paradigm is especially evident in Maurice Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric which builds on Fisher's narrative paradigm by examining the ideological nature of narrative in relation to the interpellation of subjects. He argues that "the subject is constituted at the nodes of the narrative's surface. What Walter Fisher terms 'narrative probability' is a formal and ideological constraint upon the subject's possibilities of being" (140). Moreover, "since narratives offer totalizing interpretations that ascribe transcendent meanings to individual acts, the maintenance of narrative consistency demands that a certain set of acts be chosen," meaning that individuals are limited in both the roles and the act they may take based on what would be understood by themselves and perhaps by their audiences as narratively consistent (143). One advantage of Charland's theory is its insights into situations where

the rhetor and the audience cannot be clearly distinguished in terms of who is persuading whom; instead, Charland presents cultural narratives as mutually produced texts that rhetors both draw on and create, since “subject positions are bequeathed by the past, by yesterday’s discourse” (147). As such, Charland argues that Fisher’s narrative fidelity, as both a site of rhetorical invention and a tool of interpretation, “has an ideological character, for the experiential ground to which narrative would be faithful are always already ideologically framed within the very being of the experiencing subject” (148).

While Charland focuses on the rhetorical conception of the self, Robert Asen examines the role of narrative and imagination in the rhetorical conception of the other. Asen argues that collective imagining, “shape[d] through discursive engagement among interlocutors in contexts of varying structure, scope, and formality,” influences the perceptions of participants in public debate whether or not they are physically present (349). Moreover, “imagining affects participants in public discussion differently, often disadvantaging socially and historically marginalized people and groups while tacitly aiding the appeals of other” (347). Using the welfare debates of the 1980s, Asen demonstrates the relationships between imagining, representation, and counterpublics, suggesting that public imagination – as distinguished from representation – is a driving influence in the inclusion and exclusion of counterpublic discourse and agents in public debate.

The persuasive nature of narratives is perhaps tied to their ability to evoke emotion. Charles A. Hill writes that recent research by psychologists in the area of *vividness* has found that “vivid language makes a persuasive message easier to comprehend and more likely to be remembered” (32). While Hill links vividness to the

immediacy of the rhetorical image, I would argue that we could also link this to narrative which, like an image, often makes abstract arguments more materially present to audiences. Moreover, like rhetorical images, frequently repeated narratives may become linked to particular values, and once this association is internalized, the narrative can "become a symbol for the abstract value and can be used to trigger its associated emotions" (35).

Personal Narratives

In considering the personal narrative's role in moving abstract ideas into concrete terms, a number of scholars in rhetoric and composition have discussed personal writing as part of writing pedagogy (Spigelman; Paley; Tobin; Comfort; Banks; Sullivan) and of our own scholarship (Miller; Holdstein and Bleich; Hindman; Elbow; Brandt et al.). A common theme in this work is the interactions between identity and *ethos* in the personal narrative; it seems this genre, more so than others, forces us to confront the myth of the "authentic" self. As Candace Spigelman puts it, "we do not reproduce ourselves in writing; rather, as Aristotle suggests, we select strategically the most appropriate versions and representations to complete our rhetorical purposes while acknowledging as post-modern thinkers our inability to access a stable, singular psychic core" (44). These interactions become even more complicated, as Asen indicates, for those marginalized groups about whom dominant narratives already circulate. These dominant narratives influence both the reading *and* writing of personal narratives; Lorraine D. Higgins and Lisa D. Brush find that welfare recipients frequently cast themselves in the stereotypical role of hero or victim as they tell their stories, roles with Higgins and Brush argue are not

subject positions viable for building ethos in the debate surrounding welfare as these subject positions are too easily discounted by mainstream audiences considering welfare policy.

Dana Anderson offers one framework for understanding the relationship between identity and ethos in personal writing. Drawing extensively from Burke's writings about identity, Anderson examines a number of autobiographical "conversion" stories in order to understand the role that presentation of identity plays in persuasion, writing that "concepts that can show more at work in the making of identity are an essential step toward more robust analysis – toward more fully appreciating identity's argumentative value" (165). Anderson argues that, while the two terms are inherently connected, we should understand "*ethos*" and "identity" as separate constructions in the rhetorical text, that the presentation of an identity can be persuasive in and of itself. Anderson's framework is useful in that it helps us grapple with that thin line between *ethos* and identity, and via her distinction between the "person" and the "character" of the rhetor, we may begin to understand identity as the representation of the self and ethos as the interpretation of that self by the audience through a value-laden framework. That is, certain identities may be deemed "good" or "right" by an audience because they adhere to the values that audience prizes; thus, that rhetor is perceived as credible. This may, in fact, be the case in Jeffrey T. Grabill and Stacey Pigg's study of an online forum connected to a science museum blog in which participants are encouraged to respond to and engage with recent science news, such as the discussion about the HPV vaccine that serves as the focus of the analysis. They find that several participants in the HPV discussion use different constructions of identity, such as a teenager seeking more

information about side effects of the vaccine or a woman living with HPV, in order to steer the conversation to meet their needs, primarily to receive more information about both the vaccine and treatment for HPV. Other users find these presentations of identities to line up with their own values about one's responsibility for and agency in one's own health and consequently fulfill the rhetor's requests.

Sherry Turkle has also written extensively about the construction of identity, but her work primarily examines constructions of identity online, with a particular focus on gender. Over the course of several case studies, Turkle elucidates the role that identity creation within the spaces of Role-Playing Games (RPGs) and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) plays in individuals' constructions on their real-life (RL) selves. Turkle arrives at ultimately an ambiguous position: while some participants seem able to work through RL issues by taking up other subject positions in RPGs and especially MUDs (where anonymity is possible), others use the space reenact past problems without moving forward. What is telling about Turkle's study is the ways in which RL and MUD life began to collapse for players, which in many ways offer a precursor for more contemporary experiences with social networking. That is, we may imagine Facebook, for example, as an MUD in which users are playing characters, except that social networking sites have the added patina of "authenticity," meaning that audiences' anticipate themselves to be reading/viewing genuine constructions; the outrage at discoveries of "catfishing" – the act of posing as another individual on Facebook and striking up a relationship with someone – attests to this assumption.

This question of "authenticity" is a frequent one in multimodal narrative composing practices. In their study of teenagers composing digital narratives, Birgit

Herzberg Kaare and Knut Lundby found that the composers attributed greater authenticity to autobiographical texts that included personal images and the composer's own voice. For these teens as well as the users of Facebook, images carry a great deal of weight in verifying what is "real" or "authentic" in the construction of an identity. Of course, despite the confusion and outrage when a supposed autobiographical text proves to be false, users of social media are often well aware of themselves as constructing identities and self-narratives, and this discussion is often surrounded by questions of surveillance and privacy. In her study of Internet users' perceptions of privacy, Miyase Christensen finds that many users hold "an understanding of privacy in which the issue is not *whether* one's information is accessible, but by *who*, *to what extent*, and *toward what gain or loss*" (231, emphasis in original). In other words, users have taken a fundamentally rhetorical view of their information and its circulation, with careful attention to what may be gained or lost by circulating certain identities in certain spaces. Digital spaces frequently feature recursively constructed identities and narratives as rhetors revise existing texts or create new ones based on audience responses.

Sometimes, though, the careful construction of identity has little effect on how audiences receive particular texts. In her examination of the discourse surrounding breast cancer, Judy Z. Segal finds that audiences' adherence to dominant narratives often results in the censure of rhetors presenting alternative narratives; individuals who complain about the difficulties of treatment, criticize the "warrior" metaphor so often applied to breast cancer patients, or indict carcinogen-producing industries are accused of having bad attitudes by other members of the breast cancer community. Like Charland, Segal finds that the stories that will be received positively by an audience are limited by that

audience's ideological understanding of material surroundings; when audiences are confronted with stories that fall outside their experiences, they often dismiss such stories as failing according to their measures of narrative probability of fidelity.

In her conclusion, Segal makes two statements about personal narratives in general. She writes, "I believe that personal stories have lost value recently by virtue of an excess of opportunity and exposure – a condition wrought, arguably, by commerce and the popularity of blogging [...]. No one, including the narrators, benefits from the publication of these stories; meanwhile, the genre of the personal is diminished by its careless examples" (17). She continues, "The personal narrative can be the end of dialogue, a conversational trump card" (18). On the one hand, Segal's two critiques seem counterintuitive: there are too many narratives out there for one to matter, *and* we overly value a single narrative so that it ends conversation. At the same time, we might understand her critiques as judging the use of personal narrative on both the macro and micro level. In instances of individual persuasion, one person's narrative may prevent another from questioning or responding critically because personal experience is given a particular kind of weight in intimate settings. At the same time, it is extremely difficult for a private individual to reach a public with a personal narrative due to the overwhelming number of narratives that have taken up residency on the internet. We might also understand Segal as criticizing the participation structures for personal narratives in online spaces as reductive and strictly regulated. While she names blogging as one reason for the proliferation of narratives, she also mentions an ad campaign for hair care products that asks consumers "What's your story?" While some participants tell stories related to the product, others told stories of abuse, addiction, and tragedy, but

these stories circulated in a commercial space that rendered them useless, or worse than useless, as Segal sees it, since the genre itself is “diminished” by such flippant use. The generic conventions of dominant cultural narratives become part of the structure of participation; one may only have her story circulate and matter if she follows the generic regulations.

The Available Means of Imagination

As Segal’s work suggests, audiences for personal narratives are often limited in their interpretations of these narratives, resulting in some storytellers being discredited and others validated based on their adherence to the conventions of our dominant cultural narratives regarding a particular topic. We might understand this difficulty in evaluating alternative narratives – narratives that do not fit dominant conventions – as an insufficiency of imagination, an inability to think beyond the stock narratives one has been enculturated into considering “realistic.” “Narrative imagination,” as Martha Nussbaum calls this ability to engage with stories, “is an essential preparation for moral interaction. Habits of empathy and conjecture conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another’s needs, and understands the way circumstances shape those needs, while respecting separateness and privacy” (90). However, when we have a limited number of narratives, we may be limited in empathetic responses due to the motivations we assume of individuals based on what we have gleaned from dominant cultural narratives. In many ways, expanding the available means of imagination through the acceptance of alternative

narratives into what one imagines as possible does for public audiences what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch propose “critical imagination” may do for scholars: “The idea is to account for what we ‘know’ by gathering whatever evidence can be gathered and ordering it in a configuration that is reasonable and justifiable in accord with basic scholarly methodologies,” or in accord with the principles of narrative probability and fidelity (71). “The next step,” they write, “is to think between, above, around, and beyond this evidence to speculate methodologically about probabilities, that is, what might likely be true based on what we have in hand,” and the more extensive one’s available means of imagination is, the less one is limited in those probabilities to dominant cultural narratives with their frequently sexist, heteronormative, ableist, and racist assumptions.

My primary reason for proposing the available means of imagination is to justify the study of circulation as a rhetorical end. It is difficult to determine the effects of a single text on the material world, but increasingly, rhetoricians are shying away from judging material effects as manifestations of agency in exchange for considering affective nature of agency, as Chaput demonstrates. The available means of imagination allows us to take wide circulation as a sign of the rhetorical success of a text even without material changes because it acknowledges that political change is an incremental process of changing the assumptions of individuals.

Secondly, the available means of imagination is a theory of invention *and* reception, of internally persuasive discourse as well as more formal, explicit situations of rhetoric. In this way, I take my understanding of *rhetorical theory* from Crowley:

As ancient rhetors such as Gorgias and Cicero argued in theory and personified in practice, an art or practice entitled to be called “rhetoric”

must intervene in some way in the beliefs and practices of the community it serves. Hence any rhetorical theory must at minimum formulate an art of invention, as Aristotle did; furthermore, the arguments generated by rhetorical invention must be conceived as produced and circulated within a network of social and civic discourses, practices, images, and events. (27)

The available means of imagination fits Crowley's understanding of "rhetoric" by offering a theory of the recursive role of narratives, both dominant and alternative, in the invention of arguments as part of larger "social and civic discourses, practices, images, and events." The recursive nature of imagination cannot be overstated, even as, in this section, I attempt to present its effects in a somewhat linear format, beginning with the work of interpretation of narratives, then moving onto the work of invention.

While Fisher's work has been aptly criticized, I continue to find his heuristic for the interpretation of narratives useful in its descriptive capacity, especially in regard to personal narrative. We can see readers using the categories of structural coherence, material coherence, and characterological coherence based on the criticisms that they make of narratives. For example, a common move for discrediting a witness's testimony in a court of law (or other venues trying to establish an account of past events) is to point out aspects of the witness's story that do not agree with each other, demonstrating evaluation of structural coherence. Similarly, audiences will question aspects of a story that do not line up with their own experiences, or its material coherence, such as men who argue that street harassment doesn't happen because they never see it.

Characterological coherence, or whether or not the rhetor would in fact do or say the things she claims, comes into play when evaluating the stories of people the audience knows personally (or at least feels like they do, as tabloid journalism encourages exactly this kind of evaluation of celebrities). In addition, characterological coherence may be

evaluated based on archetypes, such as when audiences wonder how a doctor, who is sworn to promote life, can perform euthanasia.

As Charland points out, these categories of evaluation – our internal rubrics for coherence – interact with each other and with our ideological viewpoints. This is most obvious, perhaps, with material coherence, as what audiences imagine as possible in the narrative depends on their own experiences of what is possible – thus, some men have trouble understanding the pervasive nature of street harassment. However, what feels structurally coherent is likewise ideologically limited; Higgins and Brush found that their participants writing stories about being welfare recipients tended toward hero or victim narratives because those are narrative structures that seem coherent. The ideological implications for characterological coherence based on archetype is obvious, given that different audiences will hold different assumptions about a given archetype, but the characterological coherence of an action taken by a person one knows will be colored by whether or not one perceives that action as good or bad, just or unjust, productive or futile, etc. Conversely, one's actions might be judged as good or bad, etc., depending on how audiences perceive the actor, as in Chaput's example of the interviewee seems determined to paint all of Obama's reforms as harmful (17).

In discussing characterological coherence online, I believe it is best to make certain distinctions between identity and ethos, much like Anderson in her examination of memoir. While the root word "character" has particular connotations for a "narrative" framework, it may also bring to mind for rhetoricians the definition of ethos as the character of the speaker. This understanding may be well and good if we take ethos to be solely based on what is in the text at hand, as Aristotle did, but Warnick points out quite

quickly that the ancient understanding of ethos is insufficient for digital environments where the construction of an ethos or ethoi over time may be documented (*Rhetoric Online*, 34). This is, of course, not necessarily a phenomenon restricted to digital spaces; politicians have long been held accountable for previous voting records, for example. However, in digital spaces and especially with the advent of social media, more individuals are establishing public identities that can be seen as developing over time. Moreover, these identity constructions are happening across a number of sites, often with different audiences in mind, and may or may not be explicitly networked (such as connecting a personal website to one's Facebook profile or connecting one's Twitter account to a LinkedIn profile).

This fragmentation of identity, however, is not always perceived by audience members as a fragmentation of ethos, given our longstanding myth of the unified self. Ethos, I would argue, is what happens when an audience interprets a manifestation of identity. While Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca avoid using the term ethos in deference to Aristotle's definition, their account of the interactions between a person and his acts in others' perceptions of him as a rhetor form the backbone for our modern understanding of ethos as well as, perhaps, another theory of characterological coherence. Consequently, audiences perceive fragmented digital identities as multi-nodal ethoi – or bits of identity scattered across the web that are interpreted as a unified ethos – to the benefit or, more often, detriment of the rhetor. While public figures often invest time in constructing coherent identities across platforms, private individuals often do not or even purposefully separate these identities and their intended audiences.¹

1. For example, because I have Facebook friends from a variety of religious and political backgrounds, I avoid discussing politics on Facebook beyond the most hedged statements. On Twitter, on

My point here is that the characterological coherence of digital texts and texts that circulate digitally is dependent on the outside knowledge that an audience member has. Again, like with development of ethos over time, this is not necessarily a phenomenon limited to digital spaces – whether or not one deems the actions of an acquaintance as characterologically coherent will depend on how much one knows of the person – but what is different is the degree to which this scattered bits of identity can be found and collected via Internet searches. Thus, as we will see in my examination of viral blog post “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother,” a narrator/rhetor may be found characterologically coherent within the confines of one text but may be criticized for lack of coherence or hypocrisy when previous texts are taken into account by readers.

Like characterological coherence, evaluations of material coherence will often depend on how much contextualizing knowledge an individual has at her disposal. While Fisher notes personal experiences as a rubric for these evaluations, we must also consider the repertoire of narratives that individuals and groups accept without having experienced them for themselves, something akin to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*. Segal highlights one example of this with the pink ribbon rhetoric that surrounds breast cancer, influencing how individuals without direct experience with the disease imagine what patients, survivors, and their families feel and do. As Asen points out in the welfare debate, these imagined narratives in turn influence how individuals discuss issues involving the group in question, whether or not that group is present. The recursive nature of this phenomenon – that our ideas of what narratives are possible are dependent on

the other hand, I am more likely to perform my feminist, socialist, anti-racist diatribes as I don’t have to worry about my mother reading them. The irony of this is, of course, that while my Facebook account is somewhat protected from random viewers, my Twitter feed is public, reflecting Christensen’s assertion that social media users have complicated and contextually-based understandings of privacy.

what narratives we hear and accept as valid *and* that what narratives we accept as valid will be evaluated based on what narratives we have already heard – is at the heart of William G. Kirkwood’s criticism of Fisher’s narrative paradigm. Kirkwood writes, “Fisher’s account of rhetoric and moral argument might prove useful in predicting how specific audiences will evaluate stories. However, it is also troubling, for it implies that ‘good stories’ cannot and perhaps should not exceed people’s values and beliefs, whether or not these are admirable or accurate” (30). He goes on to argue that “Although any account of rhetoric should acknowledge its role in expressing the shared values of a culture, a complete account must do more than this. It must also explain how rhetors can acquaint people with new and unsuspected possibilities of being and acting in the world” (31). Using the term “the rhetoric of possibility,” Kirkwood outlines the ways in which narratives – taking folk tales as his primary examples – may suggest new ways of being in and interacting with the world around us. He pays particular attention to the many obstacles that rhetors may need to overcome to make audiences aware of the new possibilities they present. The uptake of new kinds of narratives is additionally inhibited by the affective nature of attention. As Crowley reminds us, a person pays attention to a narrative in the first place because it elicits an emotional reaction, especially when narratives can be easily interpreted by her already-held belief system. Crowley writes that

densely articulated ideologies construct bad affective grammarians who pay intense notice to objects and events that can be threaded into the intricate tapestries of their belief system(s). They notice because almost everything that is made legible by their belief system(s) is weighty with affect for them. If this account is correct, extremists have difficulty taking notice of events or objects that neither support nor attack their beliefs. (85)

While Crowley is inquiring specifically into fundamentalist Christianity, “densely articulate ideologies” abound, even among positions deemed “moderate” or

“progressive”; while I may consider my ideology of feminism morally superior to another’s misogyny, it does just as much to determine what I do and do not see based on my emotional reactions. Moreover, as Ahmed argues, objects and signs, including narratives, become imbued with affective meaning as they circulate and are appropriated by various rhetors, meaning that when and where attention is paid by different audiences may change over time.

Kirkwood concludes that when uncommon narratives and/or interpretations of narratives are accepted, it is usually on the basis of the rhetor’s ethos:

When commentary reveals possibilities that cannot be derived from the immanent facts of an account, auditors can judge the merits of the commentary on two grounds. If it confirms their pre-existing beliefs, they may agree with it. Then, however, they are not gaining new insights. If commentary raises unfamiliar possibilities which are neither confirmed nor denied in their beliefs or experience, auditors can choose to accept the commentator’s word that she or he can perceive these possibilities. To do so they must judge whether the commentator is reliable. This does not lessen the aesthetic or logical value of commentary, but it shows the limits of narrative rationality and reinforces the idea that some kinds of storytelling rely heavily on the *ethos* of the narrator. (41-2)

If audiences accept the rhetor’s assessment that these new possibilities are, in fact, possible, then new narratives are added to their available means of imagination. The ideological judgments an audience will necessarily make about these narratives will continue to influence how the audience interprets arguments based on them, but at the very least, the expansion of “reality” also expands the possibilities for debate.

Additionally, since these narratives are “sticky,” to use Ahmed’s term, they carry with them affective meanings but may also have new affective meanings impressed upon them in the course of circulation; Ahmed writes that “the more signs circulate, the more affective they become” (45). This suggests that narratives added to the available means of

imagination increase the rhetorical *and* affective positions available to an individual or group, perhaps then adding to the kinds of narrative to which one may pay attention. In this way, we can see the interactions between the affective values of larger cultural narratives and the emotions of individual stories, including appeals to pathos: while dominant cultural narratives unequivocally influence an audience's position in relation to individual narratives, individual narratives, once accepted by an audience, may influence their perception of and affective relation to cultural narratives. Consequently, while audiences may not necessarily express new positions in debate regarding the issues of the narrative at hand, their affective position in relation to it may shift and change over time as they are exposed to more narratives, perhaps priming audiences to consider favorably new narratives, new positions, and new rhetors, or to even consider them at all.

Narrative and New Materialist Methods

While living in a time when the things most likely to spread on the Internet are cat videos can make anyone skeptical of the political power of circulation, a theory of the available means of imagination articulates why wide circulation of a narrative, even one met with substantial criticism, has an effect on political discourse. The question then, for rhetoricians, is what narratives circulate and why. This is, in fact, the central question of this dissertation. In order to best account for the circulation of the individual personal narratives that form the basis of my case studies alongside (and sometimes through) the attendant affective structures and ideologics, I turn to Gries's new materialist methods. As Gries explains, "Things, especially in a digital age, simply, or rather complexly, flow. We need methods that can explain how new media practices enable things to experience

reproduction and distribution and thus circulate widely at viral speeds. We especially must better account for how digital technologies, participatory media platforms, and various actor networks contribute to the circulation and transformation of things in both digital and physical realms" (*Still Life with Rhetoric*, 8). While Gries focuses on the transformation and reproduction of images, much of her work is applicable to narrative, in particular if we think of individual personal narratives as transformations and reproductions of cultural narratives, as well as considering the retellings rhetors may perform of the stories of others for their own rhetorical ends. Perhaps most important for a study of digital circulation is that new materialist methods understand agency as emergent through the relations between human and nonhuman entities, treating the social networks and structures of participation that promote circulation with equal weight as the human actors (68).

I have used "a new materialist rhetorical approach" in the case studies that follow, which "privileges following, tracing, embracing uncertainty, and describing in order to construct the empirical evidence needed to learn how single multiple things become rhetorical as they reassemble collective life" (88). These case studies began when a personal narrative or news event related to one came onto my radar, frequently via social media. Much like Gries describes in relation to the Obama Hope image, I began a process of searching for the responses to these narratives, clipping web pages, following links, performing multiple searches with different key terms, even looking at newspapers on microfilm in one case. As I developed my collections, I avoided evaluating the content of the texts I collected, instead opting to gather as much as possible before examining the texts in any detail. I also avoided evaluating the "credibility" of any source, treating

anonymous authors and usernames with the same weight as journalists and documented experts. Gries writes that “to keep up with a runaway object or a body multiple such as a viral image [or narrative], scholars much relinquish their own control to a certain extent and be flexible enough to follow the thing under study wherever it takes them,” and by focusing first on collection, I allowed myself to roam through the Internet before applying overly deterministic interpretive frameworks that might limit my search (91). Following this collection stage, I began examining the texts I collected in more detail, reading specifically for common narratives or arguments regarding the personal narrative that served as the origin point or regarding the context, arguments, or author of that narrative. As categories of common narratives emerged, I returned to searching with more detailed key terms or with specific gaps in mind that I wished to fill.

Because I wished to focus on the most common interpretations and meta-narratives of the original personal narrative, these case studies feature little analysis of individual texts, instead relying on thick descriptions of reactions common across a number of texts to understand the larger movements of texts through structures of participation and ideologies. While I had a vested interest in tracing the circulation of narrative from the beginning of this project – and consequently was predisposed to understand the responses I found in my searches through the interplay between individual personal narratives and dominant cultural narratives – I made an effort to let myself “be drawn by psychogeographical attractions” – or “those influences that impact our thoughts and emotions and constantly draw us back to a particular place or site” – as I decided what aspects of these cases to prioritize in my writing (Gries, *Still Life with Rhetoric* 99). This is especially true in the GamerGate case study where the sheer number of texts

prevented any kind of comprehensive accounting of the case in the limited space of a chapter.

Each case study highlights some aspect of the interaction between narrative and circulation. The second chapter, which covers Long's article "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" and subsequent conversations, establishes the relationship between emotion and circulation, arguing that Long's post traveled widely because of the wide range of emotions it evoked. This relationship stands out starkly in cases like Long's where a personal narrative is used to maneuver audiences into an emotional state that will make them more open to the rhetor's arguments. Chapter 3 analyzes the ways in which the story of Savannah Dietrich, a teenage sexual assault victim who violated a court order by posting the names of her underage attackers on Twitter, was circulated via its uptake into preexisting ideologics, demonstrating the ways in which rhetors may adapt another's personal narrative to serve as evidence of their own claims while also having their own interpretations of the story mitigated by their worldviews. In Chapter 4, I turn to the case of GamerGate, a movement purportedly devoted to ethics in games journalism which began with programmer Eron Gjoni's blog post about his relationship and break-up with game designer Zoe Quinn and culminated in Quinn and other women in the games industry receiving rape and death threats. This case provides further insights into how a personal narrative may be interpreted to fit a preexisting world view, as well as demonstrating how competing narratives develop surrounding the same event, including accounts of the motivations of participants, critiques of opponents, and moves to bolster the ethos of the group with which the rhetor identifies.

Through the course of these case studies, I find that emotion is a key component of the structures of participation in social media, especially when emotional reactions to particular arguments or commonplaces become sedimented into ideologics.

Understanding these emotional reactions may help rhetors anticipate potential circulation routes for personal stories and identify multiple ideologics in which their narratives may spread, increasing the number of individuals who may come into contact with an alternative narrative and the likelihood of prompting discussion on dominant narratives as incomprehensive, hegemonic, misrepresentative, or otherwise flawed – in other words, helping rhetors affect the available means of imagination.

CHAPTER II
CIRCULATION, CONTROVERSY, AND MEASUREMENTS OF “SUCCESSFUL”
RHETORIC:
THE CASE OF “I AM ADAM LANZA’S MOTHER”

In the previous chapter, I outlined the theory of *the available means of imagination* as a way of contextualizing the roles of circulation in public rhetoric. In this chapter, I turn my attention to a single case to demonstrate the interactions between emotions and circulation in a public debate, namely the potential relationship between mental illness and violent crime. On December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut and killed twenty children and six adults before turning his weapon on himself. Prior to this attack, Lanza had killed his mother, Nancy, in their home. As one of the deadliest shootings in U.S. history, the incident prompted a broad examination of gun control legislation, including proposals for new regulations regarding background checks for firearms purchases and for the banning of certain kinds of firearms and ammunition.

While the suddenly vocal support for stricter gun control regulations and the equally vocal opposition of the same have become unfortunately par for the course when shootings like this occur in the U.S., the discussion of mental health care for individuals and support for their families was somewhat new. A few days after the shooting, little-

known blogger Liza Long wrote a response explaining that her son is mentally ill and occasionally takes a violent turn, threatening harm to himself and others. She outlines her fears regarding his future, especially the lack of facilities and insurance coverage for treating individuals with mental illness. Long's narrative quickly gained traction on social media through numerous re-publications and responses and the reader comments that inevitably follow. While Long was roundly criticized for her post, this wave of attention also imparted to her a degree of ethos by expertise, resulting in her invitation to the U.S. Congressional Forum on Mental Health in March 2013. Long's case demonstrates the ways in which relatively unknown individuals may harness digital circulation to generate a kind of credibility that would be otherwise unattainable, making her narrative and its context worth study by rhetoricians. In this chapter, I examine Long's narrative in relation to some of our dominant narratives regarding mental illness and motherhood, arguing that one of the reasons that Long's narrative circulated so widely was that individuals were compelled by their emotional reactions to her story to publically refute her, thereby sharing the story further. Moreover, Long's narrative offers an example of how a narrative may be widely criticized but can still contribute to the available means of imagination for a particular issue, requiring us to rethink how we measure "successful" rhetoric.

"I Am Adam Lanza's Mother": Circulation and Reception

While the "mommy wars" of the last decade have been manifested in a variety of arenas – breast versus bottle feeding, for example, or attachment parenting versus the Ferber method – the debate has most often been depicted as pitting stay-at-home moms

against mothers who continue to pursue careers. In more recent years, the focus has shifted from the either/or decision to the attempt to balance both, as evidenced by the popularity of Anne-Marie Slaughter's 2012 article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." As Catherine Rottenberg demonstrates, Slaughter's argument that happiness is to be found in the ideal work-family balance reinscribes dominant notions of appropriate desires for (white, middle-class) women, who "are compelled and encourage to want to 'have it all'" (163). While numerous critics (and Slaughter herself) have recognized the ways in which the work-family balance model neglects the material circumstances of working-class women and women of color, the experiences of mothers of children with mental illnesses are not often considered in the debate. When we do hear these voices, they are almost exclusively mother of children with autism; parents of children with depression, anxiety disorders, or eating disorders are largely absent from public view. When these parents are present in publically available narratives of mental illness, they are often depicted as causes of or contributors to mental illness, like the figure of the overly critical mother who prompts a daughter's anorexia or the chronically traveling father who is oblivious to his child's depression. Combined with the recent discourse surrounding the causes of autism – from the unloving "refrigerator mother" to vaccination to what kinds of diet will "cure" it – popular opinion seems to be that parents, especially the mothers who should serve as primary caregivers, are responsible for mental illness in their children.

In this cultural context, it is perhaps unsurprising how much attention was given to Adam Lanza's mother, including a certain amount of misinformation. Early accounts of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary reported that Lanza's mother was the teacher

of the class Lanza initially targeted. Pop psychologists were quickly offering the explanation that Lanza was attempting to eliminate what he saw as rival siblings. When this report was clarified as inaccurate, some began focusing on Nancy Lanza as the source of the firearms used in the shooting, as she owned a number of legally acquired guns and was reported to regularly take her sons target shooting. In addition, later reports suggested that Nancy had not done enough to help her son, focusing on his comfort instead of encouraging him to take his medication. Even as Nancy Lanza was labeled as the first victim of her son's attack, she was indirectly held responsible.

It was in this context that, on December 14, 2012, Liza Long's article "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" appeared on *The Blue Review*, a journal of "popular scholarship in the public interest" published by the Boise State University College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, and on her blog, *The Anarchist Soccer Mom*, under the title "Thinking the Unthinkable." On December 16, the article went viral, reproduced on such news aggregate sites as *The Huffington Post*, *Salon*, and *Slate*, and circulated via social media (I first became aware of the piece from the multiple postings that showed up in my Facebook feed). On December 17 and 18, reactions to the original article began circulating as widely as the initial post itself, again often brought to social media via news aggregate sites.

In her post, Long describes a recent incident with her 13-year-old son, Michael (Long has changed her children's names throughout the blog). A few days before the Newtown Shooting, Michael and Long found themselves in an altercation over whether or not his pants fit his school's dress code. After losing his electronics privileges for the day, Michael became remorseful and apologized to his mother before asking for his video

games back for the day. When Long accepted his apology but denied his request, Michael became belligerent again and threatened to kill himself. Long describes a previous incident in which Michael pulled out a knife and threatened to kill her and himself while her two younger children locked themselves in the family's car. Following Michael's second threat of suicide, Long drove him straight to a psychiatric facility and checked him in. "By day three," she writes, "he was my calm, sweet boy again, all apologies and promises to get better. I've heard those promises for years. I don't believe them anymore." Long closes her articles with some statistics about the number of people with mental illness who are relegated to the prison system because there are not suitable facilities for individuals like Michael, arguing that it is time for a nation-wide conversation about mental illness.

Segal provides an interesting framework for analyzing both Long's narrative and responses to it. Segal examines the role of common breast cancer narratives in the public construction of both cancer and the cancer patient, finding that "a standard story of breast cancer had emerged, and that it function[s] as an epideictic rhetoric" (13). Moreover, the "standard story" functions as a gatekeeping device, ensuring that stories that fall outside the pink-ribbon norm – stories that call for political action against carcinogen-producing corporations, for example – rarely achieve a wide audience, resulting in what Segal calls the "maintenance of ignorance about breast cancer" (14). Using the lens of standard and non-conformist stories, we see that Long's story disrupts common narratives in a few ways. First of all, the common narrative of a mother with a mentally ill child paints the situation as a hard but ultimately rewarding experience, with the mother and other family members learning valuable life lessons. Admittedly, this narrative is most commonly in

reference to children with autism, like Tom Fields-Meyer's *Following Ezra* or the television show *Parenthood*, and often this portrayal of mentally-ill people as teachers of great life lessons continues into adulthood, as in such films as *Rain Man*, *The Fisher King*, and *The Soloist*. When we do see stories of those mentally ill individuals who are violent, usually in fictional narratives like the serial killer mystery or horror stories, they are generally villains, and families are only mentioned as victims or as perpetrators of the abuse that leads to the mentally ill person's violent actions. Long breaks these common narratives by presenting the figure of the long-suffering mother who is not happy with the hand she has been dealt. Her statement about no longer believing her son's promises and apologies indicates her level of cynicism about her position. Additionally, few narratives about mental health and violence indict both our stigmatization of mental illness and our broken health care system for providing few options for family members in Long's situation. Interestingly, Long breaks the standard narrative in many of the same ways that Segal notes non-conformist breast cancer narratives do: Long does not treat this obstacle as a chance to learn a life lesson, nor does she express unconditional love for Michael by framing her struggle in her concern for him. Instead she asks readers to identify with her fear for herself, her other children, and other people Michael may lash out at. Additionally, Long criticizes the system that has forced her into such a tenuous situation, having to choose between having her son incarcerated or living with his violent outbursts, much like non-conformist breast cancer narratives may indict carcinogenic producing industry and pharmacological corporations for their role in the perpetuation of breast cancer.

That Long's story does not conform to the dominant narrative is important when we consider Walter Fisher's framework for the evaluation of narratives by the criteria of structural, material, and characterological coherence. By telling a story apart from the dominant one of mainstream discourse, "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" breaks material coherence for its readers unless they have alternate discourses on which to draw. That is to say, if they are relying on TV shows like *Parenthood* and the other pop culture texts described above, readers will find themselves having to judge Long's story in relation to fictional accounts about raising mentally ill children that are frequently subject to and perpetrators of a sexist, racist, ableist hegemony. If readers are instead relying on different narratives, perhaps their own experiences with mentally ill children or the stories they have heard from friends and family, their evaluations of Long's narrative will be different.

In addition to this trouble with material coherence, some responses to "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" indicate that readers also found fault with the characterological coherence of Long's story. Fisher defines *character* as "generalized perception of a person's fundamental value orientation. From this perception, one infers a person's probable decisions and actions, and determines the relationship of the person's orientation to one's own way of being in the world" (148). Fisher differentiates between *character* and *ethos* insofar as one's credibility or lack thereof with particular audiences often depends on one's perceived values. Additionally, a rhetor's *ethos* will suffer if she appears to lack characterological coherence (for this reason, some politicians are indicted as "flip-floppers"). In the case of Long, this tension is manifested as criticism of her practices as a mother who claims to love her son. Some critics, including academic

blogger Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg, question Long's use of her son's photo as part of the article, arguing that the inclusion of the photo and telling the story under her own name is a complete disregard of Michael's privacy. Blogger Hanna Rosin goes so far as to claim that Michael is being libeled by his mother and deserves protection by the state.

Columnist and blogger Sarah Kendzior takes these critiques a step further; in a post titled "Want the truth behind I Am Adam's Lanza's Mother? Read Her Blog," she argues that readers should carefully examine Long's other posts before drawing conclusions about the article. Kendzior writes that "Long has written a series of vindictive and cruel posts about her children in which she fantasizes about beating them, locking them up and giving them away. In most posts, her allegedly insane and violent son is portrayed as a normal boy who incites her wrath by being messy, buying too many Apple products and supporting Obama." She includes excerpts from Long's previous posts to support this claim before concluding that Long might be mentally unstable herself and perhaps a danger to her children, a claim Rosin also makes. Interestingly, Kendzior and Long later posted a joint statement claiming that they did not want to become part of the "Mommy Wars" of the blogosphere – a looming background for the conversation as a whole – though here Kendzior is arguing that the validity of Long's argument rests entirely on her credibility as a mother.

Other responses to Long's article demonstrate a distrust of the fidelity of Long's narrative. Fisher writes, "Obviously some stories are better stories than others, more coherent, more 'true' to the way people and the world are – in perceived fact and value. In other words, some stories better satisfy the criteria of the logic of good reasons, which is attentive to reason *and* values" (68, emphasis in original). Many readers were troubled

by the values depicted in Long's article and the possibility that these values might come to be widespread in larger conversations regarding mental illness. One of the most widely circulated of these responses was an anonymous post on the blog *thursday* titled "You Are Not Adam Lanza's Mother" in which the author lists six points "to summarise the main reasons why it's a terrible springboard for further conversation on the subject." The author criticizes Long for both silencing Michael by making him the object of the narrative and taking on the voice of a dead woman, "appropriate[ing] the experiences of people who are unheard." In addition, the *thursday* blogger argues that Long's article "complains about mental illness stigma while reinforcing it by explicitly tying it to violence, and in particular, mass killings," pointing out that people with mental illness are far more likely to be the victims of crimes rather than their perpetrators. A second response came from feminist news aggregate site *Jezebel*, titled "That Woman Is Not Adam Lanza's Mother, and She's Distracting Us From the Real Issue," in which Laura Beck argues that this discussion of the role of mental illness in mass shootings detracts from the focus on easily accessible guns, a more immediate problem in Beck's opinion.

A third set of responses were much less widely circulated: the personal narratives of individuals who find themselves in positions similar to Long. Chad Eagleton, blogging at *Cathode Angel*, writes that his violently mentally ill brother is currently serving a 56 year sentence before describing the day when he viciously attacked family members and friends. He closes his post by stating, "Looking back and pondering my brother's life, only one thing brings me any comfort—at least he never picked up a gun. That's the best that can be said when you live in a country where a citizen's best hope for mental health care is prison." Rebecca Schoenkopf, writing at *Wonkette*, echoes this lack of options as

she tells the story of her older brother who killed himself, she believes, to prevent himself from harming their younger brother. That these responses and others like them did not receive the same level of attention as the critiques of Long's article demonstrates again that these narratives are non-conformative and are consequently regulated by readers through lack of circulation. In light of its wide criticism, then, it is worth asking why exactly "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" circulated so much farther than other narratives of the same type.

Strategies of Circulation: Narrative and the Generation of Controversy

To begin to understand the circulation of Long's narrative, we must first consider the genre of the blog, as Ridolfo and DeVoss consider the genre of the press release. "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" appeared almost simultaneously on *The Blue Review* and *The Anarchist Soccer Mom* and shows signs of the generic markers outlined by Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd. They note that "most commentators define blogs on the basis of their reverse chronology, frequent updating, and combination of links with personal commentary" (171), and Julie Rak argues that understanding blogs as an online diary misses the importance of this combination of links and personal information, making blogs a genre that looks simultaneously outward and inward. "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" demonstrates both the personal disclosure and commentary on recent events via links that is considered typical of blogs as a genre. What is somewhat telling is the structure of the argument: in previous blog posts, Long has included links toward the end, like in "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother," but those links were not used as evidence for her arguments. Instead they offer readers more information on a topic. We can see, then, that

Long was writing in anticipation of publishing at *The Blue Review*; she is offering outside sources to support her argument as she would in an academic setting as opposed to a blog. Using Ridolfo and DeVoss's concept of rhetorical velocity, we might then posit that Long designed her text to circulate more widely than just her personal blog, where evidence beyond personal experience is not required.

Moreover, as Kendzior's critique demonstrates, Long develops a distinctly different ethos in the text of "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" than in much of the rest of her blog. Kendzior's methodology of bringing to light previous posts is indicative of the shifting nature of ethos in online spaces. As Warnick notes, the ancient understanding of ethos as something limited to and created within a single rhetorical performance is completely inadequate in the age of the internet (*Rhetoric Online* 34). As I explained in the previous chapter, while public figures have long had ethoi outside the text – in the form of voting records, previous speeches or writings, or coverage by the media – with the rise of social networking and blogging, even private individuals have accessible ethoi outside their texts. Miller and Shepherd write that "in a blog, that construction [of self] is an ongoing event, the self being disclosed a continue achievement." With her intended publication venue of *The Blue Review*, Long may not have anticipated the association of her ethos from her blog with the ethos she crafts in the text itself – though she published the article to her blog as well.

But, as Edbauer demonstrates in her analysis of viral marketing campaigns where individual rhetors and audiences are difficult to identify, focusing on the rhetorical situation, with its components of exigency, text, and audience, can only get us so far in accounting for the circulation and distribution of a rhetorical text in the context of

neoliberalism. In the case of "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother," we must attempt to account for the viral spread of the article in its various iterations via social media. While the motivations for "sharing" via social media (posting a link, image, or video for one's followers to view) are undoubtedly multifaceted and complicated, I would argue that one underlying goal in sharing is the construction of a rhetorical representation of self. In the case of a political text like "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother," sharing is often used to identify or reaffirm one's political affiliations or commitments. That is, social media users often share texts to demonstrate Burkean identification with the writer and/or the position illustrated by the text, or, at least, this is the assumption when one shares a link without commentary. For example, a social media user might post the National Congress of American Indians's video "Proud to Be" without commentary to illustrate his belief that Washington D.C.'s NFL team should change their name as well as his commitment against racism. Likewise, he might post a link to an article from the Tea Party news blog *Townhall.com* about reproductive health and socialist medical care to illustrate his agreement with its argument as well as his politically conservative position.

Other times, however, social media users will share a link with commentary that details the user's relationship to the text and/or the political positions therein, and often, though not always, the commentary will announce a disagreement; the same article from *Townhall.com* may be posted with a comment along the lines of "Tea Party attacking women yet again" and readers will assume very different things about the poster's relationship to the article and the views it espouses. In this way, users identify against the text that they share, simultaneously promoting and critiquing, which may result in just as many views as sharing for identification. This fact has become so apparent to some online

writers that they have begun writing critiques of offensive texts without providing links to the text in question in order to discourage their readers from giving the text more views, which may provide the creator/owner with cultural capital and/or monetary gains. Moreover, the processes of identification for and against can be mutually-producing in that as a text circulates in social networks, more users feel compelled to take a stance on the issue of the day (or at least what seems like the issue of the day according to their social media feeds), resulting in more shares and more views.

Because of the dual (and mutually-producing) processes of identification for and against through sharing, controversy generates circulation². This point may seem obvious given how often popular thinkers of the Nicolas Carr variety have decried the death of nuanced argument in the face of short-forms like Twitter and the rise of “tl;dr”³ and practices like “trolling” or “flaming”. Given how much we have come to rely on the Internet for democratic discussion, concerns regarding the potential of these spaces for civil debate are warranted (see Lampe et al.), but, more and more, we can see web writers using controversy generation as a rhetorical tool rather than viewing it merely as a constraint. For example, when Twitter activist Suey Park wanted to call attention to

2. There is a long standing relationship between controversy and rhetoric, often referenced with the dislogistic term “demagoguery.” There is relatively little scholarship on the generation of controversy in online forums, a practice that may all too easily descend into “trolling.” Though she does not specifically address the digital, Leah Ceccarelli examines the use of controversy in public debates regarding science as a means to stall political decision-making on issues such as AIDS or global warming, demonstrating that the generation of controversy can be used for many ends and is worth further consideration as a rhetorical tool.

3. Some long-form web texts have started providing short summaries of content under the heading of “tl;dr,” or “too long; didn’t read.” Interestingly enough, these summaries function much the same way as abstracts in academic articles, giving the reader enough to know if she wants to read the article in full (or at least giving her enough to talk about it as though she has read it).

Stephen Colbert's use of racial humor on *The Colbert Report*, she used the hashtag #CancelColbert, not because her goal was to actually get the show canceled, but because the perceived call for cancellation was more likely to circulate, thus drawing attention to her message regarding the problem of using racial slurs to combat other kinds of racism. Whether or not this strategy worked is up for debate; Park did gain a lot of attention, but many respondents focused only on the message of the hashtag rather than Park's larger arguments about institutional racism and the treatment of Asian Americans in particular. However, Park did acknowledge that the hashtag was designed to be deliberately inflammatory, telling interviewer Jay Caspian Kang, "There's no reason for me to act reasonable, because I won't be taken seriously anyway. [...] So I might as well perform crazy to point out exactly what's expected from me."

Another place we can see the deliberate generation of controversy is in article titling, like Dr. Richard Saul's opinion piece in *Time* titled "Doctor: ADHD Does Not Exist." Following this inflammatory title, Saul qualifies his statement, writing that "ADHD — as currently defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and as understood in the public imagination — does not exist." Deliberately provocative titling in this vein has become a common practice in web writing and, along with titles of the "You won't believe what happens when..." variety, have come to be known as "click-bait," reminding us that, while the writers themselves may be hoping for readers to meaningfully engage with their texts, the capitalist system that sponsors their circulation relies only on the number of views to self-perpetuate.

This kind of titling can be seen in the way that Long's piece appears under two different titles: on her own blog, the title is "Thinking the Unthinkable," but on *The Blue*

Review, and in its subsequent shares on *The Huffington Post*, etc., the piece is called “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother.” This second title may be considered “better” for a number of reasons: it is more specific, more likely to draw readers’ attention, and more likely to come up in the myriad of online searches that were being performed to find out more about the Newton shooter – that is, it is more likely to get views. In the body of the blog post, the claim of solidarity may be seen as an instance of *cohortatio*, or “amplification that moves the hearer’s indignation” (Lanham 36): “I am sharing this story because I am Adam Lanza’s mother. I am Dylan Klebold’s and Eric Harris’s mother. I am James Holmes’s mother. I am Jared Loughner’s mother. I am Seung-Hui Cho’s mother. And these boys – and their mothers – need help” (Long, “Thinking the Unthinkable”). By naming a string of famous shooters in conjunction with their mothers, Long reminds us of the magnitude of the problem of gun violence, suggests that the mothers of these shooters had also tried to get help for their sons, and attempts to move readers to anger and sadness at the lack of options for these mothers. In this way, Long again works against the dominant narrative regarding mental health and violence, which as Margaret Price argues, is one of “mental pathology escalating ‘inevitably’ toward extreme violence” (143). These incidents, Price writes, are “framed as a failure of *control* [through medical treatment or incarceration] rather than a failure of *care*” (156). In requesting *help* for the perpetrators of violence and their mothers while explicitly rejecting the option of incarceration, Long calls attention to the oft-forgotten alternative option of *care*.

But claiming solidarity with these mothers is a controversial move, which we can see from the number of responses that began (often in their titles) by refuting Long’s claim to solidarity. Readers often pass over the argument regarding the lack of systematic

aid for the mentally ill and their families to focus on the narrative of motherhood found between the lines. This is perhaps not surprising, given that Long is most certainly the subject of the story. And it is not even the narrative of motherhood in relation to mental illness that comes into play; instead, critics attack Long for being a bad mother in general: for posting a picture of her child online with her real name attached and denying her son privacy, for writing about how frustrated she gets with her children, for making herself the center of her blog, and so on. That critics opted to engage with Long's motherhood rather than her argument about the lack institutional support for people with mental illness and their families may indicate that they did, as Segal suggests, find Long's narrative silencing; perhaps an audience of other mothers felt qualified to address the topic of motherhood but not the topic of mental illness. When it comes to children with disabilities, Alison Kafer writes, "Parents are not only the ultimate arbiters but also the only ones with any right to speak or reflect on the case; both decision making and debate belong only within the realm of the family" (61). Thus, critics who are not parents, specifically parents with mentally ill children, cannot enter the debate until they have discredited the authority of the Parent; unfortunately, following attempts to discredit Long, few critics put forward arguments regarding mental health care.

Additional engagement with Long's argument is perhaps curtailed by the fact that at the heart of the matter is a mentally ill, sometimes violent *child*. Kafer notes our discomfort at the "disruption in [our] temporal fields" when the ability of one's mind and the age of one's body do not align (55). While Kafer specifically examines the figure of the adult with a child's mind, I would argue that Long's son Michael presents an equally disconcerting problem: the child exhibiting behaviors we attribute to adults. The title of

Jennifer Kahn's *New York Times* article, "Can You Call a 9-Year-Old a Psychopath?", indicates our discomfort at picturing the likes of Ted Bundy in a child's body, our avoidance of even considering the possibility of children that disturbed, unless they are in horror films. Likewise, given our difficulty imagining psychopathic children, Michael's behavior borders on the edge of unbelievable, resulting in a skeptical view of Long as narrator. However, whether critics feel the need to discredit Long as a mother or express their disbelief at Michael's purported behavior, the result is the same: dramatically speaking, attention is shifted away from the scene about which Long is making an argument and onto the agent herself, similar to the ways in which arguments about environmental concerns in breast cancer narratives were usurped by criticisms of the narrators themselves.

Emotional Engagement and Expressions of Outrage

One aspect of the controversy of Long's article is the competing emotions of outrage and resignation found in the Long's text itself and the responses that followed. Jenny Rice notes that outrage is often considered the most appropriate reaction for intelligent, informed individuals: "The experience of outrage becomes a warrant that proves I am indeed 'paying attention' to whatever public crisis needs to be addressed" (55). Rice worries that "feeling easily becomes a substitute for action. That is, feeling becomes both the evidence of and the actual activity of public relationality. Feeling angry is not a prelude to action; it is the action itself" (60). Marilyn M. Cooper articulates a more complex relationship between emotion and social action. Drawing on the work of neurobiologist Walter J. Freeman, Cooper argues that "emotions are intentions to act in a

certain way,” as emotions are responses to outside stimulation that encourage individuals to react toward that stimulus in a particular way in the future: “emotions are, at base, preparations for action, and we become aware of them (as others do, often before we do) only when they are expressed in publicly observable, and internally felt, adaptations of the body that serve as signals of intent” (430). Cooper’s understanding is especially pertinent for the responses to Long’s article that I have discussed here, given the level of engagement required to craft the kinds of extended arguments presented. We may interpret the emotion of outrage as the precursor to the act of writing a rebuttal (or a rebuttal to the rebuttals in the cases of Schoenkopf and Eagleton) and posting it to a publicly accessible forum.

But it is important to consider the ways that outrage as an embodied emotion is mediated through both previous experience and textual constructions. Outrage is first experienced as a bodily sensation – tightening in the stomach, clenching of the muscles, the feeling of being pressed together, contained, and the need to push back. That bodily experience is then mediated through our cultural norms for what those embodied sensations mean; Laura Micciche writes that “only through collective, implicit assent in communal life does emotion have meaning, for here is where identification of emotion is ascribed to expression and perceptions, which comes to stand for what we have agreed to interpret as [...] *indignation*” (11, emphasis in original). However, as Cooper argues, we are often unsure of the emotion until it is performed, until we see exactly what action comes out of the bodily sensation. The same bodily sensations that I named as part of outrage could just as easily be sensations of anxiety, and we may only be able to interpret the feelings as one emotion or the other based on the accompanying thoughts (“How

could anyone say such a thing!” versus “I can’t breathe! I need to get out of this room!”) and actions (yelling and/or throwing things versus fleeing a space or curling into a fetal position). The sensation that we identify as outrage is experienced as the result of a stimulus, often a text, but the initial bodily experiences may fluctuate over time and, consequently, the emotions related to them. Crowley writes, “Words, performances, images, and other representations appeal to the gut. They trigger emotional responses that can set off a chain of ideologic that can in turn arouse additional emotional response” (88). These additional emotional reactions are also contextualized in cultural norms and the specific situation but “may seem to underwrite the empirical truth of whatever conclusion is drawn” (88).

At any point in this process, an individual may begin planning and/or executing a textual response that reflects their emotions. In the case of shorter, faster responses, such as a comment on a blog posting or Facebook status update, responses may use alphabetic texts, images, or gifs (short, repeating video clips) to express the emotional reaction. These shorter responses frequently rely on a set of shared values, ideologies, and language norms for correct interpretation by readers. For example, the popular phrase “I can’t even” has become widely used to express the feeling of being overwhelmed by emotion, but the actual emotion itself is often up to the reader of the comment to identify. In some cases, the emotion may seem self-evident; when left as a comment to a video of baby sloths, readers will most likely identify the comment as an expression of “squee,” an onomatopoeic term for the feeling of being overwhelmed by “cuteness.” If this same video were left on a video of Indiana governor Mike Pence announcing his signing of the state’s Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the commenter anticipates that readers will

share her feelings of despair or elation and consequently interpret her comment appropriately. Much of the same may be said for gifs as rhetorical conveyors of emotion. It is perhaps easier for audiences to interpret the emotion conveyed by gifs as they often contain images of an embodied performance sometimes accompanied by text. For example, one popular gif shows Tina Fey's character Liz Lemon moving her hands in the air as though giving high-fives to invisible recipients. This short, repeating video is overlaid with the text "High-fiving a million angels." This gif is often used to express a sense of accomplishment, though whether the accomplishment is genuine or ironic is often up for the reader to decide. Sometimes, though, a rhetor using a gif relies on more than the embodied performance captured by the gif to relay meaning. Many gifs are taken from popular television shows and movies, and a full interpretation of a gif may rely on the audience's familiarity with this larger context. Interpreting the ironic sense of accomplishment that may be conveyed by the "high-fiving a million angels" gif in part depends on a certain familiarity with the character of Liz Lemon and the kinds of things she would deem "accomplishments."

Longer responses, like the blog posts regarding Long and "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother," require an additional level of planning and, consequently, represent an additional degree of emotional mediation. At this point, responders are more likely to see themselves engaging in the persuasion of an audience rather than just expressing a reaction. Because these texts are longer, rhetors may rely less on shared values and narratives to convey meaning than they would with shorter comments, but they continue to rely on shared values and narratives for persuasive purposes. In addition, at this point rhetors are more likely to engage in extensive language use to describe their emotions,

codifying sometimes messy, complicated feelings into standard forms of expression in order to engage audiences. This is, perhaps, one function of seemingly stock narratives, to act as a vehicle for the sharing of emotions. In this way, the narratives that rhetors use or reinterpret indicate both an ideological and emotional stance. The case of “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother” presents competing narratives of motherhood identified with the competing emotions of resignation and outrage. To begin, the predominant emotional performance of Long’s text is resignation instead of outrage; she has dealt with Michael’s outbursts and threats as well as an institutional system that offers her no support for so long that she almost seems to have no energy left for outrage. And this is, perhaps, one of the problems that many readers had with “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother.” The cultural power of Motherhood as a master signifier is essential here; Crowley writes,

People who fantasize identity with whatever is depicted by one or more master signifiers – God or nation [or motherhood], for example – do so because they desire love or recognition from a culturally sanctioned Big Other. When they believe that significant groups of people do not desire identification with the same master signifier that motivates their fantasies of identification, they can become alienated and even enraged by this implied challenge to a fantasized communal identity. (95)

Since the narrative of the warrior mother, iconized in women like Jenny McCarthy and Sarah Palin, is celebrated as perhaps the epitome of womanhood, Long’s resignation strikes some readers as almost morally reprehensible, as though she is committing the ultimate sin of giving up on her child (never mind her other two children who sometimes lock themselves in the car in case their brother becomes violent). As such, many of the women who respond as mothers may see themselves as performing the outrage that every

child deserves; in publicly denouncing Long, they perform their own appropriate motherhood.⁴

One of the important functions of mediation in regards to outrage is to present appropriate performances of outrage for one's subject position. While outrage may be the most appropriate reaction for informed individuals, too much outrage may be deemed as socially inappropriate, especially in relation to one's race, class, and gender. For this reason, political demonstrations populated primarily by people of color are more likely to be called "violent" or "threatening" by media, such as in the coverage of the demonstrations in Ferguson, MO following the shooting of Michael Brown, while women are commonly judged as "hysterical" when they express anger. The object of outrage is also important; expressions of outrage that serve to uphold dominant conceptions of race, such as black women expressing anger regarding their treatment by black men, are far less likely to be deemed socially unacceptable than expressions of outrage intended to disrupt the status quo, such as black women expressing anger regarding their treatment by white police officers. It is perhaps for this reason that the strong reactions against Long as a mother go unchecked; the respondents' outrage is always presented as being on behalf of others: on behalf of Michael, on behalf of other people with mental illness, and on behalf of the victims of future shootings should our firearms regulations not be made stricter. This outrage reifies our dominant narrative of motherhood, that mothers (and women generally) are the primary protectors,

4. This kind of compulsory maternal protection is a common trope in film and fiction; while it may seem "natural" for Mrs. Weasley, who has seven children of her own, to become a primary mother figure for orphaned Harry Potter, it seems less natural that Ellen Ripley of the *Alien* franchise, a character who was originally intended to be male, would immediately take on the mother role to a little girl she finds in *Aliens*, seemingly due exclusively to her gender.

spokespeople, and caregivers to children. In fact, Long is committing another cardinal sin of motherhood: expecting others to help care for her child. The controversy of “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother” is fueled by the aspects of Long’s argument that make it an appropriate case for relatively high levels of outrage, given its position as a non-dominant narrative.

The Available Means of Imagination and Conceptions of Success

As I discussed in the previous chapter, I am employing the concept of *the available means of imagination* to refer to the narratives and subject positions that individuals and groups imagine as possible in a given set of circumstances. An obvious play on Aristotle’s available means of persuasion, I consider the available means of imagination a recursive construction that influences both what options rhetors see themselves in a rhetorical situation and how audiences interpret those arguments based on the stock of narratives they have available to them. One reason I have proposed this framework for understanding especially the circulation of narratives is that cases like “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother” provoke interesting questions regarding rhetorical success and agency in public discourse. While Segal would argue that the widespread criticism of Liza Long and her article indicate the same repression of alternative narratives about mental illness and motherhood that she finds in breast cancer narratives (and the same subsequent ignorance on the subject), the degree of circulation that the text attained *through* the controversy it generated led to the proliferation of Long’s narrative rather than its repression; after all, Long was interviewed by a number of major news sources, spoke before a U.S. Congressional Forum on Mental Health, and published a book, *The*

Price of Silence: A Mom's Perspective on Mental Illness, following "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother." One of the complications, perhaps, in interpreting something like "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" as successful or not is the sheer spread of the text and the ambiguous nature of the Long's goals. Scholarship on narratives that circulate locally tend to focus on limited goals based on assumptions about a rhetor's purpose or intent. For example, Grabill and Pigg examine personal narratives coupled with requests for more information in a comment forum regarding the HPV vaccine, finding that narratives allowed commenters to position themselves in ways that encouraged other commenters to answer their requests. Martha S. Cheng identifies several uses of personal narrative in an online class chat room and demonstrates that the "success" or "failure" of these narratives can largely be determined by the responses of other participants.

However, unlike the narratives examined in these studies with their localized goals, Long's narratives seems to take as its primary goal the start of a conversation regarding the lack of options for people with mental illness and their families, making the parameters of rhetorical success harder to judge. In these cases, an argument could be made for the number of views a text receives as a marker of success, as Dubisar and Palmeri do in evaluating the success of one student's digital remix project, and there is some merit to this approach. The number of views does indicate that a text has circulated, and I would argue that circulation in and of itself can be considered a success even (or perhaps especially) if, as in the case of "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother," the final goal is wide-reaching political and social change. However, I would argue that the responses to "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother", even the negative ones, are a better indication of its rhetorical success than its number of views as these responses indicate the degree to

which "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" found its public, if not its ideal audience. That is, the fact that *Jezebel* writer Beck felt the need to warn readers that Long's essay could take our attention away from gun control issues suggests that Long's essay really did shift the debate.

Long's narrative is in many ways not new – Kahn's article "Can You Call a 9-Year-Old a Psychopath?" appeared months before Long's post – but Long's article traveled much farther than previous texts had done, demonstrating that the circulation of texts is deeply affective in nature. Moreover, the concerns expressed that Long's narrative would take up residence in readers' minds as a viable option among narratives regarding mental illness and mass shootings indicate an understanding that emotionally laden narratives like Long's are more likely to *stick*, as Ahmed would say, in the available means of imagination. For rhetoricians, Long's case indicates that a thorough examination of digital circulation requires us to pay careful attention to the multiple emotional economies that influence circulation and the ways in which digital tools encourage certain kinds of emotional exchanges and not others. In the following chapter, I will examine how the emotional aspects of a personal narrative may be shaped to suit the purposes of a variety of rhetors to influence the available means of imagination.

CHAPTER III
CIRCULATION, IDEOLOGICS, AND GOD-TERMS:
THE CASE OF SAVANNAH DIETRICH

In the previous chapter, I explored the relationship between dominant cultural narratives and ethos in Liza Long’s essay “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother.” I argued that because of the affective economies that are privileged in social media spaces, texts or positions that provoke controversy or generate outrage circulated more widely than texts that offer “safe” positions and identifications (cat videos aside). In this chapter, I examine the ways in which personal stories are interpreted as they are circulated in different discourse by focusing on the case of Savannah Dietrich, a teen whose sexual assault case gained national attention after she violated a court order to name her attackers. After a description of the case and the key texts involved, I argue that the different ways in which the case was characterized as it was circulated in different discourses can best be understood through Crowley’s notion of “ideologics” and its attendant ideas of the relationship between emotion and attention. I pay particular attention to the role of god-terms in circulation as well as their relationship to cultural narratives, arguing that a god-term derives its meaning in part through the narratives that may be associated with a the term, and that these narratives are often dependent on an individual’s ideological position. Considering the role of cultural narratives in the interpretation of god-terms

offer rhetoricians a new way of understanding the boundaries between groups as well as the role of god-terms in public debate. Furthermore, understanding circulation as part of the complex systems of ideologies highlights the recursive relationship between interpretation and circulation as different audiences focus on different aspects of the story as warranting its circulation.

Thick Description of the Case

In August of 2011, high school student Savannah Dietrich gathered with some friends and acquaintances at her father's home in Louisville, KY while he was at work. After drinking several shots, Dietrich passed out and awoke the next day to find her bra shifted and her underwear removed. It was not until November that Dietrich found out what had happened that night, after a friend reported that there were naked photos of her circulating: two boys had groped her breasts and penetrated her with their fingers while taking photos. Dietrich confronted the boys via text message at the end of November, and after collecting information from a number of friends, filed a police report regarding her sexual assault the day after Christmas. When the boys were questioned by police in February 2012, they confessed to their actions and handed over their cell phones for forensic testing, but the photos had already been deleted. The following month the boys were charged with first degree sexual abuse and voyeurism, to which they pled guilty in June as part of a plea bargain in exchange for a sentence Dietrich later described as "a slap on the wrist" (Riley, "Assault Victim's" A8).

It is at this point that this story takes an unexpected turn: presiding Judge Dee McDonald was asked by the defendants' attorneys to remind those present in the court

room of the confidentiality of the proceedings, as the defendants were minors. According to Dietrich and others, the judge took it a step farther, stating that those present could not discuss the trial proceedings or the crime itself. Angry at being silenced by the court and not being informed of the plea deal, Dietrich sent off a string of tweets, naming her assailants as Will Frey III and Austin Zehnder and writing “Protect[ing] rapist[s] is more important than getting justice for the victim in Louisville” (qtd. in Riley, “Assault Victim’s” A8). The defendants’ attorneys quickly filed a motion to hold Dietrich in contempt of court. Just over a week before her contempt hearing, Dietrich and her parents sat down with Jason Riley of the Louisville-based *Courier-Journal* for an interview regarding the case. When Riley’s initial article was published on July 21, 2012, Savannah Dietrich and her story came into the national spotlight. After the wide circulation of Dietrich’s story and the outrage that followed, the defendants dropped the motion for contempt.

However, believing there to have been a conflict of interest on the part of the prosecuting attorney that resulted in such a lenient plea deal, Dietrich’s lawyers and the *Courier-Journal* petitioned the court to make the court files open to the public. As Dietrich and the *Courier-Journal* waited for the hearing regarding this motion, Zehnder’s attorney, David Mejia, stated in an interview with the *Huffington Post* that Dietrich had ruined his client’s life by naming him as a rapist, arguing that Dietrich was spreading inaccurate information as Zehnder was never charged with rape (Lohr, “Savannah Dietrich, 17-Year-Old”). These statements again brought the story into the public eye, and the *Courier-Journal* added Mejia’s comments to their motion as an example of the

attorney speaking publically about the case and disparagingly about Dietrich while Dietrich herself was barred from speaking (Lohr, “Savannah Dietrich Case”).

The third wave of national attention came once the court files were opened by Judge Angela McCormick Bisig, when prosecuting attorney Paul Richawlsky came under scrutiny for both the lenient plea deal and his reported comments to Dietrich when she confronted him about it. Richawlsky was found to be an alum and frequent financial supporter of Trinity High School, where both Zehnder and Frey attended and played lacrosse. Furthermore, Dietrich reported that when she confronted him about the plea bargain (of which she claimed no knowledge before the hearing), Richawlsky reportedly told her to “get over it and see a therapist,” that “jail was for real rapists” (Riley and Wolfson A10). At the sentencing hearing in September, Judge Bisig issued a harsher punishment than the plea bargain originally called for, most notably that the charge of sexual abuse could not be expunged from the defendants’ records, but could rather be downgraded from a felony to a misdemeanor if the boys demonstrated good behavior. Dietrich continued to speak publically about her experience, especially its effects on her social life, in interviews following the sentencing, expressing a desire to encourage other young women to speak up about their own sexual assaults.

In looking at a sample of the overwhelming number of texts that deal with the Dietrich case, it quickly becomes apparent that a small number of texts serve as the impetus for many others. As we saw with “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother,” a single text may be the exigency for any number of other publications as individuals offer their own reactions to new audiences. Before I begin my analysis of the many competing narratives that emerged from the Dietrich case, I offer a quick overview of these key texts. It is

worth noting that, while Dietrich did participate in a number of video interviews, including one with ABC's *Nightline*, I will primarily be focusing on alphabetic texts as these tended to be excerpted and linked to in responses more than filmed interviews. Since the case gained national attention following Dietrich's interview with Jason Riley, a reporter at the *Courier-Journal*, this initial report was frequently linked to. However, the Associated Press report of the event based on Riley's article was more widely circulated and excerpted, and this briefer version omits some interesting details. For example, while both articles focus on the context of the contempt charge, the Associated Press tends to focus on the content of Dietrich's tweets and the subsequent fall-out, whereas Riley offers more details about the context of Dietrich's tweets, stating that "Farrar-Crockett [one of Dietrich's attorneys] said Dietrich looked at the laws of confidentiality before she tweeted and 'tried not to violate what she believed the law to be,' not tweeting about what happened in court or was in court records" ("Assault victim's" A8). The result is that Riley's article offers a more nuanced portrayal of Dietrich's motivations; while many other articles portray Dietrich as solely acting in anger, Riley's article suggests that Dietrich carefully considered her actions and the effect she wanted them to have.

Following the news that the motion to hold Dietrich in contempt had been withdrawn by Frey and Zehnder's attorneys, the case fell out of the public eye until Zehnder's attorney David Mejia was interviewed by *The Huffington Post* during the lead-up to the opening of the court files. In that interview, Mejia claimed that Dietrich had ruined his client's life: "He's had to move [...] He has lost all the potential that was there. He was on course to a scholarship to an Ivy League school to play sports and that may be

jeopardized. He's in therapy. He's just overwhelmed and devastated by what started from the conduct of this young girl saying the false things she did" (qtd. in Lohr, "Savannah Dietrich, 17-Year-Old"). Mejia argued that Dietrich's tweets mischaracterized what had occurred, that she had inaccurately used the term "rapist" when no rape occurred and stated that she had been videotaped when Zehnder and Frey had only taken photos. Mejia's statements spurred a new interest in the case as individuals rapidly criticized his victim-blaming stance with arguments much in line with the statement from Farrar-Crockett that appears at the end of Lohr's article: "[Frey and Zehnder] took the pictures, they disseminated it, they told people about what they had done. To come back and blame [Dietrich] now for ruining their reputation I think is despicable. They did this to themselves."

One final round of media attention and subsequent responses occurred once the court files were released on August 30, 2012. These opened court files brought out a number of new details including that when the boys confessed to their crimes, they said they did it because they "thought it would be 'funny'" (qtd. in Riley and Wolfson A1); that Richawlsky, the prosecutor in the case, had belittled Dietrich's complaints regarding her exclusion from the plea deal and its leniency; and the details of the plea deal itself, which Farrar-Crockett described as "completely unheard of" (qtd. in Riley, "Dietrich's Files" A8). This new information, along with the final sentencing hearing in mid-September, prompted a much smaller round of response than previous texts, probably due to the apparent age of the story. By the time Abigail Pesta released her *Newsweek* piece in December, the story was being treated as over, and any subsequent responses tended to

either harken back to Dietrich as she related to more recent cases or reflect on the final characterization of the case.

Competing Narratives, Competing Ideologies

Out of this large number of texts, audiences appeared to rely on a relatively limited number of narratives to make sense of the case. Crowley's concept of resonance in densely articulated belief systems is helpful in understanding how different individuals and groups interpreted Dietrich's story in different ways. In her work to understand why two prominent hegemonies of the U.S., Christian fundamentalism and liberalism, are unable to debate meaningfully with each other, Crowley begins by positing "that ideology, fantasy, and emotion are primary motivators of belief and action" (59). Crowley introduces the term "ideologic" – or the logic of an ideology – to describe the systems of pathways that connect the nodal points or master signifiers of an ideology. Crowley distinguishes between ideologic and what has traditionally been called "reason":

One difference between ideologic and reason [...] has to do with the sources from which its positions (moments) are drawn – belief, passion, values, desires – rather than empirical evidence. But ideologic also entails more means of making connections than are acknowledged in liberal accounts of reason. For one thing, an appeal to a belief can stimulate an emotional response that in turn can activate other closely related beliefs. For another, ideological means of connection include webs of analogous and/or metonymic historical associations (that is, articulations) built up over time. (61)

Since ideologies accept a larger variety of kinds of evidence, it is tempting for adherents to liberalism (include the institution of the academy) to dismiss ideologies as irrational.

However, as Chaput explains using different terminology, while ideologies may appear to

be “unreasonable,” they are not “irrational.” Rather, they are subject to the circulation of affective energies over time rather than the circulation of empirical evidence (17).

Crowley notes that ideologics may vary with regards to how densely articulated – or connected – their nodal points are, arguing that “the more densely beliefs are articulated with one another in a given belief system or across belief systems, the more impervious they are to rhetorical intervention. The pathways typically taken in some ideologics are so tightly connected with one another, so routinely and regularly traveled, that they become a sort of automatic ‘first response’ to encounters with new or countering beliefs or belief systems” (78). Moreover, because emotional reaction is one of the determinants for what we pay attention to in the world and because belief and emotional responses are often mutually constituting (83), “densely articulated ideologies construct bad affective grammarians who pay intense notice to objects and events that can be threaded into the intense tapestry of their belief system(s),” but “have difficulty taking notice of events or objects that neither support nor attack their beliefs” (85). This conception of densely articulated belief systems explains the surprise expressed by a conservative acquaintance of mine when I told him that many of my liberal friends were not thrilled by Hillary Clinton as a Democratic presidential candidate because she was too moderate; while he may have encountered any number of critiques of Clinton from the left, he did not notice or pay attention to them until our conversation, likely because face-to-face exchanges are often more affectively laden than other kinds of communication.

Crowley uses the concept of ideologic to understand, among other things, rhetorical appeals to myth. While Crowley understands myth as a stylistic retelling of

history in which “the moral derived from the event becomes more important than the incidents recounted,” I would argue that much of what she has to say regarding myth is also applicable to dominant cultural narratives (98). As I discussed in Chapter 1, cultural narratives often serve as bare-bones outlines of events with appropriate emotional responses onto which the details of experience may be mapped. As Crowley writes of myth, in dominant cultural narratives “the narrativity of the originating event can remain compelling, but it is more or less irrelevant to the cultural uses to which the story is put.”

While Crowley’s notion of densely articulated belief systems and their relationships to emotional reactions does much to explain why different audiences filtered the details of Dietrich’s story into different narratives, it is important to remember that ideologics are not necessarily harmful; they simply *are*. Moreover, it is possible for an individual to experience dissonance between two ideologics that may have once resonated deeply. In fact, my own personal narrative of exploring Dietrich’s case illustrates this point. One aspect of the case that became interesting to me, as I explored the online archive of texts related to it, was my own experience of finding the facts of the case as reported by the media, most dominantly the *Courier-Journal*; I felt a driving need to get at the Truth of the situation. Was the prosecutor lenient with the boys because of his ties with their school? Was Judge Dee McDonald really intending for Dietrich to interpret her warning as the teen did? What really happened at the party and afterwards? What really happened in the courtroom? My scholarly-self watched over my shoulder as I experienced these news stories and blog posts much as someone would have in the initial event, as my emotional reactions fluctuated with each new text I read. As a result, my analysis of this case is deeply influenced by my personal emotional reactions to it, as a

reflection of what many audience members who share my feminist commitments experienced. My analysis of this case is also deeply influenced by the dissonance I felt between my feminist commitments and my scholarly frameworks at that moment, though I have often found the two to be overlapping and commensurate.

As I began to write this chapter, I realized that my personal reading of these events and my sense of a scholarly responsibility to represent the event objectively came into conflict in two areas: the naming of the event itself and how to identify the two attackers. As I will describe later in this chapter, audiences articulated a great deal of tension between the terms “sexual assault” or “sexual abuse” and “rape” in how they talked about this case, in part due to how Kentucky criminal law categorizes particular sex crimes and in part due to dominant cultural understandings of “rape.” While the charges brought against the boys were sexual abuse and voyeurism, their crimes would have been characterized as rape in other states. Moreover, “rape” is the term that Dietrich frequently used to talk about what happened to her, and I have opted to validate the victim’s experience over the institutional authority of the court by using the term “rape” in my analysis. Secondly, and in relation to this first concern, I wanted to take care in how I identified the boys who attacked Dietrich, beginning with whether or not I would deliberately avoid using their names. While Dietrich made her attackers’ names public, most news sources continued to avoid publicizing them, while in other spaces individuals encouraged the circulation of their names through a variety of strategies. However, the fact that the boys are no longer minors and the minimal effect that any publication on my part might have on the further circulation of their identities has led me to use their names whenever it seems appropriate or stylistically easiest. A further consideration, though,

was whether or not I would identify Frey and Zehnder as “rapists,” a tension I discuss later in this chapter.

In any case, as Dietrich’s story was circulated in a variety of ideologics, different details of aspects of the case were brought to the forefront. A great deal of discussion by Louisville locals focuses on Trinity High School, a Catholic boys school, and reveals some of the underlying local class tensions of the case. Frey and Zehnder both attended and played lacrosse for Trinity at the time of the rape, while Dietrich had recently transferred into the public school system. In some cases, these tensions manifested as competitiveness between schools, such as in Megan Schwartz’s comment: “If my son were at Trinity, I would be outraged! Fortunately, he goes to the only true zero tolerance school in Louisville, St. X....those predators would have been gone last year, regardless of legacy and money if they were at St. X...Trinity=ALL about the money and sports....NO CHARACTER...NO INTEGRITY...NO RESPECT FOR WOMEN” (Rancid Muffdiver). While this comment illustrates the long-standing rivalry between Trinity and St. Xavier, another Catholic boys school, others responded as outsiders to the Louisville private school circle. When *Insider Louisville*’s Curtis Morrison reported on the connection between Trinity High School and Richawlsky, he writes, “It’s difficult to live in Louisville and not know how connections among Trinity alumni and other private school grads provide many men privileges not enjoyed by the rest of us.” Likewise, some responders commented on the boys’ material circumstances as relevant to the case, like Lola-at-Large: “If they [Frey and Zehnder] had been from the west end (black) or south end (white trash), they would have been named somewhere. It’s only because they live in the east end (top 5%) that they got the treatment they did” (Rancid Muffdiver). In these

conversations, the immediate context of Louisville informs readers' interpretations more than any larger cultural context; even though these comments can be seen as addressing class issues that are prevalent in any metropolitan area, they are framed quite specifically in Louisville's schools, geography, and economic structures.

Outside of the immediate context of Louisville, two different narratives emerged: that of Dietrich's case as a manifestation of rape culture and that of Dietrich's case as one of First Amendment rights. The former of these was, unsurprisingly, propagated by feminist news sites and blogs, like *Jezebel* and *Feministing*. The scathing sarcasm of Julie Gazdag's *hellogiggles* piece was perhaps unmatched in the other reports, but her comments reflect an underlying attitude toward the case by feminist respondents: "For everyone who's heard about Savannah Dietrich's court case, let's please show some respect for the victims of this situation, OK? Those poor boys, who sexually assaulted an unconscious Savannah at a party, posted the pictures online making a public mockery of her, and then had to suffer the traumatic experience of having their names posted on twitter for all to see." Comments in this vein, debating over who most deserves "victim" status in the case," continued throughout the media coverage, especially after Mejia's interview with the *Huffington Post* was released, but Gazdag also goes on to comment on the high recidivism rate of sexual criminals, arguing that lenient punishments only teach these predators how to better manipulate the system later on. Other writers expanded on this notion of victim-blaming to situate the case in larger political structures. For example, following the release of Richawlsky's comments to Dietrich after she confronted him about the leniency of the plea deal, one anonymous writer at *Inquisitr* comments, "And this, folks, is the result of the rape culture promoted by politicians like

Paul Ryan and Todd Akin with questions over what is ‘legitimate rape’ because, by all accounts, what is known about Dietrich’s assault is most assuredly a crime and one might think warrants a serious charge.” Cara Kulwicki points out that even victim support organizations can perpetuate the silencing of victims; Kulwicki critiques comments made by Jo Ann Phillips, director of Kentuckians Voices for Crime Victims, in the initial *Courier-Journal* article, suggesting that rather than going against the court order, Dietrich should have turned to Phillips’s organization for help. Kulwicki writes, “Even organizations that are supposed to advocate for victims’ rights fail to critique the state’s authority. Indeed, they also reassert their own authority over the survivors’ rights and autonomy – she should have come to us, the experts, to tell her more about what she [was] and wasn’t allowed to do.” While these respondents criticize a number of different institutions, the ultimate conclusion is that the underlying misogyny in our culture has resulted in institutions that are fundamentally biased against women, especially victims of sexual assault and rape. As such, for many of these writers, this case serves as a prime illustration of the many ways the ideologic of rape culture operates in American culture.

For writers concerned with issues of constitutional rights, Dietrich’s case seems to very obviously be a situation in which individual’s right to free speech was violated by a court order. The two arenas in which this story was primarily propagated was among conservative bloggers and blogs by lawyers intended for popular consumption. On conservative blogs, the most common emotion expressed was outrage, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is one of the primary emotions prompting recirculation. While respondents working within the rape culture narrative also expressed a certain amount of outrage, conservative bloggers like Maggie of *Maggie’s Notebook*, Ellery

Davies, and Chuck Slowe tended to direct their anger toward individuals involved in the process rather than toward the larger institutions that feminist respondents tended to target. For example, Maggie calls out Dietrich's legal counsel for providing insufficient guidance and support: "Apparently Ms. Dietrich's attorneys were distracted, maybe a text came in or they were playing Angry Birds. [...] She's 17. How would she know [the appropriate response to the gag order] without her counsel guiding her? And where are her First Amendment Rights, and who is standing for them?" Maggie goes on to target the judge as well, especially focusing on gender: "So we have a female attorney who did not protect her client, and the name 'Dee' is usually a female name – so, a female Judge who had three minor[s] in her court and protected only the criminals." While not calling out the individual judge, Davies places blame on the Jefferson County court system, writing,

I, for one, respectfully disagree with the court. Wait a minute... That's not truthful. I have NO respect for this court! [...] This is my response to the state: Show us that you have more backbone than Kentucky blue grass [*sic*], a bucket of fried chicken, and thoroughbred horses. Don't mock justice in Jefferson. Instead of relying on web vigilantes like me, post the photos below on your public crime log.

This sense of web vigilantism was prominent among conservative bloggers, and they were far more likely to post the names and photos of Frey and Zehnder than the feminist respondents⁵. In fact, Slowe reported receiving a letter from Frey's father, Bill, threatening legal action if Slowe did not remove Frey's photo from his blog, citing

5. I would argue that because feminist respondents were often more interested in addressing institutional and systematic misogyny, they may have chosen not to name the boys as this would provide more focus on the individuals who committed the crimes rather than the culture that validated their choices. Interestingly, we may attribute this distinction to a fundamental, and perhaps stereotypical, divide in liberal/conservative ideology: the conservative focus on individual blame is perhaps a result of the domineering ideology of the rugged individual, while the more liberal/feminist perspective downplaying the individual in favor of addressing institutional and social forces reflects an ideology of collectivism.

copyright infringement. At this point, Slowe wrote two blog posts addressing Bill Frey directly (even going back to replace his initial post about Dietrich's case with a new post), indicting the older Frey for his involvement in smearing the victim and the attitude of entitlement he has instilled in his son, further indicating a tendency to single out individuals for blame in the case.

The second group that viewed this case largely through the lens of rights was law bloggers. Some, like Eugene Volohk, address the technicalities of the law, specifically what can or cannot be considered confidential in these court cases. Volohk points out that Dietrich was not revealing information that she learned in the course of the court proceedings and that previous cases set the precedent that witnesses cannot be prevented from sharing their first-hand information. The comments on this post maintain this somewhat clinical tone as commenters debated the appropriate nomenclature for the defendants and whether or not the story was even worth the hype as contempt motions are largely meaningless until upheld by a judge. Other lawyers, like Maxwell S. Kennerly and the anonymous writer at *Prosecutor's Discretion*, take a more personal stance. Kennerly relates Dietrich's case to a previous blog post he had written regarding the First Amendments rights of private individuals versus the First Amendment rights of corporations; he takes Dietrich's situation as further proof that "the First Amendment, the quintessential American right that ensures the protection of all the others, was losing its power as the sword of the people, instead being fashioned in to the shield of the powerful." The anonymous blogger at *Prosecutor's Discretion* approaches Dietrich's case as a way to illustrate the sometimes complicated contradiction between a defendant's rights and a victim's rights, asking readers to consider whether one set of

rights should trump the other. While Volohk and his commenters are focusing on the specifics of this particular case, like conservative comments focused on the individuals involved, these latter two writers are more concerned with the systematic treatment of victims by the law, an approach more in line with the feminist institutional critiques.

A fourth narrative emerged, often coupled in with the rape culture or free speech narrative, that of public safety. As Gazdag noted, the recidivism rate among sexual criminals is relatively high, and many writers seemed aware of this. Since rapists rarely receive punishment that victims find appropriate for the seriousness of their crimes, many women have taken to using social media as a way to simultaneously out the rapist and warn other women away. Thus, the naming of Frey and Zehnder *as rapists* and disseminating their photos becomes a particular purpose for many writers responding to the Dietrich case; as Tumblr user hana-rosemona wrote in her prominently reblogged post, “Spread their names and pictures to protect yourselves.” This is not necessarily a new strategy; Jessica Valenti opens her post of the case with a reference to the movie *Girls Town* and the practice of using bathroom walls as a place to record sex crimes and warn other women about predators. However, the digital component of these new bathroom walls – spaces like Tumblr and Facebook – adds a few new dimensions. While the fact that these messages may now spread much farther than a single town or school has been well-documented, I am also interested in how these web vigilantes are understanding time and memory, especially on the social blogging site Tumblr. Tumblr users seemed particularly aware of how Google search algorithms could be used to further their case. “Don’t just sign the petition,” user youngbadmanbrown added to hana-rosemona’s initial post, “make sure to reblog this so their names stay in the google [*sic*]

cache. Forever” (qtd. in greeneyedzengirl). Other bloggers, following user dragonglass’s lead, reblogged after adding the phrase “Will Frey and Austin Zehnder are rapists,” often multiple times, playing with Google’s tendency to show pages that contain a high number of the search term. Tumblr users promoted the viral spread of posts featuring Zehnder and Frey’s photos and names to reduce the chances that their crimes could be kept under wraps through legal measures; as user cyber-logic says, “Their attorneys can’t prosecute me for a gag order not aimed at me [...] Nor can they silence the entire fucking Internet.”

These four circulation paths that Dietrich’s story took demonstrate the ways in which a narrative may be picked up by different groups to be circulated for different reasons. In each of these cases, Dietrich’s narrative serves as further proof for the worldview already held by respondents, who focus on the details of the narrative that made the story meaningful to them. In doing so, they posited the story as worthy of circulation to other members of their groups and brought to the forefront the terms that articulated the story within their ideologies. The terms that become associated with the narrative, however, affect not just its circulation – as terms deeply influence the movement of a text through an ideologic – but also, in the recursive process of circulation, its interpretation and situation within particular ideologies.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape: God-Terms, Ideographs, Nodal Points, and Narratives

While the most common point of contention in the conversation surrounding the case was whether or not Dietrich was justified in releasing the names of her attackers, the second sticking point for many commenters was the use of the term “rape” to describe the

event. Under Kentucky state law, the actions taken by the boys constituted “sexual abuse” but in other states, the same actions would be considered “rape.” Later, Zehnder’s attorney Mieja claimed that Dietrich’s use of the term “rape” to describe the event was dishonest, as the boys had been charged with sexual abuse and voyeurism. For some writers, like Kyra-lin Hom, this slip in terminology by Dietrich and others is what makes the boys additional victims in the situation: “It was the Internet’s rallying cry that really did the boys in – whether they deserved it or not. It was unassociated people on the Internet [...] who really built and nailed that coffin, repeatedly incorrectly labeling the boys as rapists.”

The need displayed by commenters to lock down exactly what happened – whether it was “real” rape or not – is reflective of the term’s instability in mainstream discourse. In considering how the term itself functioned as a boundary, a piece of evidence, and a point of contention in this case, I am turning to rhetorical theoretical conceptions of “ultimate” terms. Rhetorical theorists have created or imported from other areas of study a cluster of terms for those words tied to transcendental ideas that function as “ultimate” (as Kenneth Burke would describe them) in a given ideology: Burke and Richard Weaver with “god-terms” and “devil-terms,” Michael Calvin McGee with “ideographs,” and Crowley with “nodal points.” Through a syncretization of these three terms, I hope to offer a new understanding of the ultimate term as situational and deeply embedded with narrative meaning.

While neither is attributed with the coining of the term, both Weaver and Burke used “god-term” to great effect in their writing in the early 1950s. Weaver defines god-term as “that expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and

serving in dominations and powers. Its force imparts to the others their lesser degree of force, and fixes the scale by which degrees of comparison are understood” (212). He offers such examples as “progress” and “science,” highlighting the seemingly universally-agreed-on nature of such terms. Burke, on the other hand, identifies god-terms as those terms that suggest a transcendental or universal purpose, keeping the spiritual connotations of the term: “For when means become ends,” he writes, and are sought to the exclusion of all else, then the man for whom they are thus transformed does indeed identify himself with a universal purpose, an over-all unitary design, quite as with mystical communion” (332). A key difference, though, is that while Burke would agree with Weaver that many god-terms are culturally defined and accepted, Burke also posits that god-terms may be entirely individual in their fascination. What these two scholars do agree on, however, is that god-terms often prompt sacrifice from individuals; Weaver writes, “This capacity to demand sacrifice is probably the surest indicator of the ‘god term,’ for when a term is so sacrosanct that the material goods of this life much be mysteriously rendered up for it, then we feel justified in saying that it is in some sense ultimate” (214). God-terms also have their opposites. Burke draws extensively on Jeremy Bentham’s conception of eulogistic and dyslogistic terms to a single god-terms’s many potential iterations, and Weaver introduces the “devil-term,” pointing specifically at the use of the term “un-American” in his own day (a state of affairs that has arguably continued into our own). The formation of eulogistic and dyslogistic terms allows theorists to take into account both the ultimate purposes and the ultimate enemies of a

given ideological moment.⁶ In additions the terms themselves – god-term and devil-term – suggest the affective impact that they have on audiences, coloring the use of these terms in vernacular as well as explicitly rhetorical language.

While Weaver and Burke cover a wide range of scenes of human action to explain god- and devil-terms, McGee focuses primarily on the realm of politics as he introduces the ideograph. McGee argues that “ideology in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior. Further, the political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by slogans, a vocabulary of ‘ideographs’ easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy” (5). McGee understands these ideographs as part of “‘structures’ of public motives” that “have the capacity both to control ‘power’ and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual’s ‘reality.’” Highlighting Weaver’s concern with ethical rhetorical practices and Burke’s focus on uncovering human motives, McGee differentiates ideographs from god-terms, claiming that ideographs call attention to “the social, rather than rational or ethical, functions of a particular vocabulary” (8). That is, McGee emphasizes the ways in which ideographs may serve as border terms between groups, writing that

one can therefore precisely define the differences between two communities, in part, by comparing the usage of definitive ideographs. [...] So we are divided by usage into subgroups: Business and labor, Democrats and Republicans, Yankees and Southerners are *united* by the ideographs that represent the political entity “United States” and *separated* by a disagreement as to the practical meaning of such ideographs. (8, emphasis in original)

6. I am adopting the term “moment” from Crowley, who adopts it from Laclau and Mouffe, to couple the notion of an ideological position with a sense of temporality and history.

In addition to, and perhaps because of, the way the practical meanings of ideographs mark borders, McGee notes that ideographs shift over time: “when we engage in ideological argument, when we cause ideographs to *do work* in explaining, justifying, or guiding policy in specific situations, the relationships of ideographs changes” (13).

Crowley’s preferred term “nodal points,” borrowed from Laclau and Mouffe, also carries with it connotations of shifting relationships while also suggesting places of sedimentation. Crowley writes that “within hegemony meanings become fixed around ‘nodal points’ that stabilize moments or positions in such a way that they seem natural rather than constructed. [...] Nodal points seem to arrest and even stabilize the movement of difference, and hence they limit the possibility that openings or spaces for dissent may appear within hegemony” (63). As I noted earlier, Crowley describes these limitations as primarily occurring through well-worn pathways between nodal points so that reactions by individuals become somewhat automatic.

While each term has its various connotations and theoretical baggage, it is worth noting a few key shared characteristics. First of all, all three concepts are described as limiting an individual’s perception of reality in some regard. For Burke and Weaver, because the god-term is ultimate and transcendental, adherents to it feel little need to inquire further into the nature of “progress” or “science.” Crowley describes nodal points as limiting openings for dissent, and McGee argues that the structures that ideographs manifest influence and possibly determine one’s understanding of reality. Furthermore, each individual assumes that all other individuals understand the many layers of meaning found in the god-term/ideograph/nodal point; as McGee writes, these terms “presumptuously suggest that each member of a community will see as a gestalt every

complex nuance in them” (7). Ultimate terms are often incorporated into discourse without interrogation of meaning, even though a pair of interlocutors might have very different assumptions regarding meaning. These different assumptions about what terms mean are often related to a third shared characteristic, that ultimate terms always exist in relation (and often in hierarchical relation) to other ultimate terms, relations that allow these terms to contain such a great amount of meaning. As such, a single god-term/ideograph/nodal point may mean two different things to two different individuals based on the ideologic network to which each individual feels that term belongs.

I would argue that another way god-terms⁷ contain meaning is through the variety of narratives that may be embodied by the term. As McGee notes of ideographs, ultimate terms are by their very nature abstract and retain meaning only through application: “No one has ever seen an ‘equality’ strutting up the driveway, so if ‘equality’ exists at all, it has meaning through its specific application” (10). Because of their abstract nature, god-terms are often defined through the use of generic narratives, which may or may not have personal details attached to them. For example, often when Americans try to define the “equal opportunity” of which we are so proud, we turn to the “bootstraps” narrative in which an individual from a poor family may, through hard work, sacrifice, and perseverance, obtain financial success. Usually this narrative documents a series of steps that highlight the work of the individual: academic success through many hours spent studying, significant amounts of leg work to obtain and succeed at early jobs, sacrificing

7. While each term has its own merit, and while others may argue that they are distinctly different, I continue to see these three concepts – god-terms, ideographs, and nodal points – as descriptive markers of the same class of phenomenon. I have chosen to use “god-term” as the generic term for this sort of phenomenon because it reflects the affective value of these terms in a way that neither “ideograph” nor “nodal point” do.

time with family and friends in order to work, and finally the achievement of happiness and success, often illustrated through the notion that the individual's children will have a better life than he or she had growing up. This narrative, however, is not shared among all ideologics; in fact, it is one of the primary nodal points of the white patriarchal capitalist hegemony. Other ideologics may define "equal opportunity" through different narratives, narratives that do not necessarily coincide with current material circumstances; feminist ideologics may highlight the wage gap between men and women across fields while anti-racist ideologics would call attention to the unequal education opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities and the school-to-prison pipeline among other disadvantages. This discrepancy among narratives is one of the ways that ultimate terms serve to demarcate the boundaries of ideologies, as McGee argues. To use his example, asking American and Soviet citizens in 1980 (at least those who genuinely buy into their respective forms of government) what "equality" is would result in different narratives about an individual's relationship to other individuals and to a governing body.

The term "rape" offers an interesting case for illustrating this theory. Notably, while the other dominant god-term in the Dietrich case, "free speech," fits rather neatly into the vocabulary of political life that Burke, Weaver, McGee, and Crowley highlight in their discussions, there is little work on the rhetorical value of the term "rape." I contend that "rape" operates as a god-term in many situations, but it does not operate the same way in every situation. While it fits McGee's criteria of abstractness – "rape" indicates a quality of an interaction between two or more people rather than a thing in and of itself – it is perceived as "ultimate" differently in different ideologics. For feminists, "rape" is an ultimate term in the way it sums up a history of women being used by men as objects. As

Susan Brownmiller documents in her foundational work *Against Our Wills*, the “crime” of rape was established as the violating by one man of another man’s property; the raping of women by conquering men was merely another way to subjugate the conquered, along with the seizing of goods and property. While much of this history is now summed up in the term “rape culture” – from catcalling and workplace harassment to the characterization of women as prizes won by the male protagonists of video games and movies, from the virgin/whore dichotomy and lack of access to birth control to the treatment of women of color as decoration or background – “rape” remains the Ur-violation of the feminist worldview, the fundamental objectification of women.

Among other groups, though, “rape” holds a different kind of ultimate status. For example, many patriarchal ideologies perceive the claim of rape as a kind of trump card against which there is no appeal, similar to how Weaver describes “un-American” (222). Some men’s rights activist argue that women use the accusation of rape as a means to retaliate against men or to hide their own promiscuity. Todd Akins remarks regarding “legitimate rape” succinctly sum up this belief that not everything women would call “rape” is actually rape and highlights the importance of narratives in defining ultimate terms like rape, especially since rape is an embodied experience. Akins and other like him hold that “legitimate rape” follows a particular narrative: A woman, who is not by her clothing or demeanor giving any indication that she is interested in sexual contact, is confronted, perhaps in her home or perhaps in public, by a strange man who threatens her with violence. The woman resists verbally and/or physically but is overcome by the man, who engages in vaginal intercourse with her. That this is the dominant narrative of rape is demonstrated by the fact that other narratives are identified by more specific names: date

rape, spousal rape, male rape, anal rape, rape with an object, etc. A genuine “legitimate” rape can serve as justification for retaliation. Men who assault or even murder the rapists of their wives/girlfriends/daughters are often seen in a sympathetic light, whether in fiction or real life. Women, however, are rarely afforded the same consideration. In Dietrich’s case, some respondents suggested that if she was *really* raped, then she was justified in naming attackers that were given a lesser charge of sexual abuse. This kind of statement, however, calls into question Dietrich’s own assessment of her experiences as rape. A substantial number of others argued that, regardless of the crime committed against her, Dietrich should not have outed the boys, especially if the details of the case may be regarded as murky.

Much of the work of feminist activists in the last three decades has been to expand the number of narratives that are included in the term “rape.” According to Kenneth Plummer, “forced sex and sexual violence towards women (and sometimes men) has probably existed throughout history. But it does not dwell within the same meanings, discourses and stories. Rape is always historically and culturally specific, and how it is understood depends on a framework of story telling” (63). As such, feminists like Brownmiller were tasked with developing a new narratives in which rape occurred. Plummer writes, “Three important strategies in the creation of the new story were (1) debunking the myths, (2) the creation of a history and (3) the writing of a political plot,” a statement that could serve as a succinct summation of *Against Our Will* (67). The relative success of this project is debatable. On the one hand, we do now have terms like “date rape” and “spousal rape” that give women new ways to talk about violent sexual interactions with men. On the other hand, while Donald Trump’s advisor Michael Cohen

was roundly criticized for claiming “you cannot rape your spouse,” Trump’s own history of sexual violence against women did not prevent him from continuing his presidential campaign. In addition, if the storylines on television shows like *Law & Order: SVU* are any indication of the way mainstream audiences can imagine rape, many experiences are left outside the purview of the term, such as when a man is not violent or aggressive but is annoying to the point that a woman gives exasperated consent just to get some peace.

Perhaps some of the push-back against expanding the narratives of rape is that it would also expand the definition of “rapist,” which is universally treated as a devil-term. One common assumption regarding women who argue for the reality of rape culture is that they are also arguing that all men are rapists, an assertion that is vehemently denied – consider the rapid traction of the “Not All Men” hashtag following the 2014 Isla Vista shooting in which shooter Elliot Rodger explicitly indicated that he was punishing women for not having sex with him. Though the comparison should not be taken too far, the terms “rapist” and “racist” seem to have similar effects; they serve as terms of ultimate demonization, not to be thrown around lightly lest one ruin another’s reputation. As John Metta notes in his essay following the Charleston church shooting, “The entire discussion of race in America centers around the protection of White feelings;” similarly, women cannot say that, yes, all men are complicit in the systematic oppression of women without running the risk of alienating potential allies. Instead they say that, yes, all women experience sexism.

Because of the current treatment of rape as a relatively minor offense, feminists often find themselves in a position of non-negotiation. By this I mean that, while we may find ourselves in positions of sympathizing with a shoplifter or a murderer because of the

circumstances in which they found themselves, doing so with a person accused of rape – a move that mainstream patriarchal ideologics often make – would ultimately harm feminist progress regarding the prosecution and prevention of rape. To put it another way, we can engage in arguments regarding free speech with the understanding that there are nuances and complexities at play, that the context and material circumstances of an act of speech matter, because free speech is already regarded as an important and serious issue that warrants such careful consideration. In the case of rape, however, allowing those nuances to become part of the conversation would rarely work in feminism’s favor. Similarly, because of the harm a term like “rapist” can do to an individual’s reputation, patriarchal opposition may be equally hard-nosed, lest some individual be identified as “kind of a rapist.” Feminists and their opposition may find it impossible to engage in dialogue as both sides find it more important to shore up their own positions against assault by the other because they perceive themselves as at risk of losing ground (“perceive” being a key word here with regard to dominant, mainstream anti-feminist sentiments).

A sticking point seems to be the difficulty in shifting between the macro reality of rape culture and the implications that may have for individuals, those who might then be called “rapists.” In part, our hesitancy to ascribe the label of “rapist” to others is a result of our tendency to see rapists (and other sex criminals) as beyond rehabilitation. While it is possible for us to imagine a variety of crimes, like theft or the buying and selling of illegal substances or even murder, as the result of unfortunate social circumstance, ideologics that eschew the concept of rape culture can only treat rape as the manifestation of a person’s essential immoral nature. Thus, we may avoid calling an act “rape” or its

perpetrator a “rapist” in order to continue to believe that rehabilitation is possible. This becomes even more apparent when, like in the Dietrich case, the perpetrators of the crime are young; the stated purpose of withholding the names of juvenile offenders is to aid in their rehabilitation. This tension seems to be at the heart of my own hesitancy to use the term “rapists” that I described earlier, lest I interpellate Frey and Zehnder into identities they cannot escape even should they one day come to understand the privileged positions they occupy.

Circulation, God-Terms, and Ideologies

Like “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother,” the Dietrich case demonstrates the role that controversy plays in circulation. Also like “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother,” Dietrich’s case highlights what gets perceived as controversial, especially given that the case gained no attention before Dietrich took to Twitter with her story. However, the Dietrich case also illustrates how a story may gain wide circulation through its easy entry into multiple mainstream ideologies. Because respondents could identify Dietrich’s story with the god-term “rape culture,” it slipped easily into the larger world view that “rape culture” entails. Likewise, because respondents could identify the story with the god-term “free speech,” it could be circulated as proof of the wide-spread attack on free speech many subscribers to certain conservative ideologies fear. Through its identification with these two different god-terms, Dietrich’s story was circulated across the political spectrum without “liberal” and “conservative” reactions being directly oppositional.

Arguably, the circulation of Dietrich’s story with the god-terms of “rape culture” and “free speech” does little to expand our available means of imagination regarding rape

– subscribers to feminist ideologics already understand that labeling what happened to Dietrich as rape is both political and necessary, while subscribers to the constitutional fundamentalist ideologics that circulated the case as part of free speech discourse seemed to perceive no reason to address the issue of rape. On the other hand, the cross-pollination of these two ideologics – the fact that one might find both if one went on an Internet search for more information – can perhaps extend how we imagine victims of sexual abuse navigating the criminal justice system. For some readers, having the lawyers agree with the feminists that something is serious wrong with the system may make the feminists appear more credible in future claims. For feminist activists interested in highlighting the material circumstances of victims and their experiences attempting to find justice, identifying other potential arenas of circulation and tailoring arguments for those ideologics is one strategy for promoting the overall circulation of victim narratives and increasing the available means of imagination for the American public when it comes to victims’ experiences. In the following chapter, in which I focus on the event that became known as GamerGate, we will see in greater detail the ways in which rhetors may make choices based on the ideologics in which they wish their arguments to circulate and how their options – their available means of persuasion, as it were – may be limited by their own ideologics.

CHAPTER IV

“WHY DO YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD? I GIVE A SHIT WHEN THE
WORLD TRIES TO CHANGE STUFF I LIKE”:

#GAMERGATE, CONSPIRACY NARRATIVE, AND THE RECURSIVE
RELATIONSHIP OF NARRATIVE AND ETHOS

In the previous chapter, we saw how a personal narrative may be taken up and circulated by different groups, often based on how those groups fit the narrative into preexisting ideologics. In this chapter, I will continue to explore how a narrative may be interpreted and then utilized by different groups by examining the event that came to be known as GamerGate. GamerGate falls into the purview of my project because it began with a personal narrative: on August 16, 2014, computer programmer Eron Gjoni published a series of blog posts, collectively called *The Zoe Post*, describing his relationship and subsequent break up with indie game designer Zoe Quinn, who had recently attained some notoriety for the success of her game *Depression Quest* and her outspoken criticism of the long-standing misogyny and homophobia in the games industry. Gjoni admitted in a later interview that he designed his narrative to incite vitriol toward Quinn, ideally ending her games career, and he achieve at least part of his goal: following the publication of *The Zoe Post*, Quinn received unprecedented levels of harassment online, and soon other women in the industry, including journalists like Leigh

Alexander and critics like Anita Sarkeesian, were also being threatened (Jason). Meanwhile, those who attacked Quinn, whether by arguing that *The Zoe Post* revealed that her success was undeserved or by engaging in death and rape threats, claimed that they were not opposed to women in the gaming industry but were concerned by nepotism and unethical practices in games journalism. Over the following months, GamerGaters (those who argued that the games industry had become corrupt) and anti-GamerGaters or Social Justice Warriors⁸ (those who argued that GamerGaters represented the overwhelmingly misogynistic nature of games culture) worked to forward their own interpretations of *The Zoe Post* and its fallout and fought to make their narratives The Narrative of GamerGate.

Because GamerGate was an extended event that resulted in an incredible number of artifacts, textual or otherwise, I have opted to focus on four narrative moments that illustrate the ways in which each side responded to new shifts in the narrative of the other, primarily focusing on the practices and discourse of GamerGaters. The first two narrative moments, *The Zoe Post* and early responses to it, illustrate the larger misogynistic ideologies in which GamerGaters operated as well as their dependency on conspiracy narrative tropes to make sense of the event and circulate it to others. The latter two narrative moments, the Death of Gamers articles and #NotYourShield, occur after GamerGate moved into the mainstream and reveal a shift in GamerGater focus from collecting evidence in line with conspiracy epistemologies to developing a coherent ethos for the group that presented itself as moderate, inclusive, and unbiased. While we can see

8. "Social Justice Warrior" or, more commonly, SJW has become a commonly used, often derogatory term in online discussions to denote anyone who argues against racist, heterosexist, patriarchal norms of media and culture.

many of the same phenomena that I have examined in previous chapters, including the role of emotion in motivating circulation and the interpretation and use of narrative by different ideological groups, GamerGate illustrates a somewhat different role of narrative in rhetorical practice. In the cases of “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother” and Savannah Dietrich, narratives were used as evidence to support larger arguments or worldviews, whether they be about mental health care for children, rape culture, or free speech rights. In the case of GamerGate, a narrative was crafted to deliberately discredit, threaten, and provoke hostile and violent reactions toward an individual. Additionally, we have access to interviews with the participants and a rich collection of behind-the-scenes discussion regarding the construction of the narratives at play which allow us some sense of how rhetors are imagining circulation prior to releasing their texts into the world⁹, providing a more nuanced picture of the recursive nature of the available means of persuasion.

A quick word about language: I have quoted extensively from GamerGaters throughout this chapter and have standardized spelling, capitalization, and punctuation where I deemed it appropriate for ease of reading. However, I have maintained the offensive language and slurs that are an inherent part of GamerGater discourse in order to demonstrate to readers the disconnect between everyday GamerGater practice and their purported commitments. Additionally, I have opted to refer to those who opposed GamerGaters collectively as SJWs, as that is the term that GamerGaters used and serves well to highlight their monolithic characterization of their opponents.

9. Jim Ridolfo encourages the use of ethnographic methods like observation and interviews to learn more about how rhetors plan for circulation, but new materialist methods of following and tracing served me well here, as GamerGate was a well-documented event in many ways, with several individuals invested in collecting chat logs, archives of social media use, and other data.

The Zoe Post

As the text that began GamerGate, *The Zoe Post* deserves careful consideration for the ways it sets the tone for the debate that followed. In *The Zoe Post*, Gjoni describes his relationship with Quinn, documents her many infidelities and his discovery of them, and implicitly argues that Quinn is a compulsive liar and manipulator, all the while painting himself as the victim. He describes his story, arranged in seven acts and beginning with “Act 0,” as “written almost entirely in shitty metaphors and bitter snark.” He also notes that the story’s initial publication venues were the discussion forums of *Penny Arcade* and *Something Awful*, two websites popular in the gaming community, but that his threads were removed, foreshadowing the concerns regarding censorship brought up in early responses to the story, particular in the forums of games news website *The Escapist*. Gjoni opens with a quick overview of the happy parts of his relationship with Quinn before ending “Act 0” with the revelation that Quinn had been cheating on him with her boss, Joshua Boggs. His closing remark in this post hints at even more scandal to come: “the above conversation happens a few days after a considerably more painful one, where I discover almost none of the things I loved about her were true.” Gjoni’s framing of his narrative in acts, his use of delayed revelations, and his cynical prose style lend the narrative a certain literary air – Gjoni is an engaging writer telling the kind of train-wreck relationship story that is hard to look away from. But Gjoni does not rely solely on his ethos to make his argument; he presents evidence of his claims regarding Quinn’s character in the form of screenshots of chat logs and text messages they exchanged. He even utilizes a citation system in which numbers listed in the body of his text direct

readers to specific moments in the chat logs. The use of screenshots as evidence was pervasive throughout GamerGate, when GamerGaters would collect images of Twitter exchanges, reviews of games, and personal emails and compose collages that allegedly demonstrated the unethical relationships among game developers, journalists, and corporate sponsors. Gjoni even posts a video of him pulling up the chat logs on his computer as evidence that the chat logs were not invented, an attempt to head-off accusations of the digital manipulation of the images he provides.

The ultimate goal of Gjoni's narrative, beyond publicizing the fact of Quinn's infidelity, is to damage Quinn's reputation by demonstrating that she is a hypocrite, a liar, and mentally unstable, though he frames this goal as a "warning" to others who might develop professional or personal relationships with Quinn in the future. In "Act 0," Gjoni outlines some of the recurring themes that came up in his conversations with Quinn:

1. Stories about how the grief and confusion of being raised by a pathological liar taught her to make it a point to always say what she meant, and to communicate at face value.
2. Stories about an extremely manipulative ex-husband, who would do things like refuse to stop wearing the ring from his last relationship, and make her feel terrible or insane for any discomfort she expressed – though he was in fact cheating on her as he was making her feel terrible for being worried.
3. The pain of spending most of her childhood alone, as well as the injustice of being ostracized from various groups and communities in her adulthood.
4. Views on the ethics of infidelity. Which she maintains is inherently wrong even if the person who was cheated on never finds out, because (aside from willingly endangering their partner by way of increased STD risk) if the unfaithful party then has sex with their partner, they are doing so under false pretenses, and therefore without their partner's consent. That is, sex with a partner who doesn't know you've cheated on them is sex without consent.

Gjoni follows this list by saying "There were other strong principled positions,"

indicating perhaps that Gjoni chose to elaborate on these while leaving aside those

stances that Quinn did not seemingly violate in their relationship. However, the notion of a “strong principled position” or “strong principle stance” comes up throughout the narrative any time Gjoni wishes to highlight Quinn’s hypocrisy, reminding us of this initial list.

Throughout *The Zoe Post*, Gjoni relays personal information that he gleaned from Zoe during their relationship, such as details about how she feels about her childhood and previous relationships, to support his claim of her manipulative nature. For example, after a well-publicized disagreement with *Youtube* personality JonTron, known in gaming circles for his comedic reviews of video games, Quinn posted to her social media that she had nothing against JonTron and that the dispute had been played up by the reality television context of the disagreement. Gjoni, however, states that Quinn frequently spoke badly of JonTron and describes her post as lying to her followers. Gjoni ultimately paints himself as the victim in the situation, describing in detail the mental health problems he suffered during the relationship as a result of Zoe’s emotional abuse. Moreover, he does this in such a way as to silence Quinn’s concerns about her career and her own mental health. For instance, when Quinn expresses her fear that the wife of one of her sexual partners will go public, bringing undue scrutiny to her private life – especially since women are more likely to be shamed for having sex outside of strictly prescribed bounds – Gjoni writes these concerns off as another example of Quinn lying to the public. Likewise, Gjoni depicts Quinn’s attempts to cut ties with him, unfriending him on Facebook and not responding to messages and texts, as strategic moves to give him less incriminating material should he decide to go public, completely ignoring her claim that being and talking with him negatively affect her mental health and wellbeing.

Early Reactions

Unfortunately, Quinn's concerns regarding the emphasis placed on her sexual history were not unfounded, and early reactions to *The Zoe Post* manifested many of the same ideologics of rape culture criticized by feminist respondents in the Savannah Dietrich case, though some of these early GamerGaters attempted to disguise their misogyny. Initial discussion of *The Zoe Post* took place primarily on gaming discussion forums and *YouTube* with different groups emphasizing the aspects of Gjoni's narrative that fit in with their preexisting concerns, much like what happened with Dietrich's story. Many people became aware of *The Zoe Post* after gaming vlogger MundaneMatt posted a video describing Gjoni's story and offering his own commentary. MundaneMatt is one of the first to suggest that the positive reception of Quinn's game *Depression Quest* was due to her personal (and sexual) relationships with gaming journalists, in particular *Kotaku* writer Nathan Grayson. He introduces the issue of journalistic integrity – which became key to GamerGaters arguments in the month to follow – stating, “There's a lot going on behind the scenes in the indie world of gaming right now. And in essence, it's incestuous.” This is not the first time, MundaneMatt argues, that he has expressed these concerns about indie gaming and journalism, though a quick survey of his previous videos might suggest that he is more concerned about keeping feminists out of gaming than issues of journalistic integrity.

On the forums of games news website *The Escapist*, the conversation primarily focused around whether or not Gjoni's revelations of Quinn's infidelity was “newsworthy,” with original poster (OP) Rebant questioning why gaming journalism

sites (like *The Escapist*) were not reporting on the connections between Quinn and Grayson in their initial post “Zoe Quinn and the Surrounding Controversy.” In the early discussion, most participants argued that the story was gossip, personal, and not worth the attention of news sites, but Rebant pushed back, writing, “when a feminist game developer causes what in my opinion would be a scandal, that’s a big deal” (Post #8). When a respondent suggested that Rebant was engaging in slut shaming, Rebant replied, “She [Quinn] acted like a slut and deserves shaming for what she did, setting the legitimacy of feminism back a whole ton by being a massive hypocrite” (Post #12). Another user retorted, “the only thing this has to do with feminism is that she’s [Quinn is] a feminist. In case this has slipped everyone’s minds again, a feminist doing something bad should not be used by anyone concerned with intellectual honesty to say something about the entirety of feminism” (LifeCharacter, Post #15). Rebant responded by arguing that due to her public and outspoken persona, Quinn is a spokesperson for feminism before articulating a dominant theory regarding feminism to explain the absence of the scandal from gaming news:

People who are [certain of] their view point being the only correct one will interpret any non-fitting post as a troll post [a post intended to incite anger and derail conversation rather than an authentic engagement in the debate]. It’s a common mechanism and this confirmation bias is pretty much proven by psychology. I’d appreciate it if you stopped calling me a conspiracy theorist for making the absolutely ludicrous suggestion that there are feminists in charge of forums and they abuse their moderation powers by [interpreting oppositional posts as trolling]. That’s a legitimate [real, documented by psychologists] thing, and it’s what the power of moderation does to people.

While I agree that one should not overgeneralize and nitpick, I think it’s justified in this case to call attention to the hypocrisy as a symptom, since that’s exactly the argument feminism uses when describing hidden cultural biases. (Post #18)

This turning of what they perceive to be feminist values or feminist interpretive practice against feminism and feminists to reveal the built-in hypocrisy of the movement is a common tactic in anti-feminist arguments. More specifically, critics of feminism frequently argue that by focusing on women's issues and representations, feminists deliberately ignore and silence male voices (and sometimes, these critics claim, the voices of LGBT folks as well), promoting exclusivity rather than inclusivity.

The conversation was very different on the *GameFAQs* forum "Game Developer in Bed with Gaming Journalist," where participants readily condemned both feminists and SJWs without offering any reasons for their condemnation, indicating that anti-feminist sentiment is a commonplace of this particular arena, unlike *The Escapist* forums, where feminists seemed more likely to self-identify and participate. Instead, much of the commentary focused on Quinn's physical appearance, including comments like the following:

- "She looks like a man." (Lootman, Post #64)
- "Lol ugly girls cheat even more." (SleepComa, Post #72)
- "I've never heard of her, but a Google search reveals that she looks kind of disgusting." (seryou101, Post #92)
- Quinn is "an amoral sack of lumpy mashed potatoes wearing a colorful wig." (Loshadt, Post #127)

These kinds of comments gained traction after photos supposedly showing a nude Quinn began circulating. In this forum, there is little to no comment on either the newsworthiness of the item or the potential breach in journalistic integrity. Instead, participants rally around well-established assumptions regarding feminists as hypocritical, manipulative, and physically unattractive.

These two forums both reflect popular discourses regarding the relationship between feminists and mainstream culture. As feminist critiques of media and culture

have become more visible, online movements like men's rights activism and #Idontneedfeminism seek to debunk the feminist "myth" of the systematic oppression of women by men. Men's rights activists instead argue that men have been quantifiably harmed by feminism, especially in terms of educational and employment opportunities, in cases of divorce and child custody, and with regards to falsified rape and sexual harassment charges. Using #Idontneedfeminism, women circulated messages portraying feminists as man-haters who expected unreciprocated respect from men, as perpetuating the man=agent / woman=victim binary, as manipulative pro-abortion activists who expect the American people to take financial responsibility for their sexual choices, and as opposed to feminine appearance and performance by women (interestingly, many of these messages appeared on handwritten signs held by white, conventionally attractive young women). These arguments against feminism are not new, but the vocalness of their proponents increased following the Isla Vista killings on May 23, 2014, in which Elliot Rodger announced his intention to punish women for refusing to have sex with him in a *YouTube* video before killing seven people and injuring fourteen others. As I discussed briefly in the previous chapter, some men pushed back against having this killing spree described as evidence of widespread and systematic misogyny, beginning the hashtag #NotAllMen, and feminists answered these protestations of innocence with stories of their experiences with sexual harassment, catcalling, violence, and rape, collected under #YesAllWomen. One point that feminist respondents at this time tried to make clear was that not being extreme in one's misogyny was not the same as being completely guiltless. As writer Laurie Penny says in an interview for NPR's *All Things Considered*, "The language used on men's rights activists' forums is an extreme version of language that

you see everywhere on the Web. [...] It's not just sites which are dedicated to hating and slut-shaming women – it's online video games; it's YouTube and Facebook.”

For the gaming community, former *Jeopardy* champion Arthur Chu's article “Your Princess Is in Another Castle” was a clear indictment of common assumptions regarding women and sex that Rodger espoused. The title of this article is taken from the game *Super Mario Bros. 1* where, following every boss except the final one, Mario is thanked for his hard work but told that his ultimate goal/prize, Princess Peach, is still out of his reach. Chu writes at length regarding the dominant narratives of male nerds and women: that these young men will always lust after girls “out of their league” (since the idea of seeking out and dating women who share their own nerdy interests is never presented as a possibility); that these men will persistently stalk and harass these women with the goal of “wearing them down” (represented most pointedly in the character of Steve Urkel from the 1990s sitcom *Family Matters*); that after putting in their time as the friend who is always there while the woman in question goes through countless breakups with jocks and rich boys, these nerdy men will be rewarded when the woman in question discovers her feelings for him; and that, barring that, the young nerdy man may attain the object of their desires through trickery and deceit (as seen in *Revenge of the Nerds* when Lewis puts on a Darth Vader mask and pretends to be a woman's boyfriend to have sex with her). Chu then writes about the anger and frustration young male nerds like himself experience when they do everything according to these narratives and still don't get the girl in the end, describing the hateful language that he has heard from others and used himself, arguing “when our clever ruses and schemes to ‘get girls’ fail, it's not because

the girls are too stupid or too bitchy or too shallow to play by those unwritten rules we've absorbed."

Chu's summary of how young nerdy men, including male gamers, are trained to view women is clearly manifested in the *GamesFAQ* forum, where Quinn's physical attractiveness is the primary point of discussion, demonstrating the disdain that male nerds may feel toward women who share their interests but aren't conventionally beautiful. Additionally, Gjoni and others are indirectly criticized for choosing to engage in sexual relationships with her, almost as though they should be chastised for settling instead of setting their sights on more attractive women. The points raised by Rebant on *The Escapist* forum and by MundaneMatt on *YouTube*, however, reflect the common arguments of men's rights proponents more generally by drawing on popular conceptions of feminists as manipulative and hypocritical. Further, MundaneMatt, Rebant, and others seem to believe that feminists (both women and male allies) are coming to control large portions of the video games media, especially channels of review and criticism, resulting in poor reviews for video games that do not adhere to their strict expectations regarding the depiction of women and their relationships to men.

Red Pill/Blue Pill: Conspiracy Narrative and Social Reality

In many regards, the narrative regarding SJWs constructed by GamerGaters manifests characteristics of conspiracy rhetoric, beginning with the early assumptions that games news sites were ignoring *The Zoe Post* and its scandal in order to protect the interests of the SJWs controlling the sites. As G. Thomas Goodnight and John Poulakos note, "conspiracy awareness usually begins following the appearance of an unusual

event: an illegal act, an accident, a significant mistake with important consequence. The event draws interest because it represents a human tragedy, or, alternatively, a comic departure from the normal course of public affairs” (302). *The Zoe Post* delivers on both accounts: Gjoni’s tragic story of love and betrayal employs a comedic tone that suggests that it would all be so funny if it was happening to someone else, given how extreme the infidelity is. Gjoni was well-aware of his audience’s desires and expectations; interviewer Zachary Jason writes,

As Gjoni began to craft “The Zoe Post,” his early drafts read like a “really boring, really depressing legal document,” he says. He didn’t want to merely prove his case; it had to read like a potboiler. So he deliberately punched up the narrative in the voice of a bitter ex-boyfriend, organizing it into seven acts with dramatic titles like “Damage Control” and “The Cum Collage May Not Be Accurate.” He ended sections on cliffhangers, and wove in video-game analogies to grab the attention of Quinn’s industry colleagues. He was keenly aware of attracting an impressionable readership. “If I can target people who are in the mood to read stories about exes and horrible breakups,” he says now, “I will have an audience.”

The Zoe Post in and of itself was a horrible break-up story, not a conspiracy; the conspiracy became apparent in games journalists’ lack of reaction to the story, which had individuals like Rebant and MundaneMatt questioning the backstage workings of games journalism sites. The conspiracy (or “Quinnspiracy,” as some called it) built as people found more evidence to suggest that Quinn had received professional promotion from people with whom she had personal relationships and that other games journalists had promoted friends and acquaintances.

After an individual or group becomes aware of the conspiracy, argue Goodnight and Poulakos, they begin the process of hawking their newly discovered social reality and decrying the falsity of the mainstream perception of the conspiracy. In these discussions,

Typically, the question centers around the nature of rhetorical proofs: the evidence, credibility, and emotional arguments of both the accuser and accused [...] For those convinced of conspiracy, more evidence leads only to greater uncertainty. Since the nature or degree of conspiracy cannot be known beforehand, and since part of a conspirator's duty is to cover-up deeds with apparent proof or to remove entirely damning clues, all evidence points toward uncertainty. Thus, "facts" which counter the conspiracy hypothesis become suspect and must be tested over and over again for weaknesses. (Goodnight and Poulakos 306)

For instance, when opponents pointed out to GamerGaters that Nathan Grayson never actually reviewed Quinn's game *Depression Quest* for *Kotaku*, many GamerGaters responded that the disappearance of the article in question was proof that the SJWs running *Kotaku* were protecting Quinn. One of the most disputed points in GamerGate, moreover, was the authenticity of the threats and harassment received by Quinn, Sarkeesian, and other women. When Sarkeesian and Quinn began publicly sharing messages of abuse they were receiving on Twitter, GamerGaters responded by either insisting that the threats were coming from individuals unaffiliated with their movement or that the threats had been faked by the supposed recipients. JohnRavioli, in the #burgersandfries IRC¹⁰, questioned the similar wording of Quinn's and Sarkeesian's statements regarding the threats as well as their claims: "Anita is saying she was 'driven out of her home.' Zoey [*sic*] is saying she was 'driven out of her home.' No one is driven out of their homes for any kind of threats. The police come to you and sets up cops in front of your house" (Aug 28 08.59.27 – 09.00.34). GamerGaters proposed several

10. "Internet Relay Chat." Along with the /v/ (video games) board on 4chan and the *Kotaku* in Action subreddit on Reddit, the #burgersandfries IRC served as a space for GamerGaters to organize, discuss tactics, and share news. The IRC existed from August 18 to September 6, and in that time users generated nearly 5,000 pages of writing. Due to the sheer volume of information, I have opted to focus primarily on August 28, the day that the "Death of Gamers" articles appeared, to track GamerGaters reactions to and plans to combat this narrative. Quotes taken from the IRC are cited with the date and time stamp given in the chat logs.

methods for proving the threats had been faked; after someone pointed out that the amount of time between the date stamp on one threatening message and the date stamp on Sarkeesian's screencapture of said message suggested that someone had logged out of one Twitter account and logged into another, MundaneMatt suggested collecting all the tweets that mentioned Sarkeesian on Twitter to determine whether or not she was responsible for the threats made against her (Aug 28 02.55.51). That opponents were skeptical at best and entirely dismissive at worst of the kinds of proof that GamerGaters offered only further demonstrated to them the entrenched nature of the conspiracy; as Goodnight and Poulakos write, "More widely accepted evidence [or denial of one's own evidence] becomes a sign of the conspirators' power, rejection by authority a sign of the depth of the conspiracy, and consensual denial a sign of public gullibility" (307).

Additionally, "another form of rhetorical proof which becomes subject to distrust is the credibility of all sources that do not share the conspiracy hypothesis" (Goodnight and Poulakos 206). This became especially pertinent in determining who could be appealed to as authorities on the issue of gender discrimination in video games culture. As Quinn's and Sarkeesian's first-hand experience was dismissed, GamerGaters sought out other women, especially self-identified feminists, to refute SJW claims regarding the state of sexism in the games industry. A primary way of indicating which public figures and authorities could be trusted and which could be not was the terminology of "red pill" and "blue pill," an analogy drawn from the 1999 film *The Matrix*. Early in the movie, the protagonist, Neo, is offered a choice of two pills: the red pill will cause him to wake up in the real world, a terrifying dystopia of evil machines and humans struggling to survive, while the blue pill will allow him to forget everything he has gleaned about the nature of

reality up to that point and return him to blissful ignorance in the simulation the machines had created to keep humans passive. For GamerGaters, “red pill” or “red piller” meant that an individual understood what was *really* going on. For example, #burgersandfries IRC member Kiernoth said, “What’s cool is that the GameHeadlines writer is also a feminist BUT she’s a bit red pillish” (Aug 28 02.20.47-57). Later, as members of the IRC tried to identify other feminists they could cite as authorities, Kiernoth added, “Well there’s Factual Feminist, but she’s libertarian so she’s gonna be a bit more redpilled than most” (Aug 28 02.30.57). Meanwhile, “blue pills” either live in ignorance, blindly buying into the SJW’s version of social reality, or deliberately manipulate the emotions and ideologies of the ignorant for their own ends, as GamerGaters characterize Quinn and Sarkeesian. For instance, after *YouTube* personality Arin Hansen, known by his handle Egoraptor, suggested on Twitter that women getting death threats was a sign that misogyny existed in games culture, IRC user Britbong asked, “Why is he so bluepilled?” (Aug 28 11.01.54). PaperDinosaur responded, “He didn’t used to be. He became one. He’s a Zoe type. He will act the way that gets him the most views [on *YouTube*]. So, he acted a pro-gamer until the SJW market started, then thought he could ride the wave” (Aug 28 11.02.00-36).

One of the characteristics of blue pills is that they are unable to engage in discussion; as Goodnight and Poulakos write, “The enemy is beyond communication” (310). GamerGaters complained that SJWs on Twitter used passive aggressive statements to avoid actually arguing their points (Aug 28 03.26-28) and that some opponents refused to listen to or converse with white men, citing white male privilege (Aug 28 08.00.24). Moreover, GamerGaters perceived themselves as being the moderates of the situation

while SJWs treated anyone who did not immediately agree with them as an enemy. IRC user AneiDoru argues, “Neutral is still a side to us. It isn’t to the SJWs” (Aug 28 02.27.16-21). However, while most SJWs are mere blue pills, sheep tricked into believing lies about the nature of social reality, GamerGaters had larger concerns – the evil machines, if we keep with *The Matrix* analogy. While the very nature of conspiracy prevented GamerGaters from uncovering the full extent of the games journalism cabal, they found what they considered to be several key members, including Silverstring Media, a gamers development group for which Sarkeesian consults; Adrienne Shaw, an Assistant Professor in Temple University’s Department of Media Studies and Production and avid video game scholar who GamerGaters identified as the origin of the “Death of Gamers” narrative; and the CYCLES program, an Air Force-funding project, which Shaw is a part of, aimed at using video games to help individuals confront cognitive biases in decision making (Codeswish). GamerGaters interpreted the connections that could be drawn among these entities as evidence of a large-scale attack on white male gamers with the goal of eliminating them from games culture. Goodnight and Poulakos write that “conspirators are portrayed as twisted, abnormal and brutal, yet clever, and powerful beings” (310), and this is demonstrated in the ways Pastebin user Codeswish assesses his findings on these behind-the-scenes actors:

This PR group [Silverstring Media] Sarkeesian is tied to is fairly creepy. Heavily ideological, they hold retreat workshops for SJW concepts, with a sharply activist tone. Reminds us of [the documentary] *Jesus Camp*. They do workshops for game [developers] where they discuss “dismantling hegemonic masculinity in the gaming industry,” and do weird training activities like “State Torture Jenga.” “Hegemonic masculinity” – it’s like they’re quoting Gramsci’s prison notebooks. Creepy.

This quote contains an interesting array of contradictions, with Silverstring and its sponsored SJWs being described as akin to both religious fundamentalists and Marxist intellectuals, suggesting that GamerGaters are skeptical of “extremists” on both the right and the left and that they understand these groups, led by the conviction of their beliefs, to be manipulating blue pill individuals in order to make them disciples of their ideologies.

Though Gjoni’s initial break-up story retreated into the background as the conspiracy narrative began to spread, both narratives allow the white male gamer to be the victim. Admittedly, many GamerGaters were disenfranchised in some way: some suffered from mental illness while others were able to participate as extensively as they did due to being un- and underemployed. However, in this case, establishing themselves as the victims (of belligerent SJWs, of mainstream media stereotypes of gamers, and of government-sponsored projects for eradicated white male gamers) allowed GamerGaters to make certain claims regarding their ethos and supported their version of events.

Within the localized context of the gaming community, the conspiracy narrative served GamerGaters well as a means to promote circulation. As we saw in some of the early responses, many gamers were already concerned about the feminist take-over of games, a ideologic with well-greased rails for a narrative like *The Zoe Post*. Moreover, a primary tenet of conspiracy rhetoric is that the individual must come to his own conclusions by examining all available evidence himself. In an online context, this epistemological practice means more views to key texts, consequently making them more likely to appear in searches for items related to Quinn and GamerGate. Additionally, by having so many individuals searching for the “truth,” GamerGaters turned up a huge

amount of “evidence” of unethical practices, with each individual nugget having its own circulation life. At the same time, the conspiracy narrative was an impediment in many ways to the story spreading outside the a conservative gamer ideologic, as this same “evidence” was not taking seriously under other epistemologies, and GamerGaters required a circulation sponsor, someone to boost their voices beyond the gaming community, to move their concerns into the mainstream.

The Death of Gamers

Individuals who pitted themselves against Quinn and corruption in the gaming industry collected themselves under a few key terms – #Quinnspiracy and #burgersandfries¹¹ among the most popular – until actor Adam Baldwin, known for his unabashed conservative opinions, became involved on August 27, creating the eponymous hashtag for the movement and moving GamerGate out of the games community and into more mainstream conversations. The following day, a series of articles appeared on a variety of websites, games-focused or otherwise, that served to establish the primary SJW response to GamerGate and that forefront the abuse received by Quinn, Sarkeesian, and other women. On August 25, Sarkeesian released “Women as Background Decoration: Part 2” as part of her *YouTube* series *Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games*. Sarkeesian, who had been on the receiving end of Internet harassment since the inception of the *Tropes Vs. Women* series, had publicly supported Quinn on Twitter, and this was the first video she had released since Gjoni published *The Zoe Post*. Perhaps due

11. In *The Zoe Post*, after claiming that Quinn cheated on him with five different men, Gjoni writes, “And now I can’t stop mentally referring to her as Burgers and Fries,” a reference to the chain restaurant Five Guys Burgers and Fries.

to her connection with Quinn or perhaps due to the extra publicity of this video afforded by supportive tweets and links from Joss Whedon¹² and Tim Schafer¹³, Sarkeesian received an unprecedented amount of vitriol, culminating in an individual posting her address and the address of her parents on Twitter with threats of rape and violence and driving Sarkeesian from her home.

After Sarkeesian released an image of these violent messages on her own Twitter feed, writers from gaming sites and beyond responded. This collection of articles from across websites contained a relatively unified meta-narrative of the events of GamerGate, which came to be referred to as the “Death of Gamers” narrative, as many of the titles – such as “The End of Gamers” (Golding), “The Death of ‘Gamers’ and the Women who ‘Killed’ Them” (Johnston), “A Guide to Ending ‘Gamers’” (Wilson), and “‘Gamers’ Are Over” (Alexander) – implied that the identity marker of “gamer” was becoming (or should become) less and less monolithic in gaming culture. The “Death of Gamers” narrative begins with a history of the gamer identity. Dan Golding writes,

For a while, perhaps, when such technology was found mostly in masculine cultures, videogames accordingly developed a limited, inwards-looking perception of the world that marked them as different from everyone else. This is the gamer, an identity based on difference and separateness. When playing games was an unusual activity, this identity was constructed in order to define and unite the group (and to help demarcate it as a targetable demographic for business).

The problem with this identity continuing to hold sway in games development and marketing is that, as several of these authors note, women have become half the gaming

12. creator of iconic “nerd” favorites like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*

13. designer of critically-acclaimed and fan-favorite video games like *The Secret of Monkey Island*, *Day of the Tentacle*, *Full Throttle*, and *Grim Fandango*

population, though they are still treated as outsiders: “The predictable 'what *kind* of games do [women] really play, though – are they *really* gamers?’ response says all you need to know about this ongoing demographic shift. This insinuated criteria for 'real' videogames is wholly contingent on identity (i.e. a *real* gamer shouldn't play *Candy Crush*, for instance)” (Golding). Self-identified gamers “see themselves as the gatekeepers of the gaming community,” serving as the “guardians of a culture only they can define” (O’Rourke; Bernstein).

However, as many of these articles point out, gamers are not necessarily the ones defining what does or does not count as a “real game”; the gaming industry is. Devin Wilson writes, “At its core, to be a ‘gamer’ is to obsessively and regularly make the correct purchases. ‘Gamers’ are such vicious gatekeepers because they want to protect the perceived value of their investments.” The inherently consumerist nature of gamer culture is frequently highlighted. Leigh Alexander writes, “‘Game culture’ as we know it is kind of embarrassing – it’s not even culture. It’s buying things [...] It’s young men queuing with plush mushrooms hats and backpacks and jutting promo poster rolls. Queuing passionately for hours, at events around the world, to see the things marketers want them to see.” Chu critiques the very assumption that games journalism has ethics in the first place, arguing,

Games journalism isn't journalism. Games journalism is a neglected johnny-come-lately subset of entertainment journalism, which is also – with a few honorable exceptions – not journalism. Because entertainment journalism is a field where all of the money and all of the power lies in the hands of companies selling products, where the only thing to cover is products being sold, where the target audience of the publication is *defined by their pre-existing desire to purchase the product*, and thus the border between advertising and “journalism” can't help but be blurred. (“It’s Dangerous,” emphasis in original)

These critiques of the corporate gaming industry and of gamers' willingness to participate in it further highlight the perceived ideological battle lines of GamerGate: while white male gamers continue to eat up big name franchises like *Halo* and *Grand Theft Auto*, feminist games enthusiasts turn to indie developers for a wider variety of stories and gameplay. Chu goes on to say,

Never have I met a group of people as doggedly convinced that their opinion is “objectively” correct as gamers. Hence the incredible reservoirs of rage that *Depression Quest* may have gotten positive attention it didn't deserve because the reviews of it were “biased” and not “objective,” as though any such thing were possible. Hence the seething fury that this developer may have gotten her position by “knowing the right people” and not through perfect “objective” meritocracy.

Since “gamers” don't enjoy playing *Depression Quest*, an interactive fiction game about living with mental illness, they believe that Quinn's game only received positive press because of who Quinn is, either because journalists feel pressured into positively representing outspoken feminists or because she had sex with them.

#NotYourShield

Arguably, the “Death of Gamers” narrative sets up a strawman – or, rather, straw-gamer – easily dismissed by the mainstream audiences who were hearing about GamerGate for the first time. This straw-gamer is a white, heterosexual male whose speech is peppered with thoughtless race-, gender-, and sexuality-based slurs, especially when he encounters others from the anonymous comfort of his gaming console or computer screen. Individuals who were non-white, non-male, non-straight, and GamerGaters pushed back against what they perceived as an erasure of their existence, a silencing of their perspectives, and a paternalistic lecture about what they should be

offended by. This narrative, which directly opposes the notion that the only ones angry about the push toward more “inclusionary” video game culture is white, straight men, was largely collected under #NotYourShield – a hashtag intended to convey to SJWs that these individuals refused to sit by silently while said SJWs carried out a culture war in their names. Twitter user @Ninouh90, working in conjunction with fellow black gamer Jason Miller (@j_millerworks), created and began spreading #NotYourShield on September 2, and by the next day the hashtag had become a substantial part of GamerGater strategy. On 4chan, one individual anonymously posted tips for best use the hashtag, including encouraging the use of both #NotYourShield and #GamerGate so that readers would know exactly which side the poster was on because “misinterpretation is SJW bread and butter;” cautioning white, cis, males from making claims on the tag, arguing that “autism does not count” and the tag should be used by “‘classical’ minorities only;” and providing examples of good and bad tweets involving the tag (qtd. in Quinn).

Posts like this, which treated #NotYourShield as a strategy in a larger campaign, led to questions of the authenticity of the tag as the genuine opinions and perspectives of non-white, non-male, non-cis, and non-straight gamers. Quinn posted screenshots of the 4chan post discussed above on September 4 and of the IRC chatroom #burgersandfries on September 6, in both cases implying that #NotYourShield was a PR move by GamerGaters to gather public sympathy for their cause. Perhaps in response to these criticisms, the *YouTube* channel Shield Project was established on September 6. Its first video, posted on September 7 and titled “#GamerGate – We Are Not Your Shield,” opens with the statement, “The gaming media would have you believe that #GamerGate is just about ‘straight white male’ gamers trying to ‘reject women’ in the industry... What if the

gaming community told you that they were NOT your shield for the narrative you're creating?" The three minutes that follow feature still images, voiceovers, and video clips of people of color, queer people, and women professing support of GamerGate, including #NotYourShield's creator @Ninouh90. One woman says over her photo, "I am a queer feminist woman and I am not a shield for false ally gaming journalists to hide their corruption behind. I support GamerGate and will call you out." A young black man gestures to his wall of gaming paraphernalia as he says, "I am a gamer myself and I am also black and these SJWs think they know what offends me and what doesn't." Another young white man says over his photo, "Even though I'm gay, the games media want me to think that all my gamer friends are homophobic, but gaming has always been an inclusionary pastime. I support #NotYourShield." One still image shows a passport for the Republic of India next to a yellow note that has "#NotYourShield" and "#GamerGate" handwritten on it. The video closes with a clip of @Ninouh90 saying, "As a black gamer and the person who started #NotYourShield, I don't want my identity to be used as some kind of marketing push or some kind of instant get-out-of-jail-free card for SJWs to use against me. So, my name is Nino, and I am not your shield."

The rhetorical choices made in this video fall in line with the focus on visual evidence throughout GamerGate on the part of both GG supporters and detractors, given the frequent use of screen captures and images to ensure that described events really happened. By displaying female and non-white bodies, the premiere Shield Project video "proves" that it is not the work of white male gamers attempting to improve their image. Interestingly, however, this is the only video in the series to feature images and video prominently; future videos often involve the Shield Project host interviewing women,

people who identify as LGBT, or people of color through Google Hangouts, but these interviews are primarily audio, and while individual user avatars (visible in the bottom of the screen) may show their faces, they just as often show anime characters or other images.

Controlling Narrative, Controlling Image

Throughout the course of the event but especially after the debate broke into the mainstream, a great deal of effort on both sides was put into documenting and demonstrating the hypocrisy of the other side – that the stated goals and actual practices both SJWs and GamerGaters did not line up. While GamerGaters made claims about the purported nature of feminism and feminists, Quinn and her supporters argued that the ostensible goals of GamerGaters – ethics in gaming journalism – were belied by the frequent discussions of how best to end Quinn’s career¹⁴. In both cases, rhetors claimed that how their opponents argued was symptomatic of the larger problems inherent in each side’s ideologies. GamerGaters argued that the refusal of SJWs to listen to and engage in debate with them was indicative of a lack of inclusion and the faultiness of their assumptions regarding white male privilege. SJWs argued that GamerGaters were unable to see their own privilege and the ways in which their call for “ethical” practices was an excuse to discourage women from the gaming industry. Furthermore, SJWs argued that the threats of death, sexual harassment, and doxing leveled against women in the field, before and after *The Zoe Post*, were evidence of the overwhelming misogyny in video

14. For Quinn, documenting these attacks were a matter of legal importance as she built her case for a restraining order against Gjon that would prevent him from approaching her physically and from sharing information about her online.

game culture, to which individual GamerGaters frequently replied that they did not personally engage in such behaviors and disapprove those who do, often also pointing to similar threats leveled against members of their own side. As GamerGate moved into mainstream awareness, GamerGaters began to focus less on collecting and distributing evidence against Quinn, Sarkeesian, and others (though they continued to do so), instead turning their attention to shaping their public image as moderate, informed, unbiased, and inclusive.

In many ways, the GamerGate incident serves as an excellent example of Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca's theory regarding the interactions between our perceptions of a person and her acts. To begin, "the concept of 'person' introduces an element of stability. Any argument about the person has to do with this stability: it is assured when an act is interpreted as a function of the person, and it is failure to respect this stability which is deplored when someone is reproached for incoherence or unjustified change" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 294). This is the same phenomenon that Walter Fisher documents with his ideas regarding characterological coherence and that Roland Barthes writes of when he describes the reaction to a wrestling villain hiding behind the rules of the ring after violating them himself: "The inconsistency, far more than treachery or cruelty, sends the audience beside itself with rage: offended not in its morality but in its logic, it considers the contradiction of arguments as the basest of crimes" (24). In the case of GamerGate, Gjoni's framing of Quinn as a hypocrite for betraying her "strong principled stances" anticipates an audience's reproach for such instability. But beyond that, GamerGate illustrates our expectations that a rhetorical collective – a group of individuals sharing a common rhetorical stance – will exhibit the

same stability or characterological coherence we expect of individuals. What Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca term “plasticity, which everyone allows spontaneously to himself, while just as spontaneously denying it to others,” may be applied to the group with which we identify, allowing us to discuss the multitude of opinions and argue that the viewpoints of one individual should not be attributed to the group as a whole, while being denied to the group we identify against, resulting in all group members being held accountable for the words or actions of a single member (295). This double standard was apparent to many GamerGaters; #burgerandfries IRC member haahwaaw wrote, “It’s a real shame that one actual person or SJW can flag some stupid series of words and that’s all of us by default. But every single person who writes an editorial making us out to be worse than 2 Hitlers are only allowed to be treated as individuals, and even then they’re supposedly almost infallible at worst” (Aug 28 08.20.07 – 21.12). At the same time, they ridicule the perceived hypocrisy in some feminists opposing sex work and others defending it, a debate that many feminists would argue is extremely nuanced and productive for forwarding feminists ideals (Aug 28 02.37-38).

The perceived stability of the person is important because “often, the idea one has of a person, instead of being the outcome of argument, is rather its starting point and is used either to foresee certain unknown acts, or to interpret known acts in a particular way, or else to transfer to the act the judgment passed on the agent” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 299)¹⁵. Moreover, “the intervention of the person, as a context for the

15. While Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca avoid using the term “ethos” to characterize this relationship between our prior perception of the rhetor and the rhetorical situation at hand (in keeping with the Aristotelian foundations of their work), contemporary rhetorical theory has taken this interaction as a key component of ethos.

interpretation of an act, comes about most frequently through the medium of the notion of intention, which has the function of both expressing and justifying the reaction of the agent on the act. [...] The idea we have of these intentions depends essentially on what we know of the agents” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 301). For this reason, managing the initial impression an audience has of a rhetor can be fundamental for further rhetorical engagement – preventing audience from immediately dismissing or rejecting a rhetor’s arguments based on his perceived ethos. GamerGaters frequently discussed strategies for managing their image, realizing that as “gamers” they were working against a number of negative stereotypes from the beginning and even more so after the “Death of Gamers” narrative began circulating. As we saw earlier, preventing white straight men from masquerading as minority gamers using #NotYourShield and consequently being found out as a fake was one of these strategies, and similarly, many of these strategies were about mitigating damage to their already-compromised ethos. For example, when some GamerGaters proposed protesting the PAX gaming convention, PZT warned on the #burgersandfries IRC, “Please don’t do anything autistic or stupid. One video of a guy acting like a retard in public and we’re fucked. (Aug 28 07.21.33, 42). Similar warnings were posted regarding online discussions, with Crunchepillar posting in #burgersandfries, “Stop burning bridges on twitter...I’ve made good progress with a lot of SJWs and almost gotten them to change just to have some lolsorandum faggot pipe in about how all SJWs are fags” (Aug 28 09.35.18, 45).

In addition to avoiding behaviors that would negatively affect their ethos, GamerGaters participated in and proposed “charitable” activities that would improve their reputation, since “the value we attribute to [an] act prompts us to attribute a certain

value to the person” which may result in “a modification of our conception of the person, to whom we shall explicitly or implicitly attribute certain new tendencies, aptitudes, instincts, or feelings” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 297). For example, when The Fine Young Capitalists, a Toronto-based non-profit group working to demonstrate that games by women could be economically viable, announced that they had a falling out with Quinn prior to the release of *The Zoe Post*, GamerGaters flocked to their IndieGoGo campaign and ensured they met their fundraising goal. GamerGaters then used this act to support their claims that they were not opposed to women in video games, only corruption, since “former acts, and the good reputation resulting from them, become a sort of capital incorporated in the person, an asset which one can rightfully invoke in one’s defense” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 299). While on the front, these actions appear to be spontaneous gestures, they were frequently debated behind the scenes as GamerGaters weighed in on the possible outcomes. For instance, when NewDCD proposed “Operation Virtuous Mission”¹⁶ to take “the PR angle even further” by having GamerGaters intervene when individuals harass SJWs online, Zachenen argues that it would look “like mansplaining.” NewDCD responds, “Doesn’t matter, though. The crazies are not our objective here. The objective is to cause infighting and doubt within SJW ranks” by offering evidence of a different character than the one SJWs shilled (Social Justice Bread).

Managing their image was important to GamerGaters because it was vital to maintaining control of the narrative of GamerGate, especially once mainstream media

16. “Operation Virtuous Mission” is a reference to the 2004 game *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* and appeared frequently in GamerGater conversation. Interestingly, the game prominently features issues of conspiracy and government-controlled narratives.

began covering it. Many GamerGaters understood themselves to be waging a war of narrative in which winning would mean completely discrediting the SJW narrative of evil white male gamers (and consequently discrediting Quinn and Sarkeesian) and putting their narrative of games journalism corruption in its place. However, as #burgersandfries IRC member Thidran notes, GamerGaters were “at a massive disadvantage due to [SJWs] having years to build up their narrative” (Aug 28 23.58.53). While GamerGaters felt that their evidence of corruption stood on its own, they needed to impress upon their audience the falsity of SJW representations of their character and priorities before they could present their version of events. At the same time, the tactics used to improve their ethos – charitable donations, active and visible defense of women in gaming, promoting minority voices – became part of their narrative as they described games journalists as only interested in including the voices of those in power (SJWs) instead of the minority voices they claimed to want to include. As the GamerGate event developed, narrative and ethos were recursively constituting for GamerGaters, as new parts of the narrative were drawn on to boost their ethos and actions taken to boost their ethos became part of their narrative. This recursive interaction encouraged the maintenance of a stable identity for the collective, and arguably, the strategies used by GamerGaters were geared toward the building of a coherent collective identity that would mediate the negative connotations of the collective terms “gamers.”

The Stakes of the Game

Given the narratives that GamerGaters most prominently draw on in their discourse – narratives like *The Matrix* and *Metal Gear Solid 3* that feature end-of-world

scenarios – it is unsurprising that they attributed so much weight to their cause. Perhaps the primary difference between the two sides of the GamerGate debate is exactly what was at stake for the participants. More than one person fled her home out of fear for her safety, and Sarkeesian canceled a speaking engagement at University of Utah when security could not prevent attendees from bringing firearms into the venue, despite the threats leveled against her. Meanwhile, GamerGaters were forced to confront the fact that their behavior and norms may no longer be socially acceptable. While GamerGaters frequently push back against the notion that they are racist, misogynistic, and homophobic, the #burgersandfries IRC, to take one example, is filled with instances of the kind of discourse that prompts the negative stereotyping of gamers, especially by SJWs. For instance, money is frequently referred to as “Jewgold” and one who lacks it is a “poorfag.” The participants in these conversations, though, see no discrepancy in their professed commitments to inclusion and their everyday language; as PaperDinosaur states, “calling someone a faggot isn’t being a dick” (Aug 28 08.33.17). It is unsurprising, then, that they seem unable to understand or even imagine the motivations of SJWs (beyond the desire to whine and/or receive special treatment). Complaining about how SJWs engage in “passive aggressive” tactics that limit genuine discussion, IRC member Keirnoth writes, “Another one was someone retweeting someone else saying ‘DEATH THREATS R BAD.’ Well no shit, but it’s the goddamn internet” (Aug 28 03.28.14, 24). For Keirnoth, and arguably many others (as no one debates his statement), death threats are inherent to the Internet, something to be overlooked like advertisements in the sidebar instead of actively opposed. User oxxo asks, “Why do you want to change the world? I give a shit when [the] world tries to change stuff I like” (Aug 28 08.29.41). And that, for

GamerGaters, is what is at stake: stuff they like. Not their livelihood, or emotional well-being, or physical safety. Just stuff they like changing.

At the same time, GamerGaters showed themselves to be rhetorically savvy when it came to the manipulation and management of narrative. Much like the case of Savannah Dietrich, GamerGate demonstrates for rhetoricians the ways in which a personal narrative may be taken up by different groups for different rhetorical purposes. Moreover, we can see how larger cultural narratives – often substantial aspects of a group’s ideologics – influence what parts of a personal narrative are deemed noteworthy. However, unlike the Dietrich case, where different groups circulated the narrative with little interaction, in GamerGate we watch two groups wrestling for control of the narrative; while they debate with each other, they also make arguments to audiences outside of games culture about the appropriate interpretations of Gjoni’s story, the harassment that followed, and video games themselves. In addition, through the IRC chat logs, we can see the ways in which GamerGaters strategized the content and implementation of their narrative. In addition, the GamerGate case gives us insight into how rhetors plan for and react to circulation. Like Liza Long’s blog post, a great deal of GamerGater material was shared as the result of an emotional reaction, whether that was outrage directed at games journalists and/or SJWs or outrage directed at GamerGaters for the harassment of women. GamerGaters in fact planned on this circulation as a first step in inciting their audience to action against Quinn, Sarkeesian, and other SJWs. However, at first, circulation largely remained localized in the games community. Attention to the debate greatly increased after Adam Baldwin became involved, since, given his previous comments and public positions on media and culture, his ready-made audience of Twitter

followers were inclined to oppose SJWs. At the same time, the SJW side of the story was being circulated by the various “Death of Gamer” articles that appeared shortly after Baldwin initiated #GamerGate. As with Long’s and Dietrich’s narratives, the stories of GamerGate began reaching wider audiences after the intervention of a third party – coverage or republication by websites with audiences beyond the local context.

In addition to these questions regarding circulation, GamerGate prompts us to examine assumptions regarding credibility in a time of anonymous communication. The easy creation of so-called throw-away accounts – social media accounts created for short-term uses with no intention to maintain them over the long term – raises questions about the constitution of collective movements, especially when the “trending” status that may further promote a particular hashtag or new story may be based on the number of individual usernames discussing it. What appears to be a collective of 100 individuals may in fact be a much smaller group with each individual posting to multiple accounts. In particular, the role of the screen capture in GamerGate calls attention to shifting notions of evidence and authenticity as rhetors seek to prove that artifacts – blog posts, tweets, and comments, for example – *did* exist even though these artifacts and the user who made them may have since disappeared. Furthermore, as we saw with Long’s case, a rhetor using her “real” name does not guarantee that she will be treated as credible by the audience while another anonymous rhetor may be, due the alignment of her argument with preexisting ideologics. In the concluding chapter, I will address some of these issues of authenticity, identity, and credibility, as well as the issue of circulation sponsorship in the context of digital rhetoric and social media.

CHAPTER V
DIRECTIONS IN WHICH TO HOPE

I began this project with the assumption that the circulation of personal narratives that give alternative accounts of the lived experiences of oppressed and disenfranchised groups could do important social and political work, regardless of the responses those narratives received. This assumption is summed up in the notion of the available means of imagination, in the idea that exposure to alternative narratives can shift our understandings of what is possible even if we are critical of the narratives themselves. With this starting point in mind, I aimed to understand how personal narratives by relatively unknown individuals could come to occupy space in the imagination of the American public through their circulation in social media, searching for particular features or strategies that may have contributed to these stories viral spread. In this course of this analysis, I came to focus on a few things:

1. Emotion, positive or negative, fuels circulation by serving as motivation for individuals to share texts that they respond strongly to. In turn, strong emotion displayed in response to a particular text suggests to others that they share their own opinion on the subject, further circulating the text that prompted the response.

2. Individual stories may be adapted or interpreted to fit into multiple ideologies, and a story that can be read as meaningful or important to multiple ideological groups will circulate more widely.
3. Narratives that serve to shore up a group identity may circulate more widely as individuals both demonstrate their own identification with the narrative and as others argue that the group's self-representation is flawed, dishonest, or hypocritical.

In this concluding chapter, I explore some of the implications of this work, including what it suggests for future scholarship in circulation studies and in digital rhetoric, and suggest a few areas that may be ripe for investigation.

In many ways, focusing on personal narrative to discuss the role of emotion in circulation reinscribes some of the more troubling assumptions about the genre, namely that it is inherently emotional (and consequently “feminine”) and therefore should be taken with a grain of salt in serious political deliberation. On the other hand, if all political discourse is always-already emotioned, as Crowley's framework of ideologies and Chaput's notion of affective economies suggest, the personal narrative is perhaps different from other, more “logical” modes only in that we anticipate having an emotional reaction to a personal narrative and if we don't, we perceive some kind of breakdown in communication. Undoubtedly, the personal narrative is fraught with pitfalls, whether that is to shut down discussion entirely, as Segal argues, or to encourage individuals to evaluate the arguments of others based entirely on how those arguments line up with their own experiences, as Fisher writes. However, like most rhetorical strategies and tactics, these results are only “good” or “bad” insofar as they forward discourses or political

actions that we deem “good” or “bad.” The innumerable stories of rape, sexual assault, gender-based violence, and street harassment shared under #YesAllWomen successfully shut down #NotAllMen, and as a feminist, I think that is good. At the same time, I recognize how frequently personal narrative has been the end of productive discussion, often at one-on-one level when an individual reiterates an oft-repeated story that reinscribes her view of herself and the world in ways that are counter to the claims ostensibly under debate – such as someone dragging out the “I have black friends” card when confronted with accusations of racism and/or perpetuating a racist system.

It would be easy, perhaps, to argue that it is dominant narratives that shut down conversations while alternative narratives open up new possibilities. While the concept of the available means of imagination focuses primarily on narratives that may be deemed “alternative” in some way, in reflecting on these case studies, we may question how far a personal story must deviate from the dominant cultural narrative to be “alternative.”

While Liza Long’s narrative about her son’s mental illness illustrates substantial departures from standard stories, stories like Savannah Dietrich’s that call attention to the silencing of victims and the relatively minor punishments handed to sexual abusers have become increasingly common. The notion of alternative here, then, might have more to do with the audience’s perceptions of the relative dominance of the narrative. As discussed in both chapters 3 and 4, many who ascribe to patriarchal ideologies, men’s rights activist and GamerGaters for example, perceive stories like Dietrich’s as being dominant to the point that young men are suffering enormous losses every time a woman breathes a word about sexual assault. That these kinds of stories have suddenly become more visible only further entrench these groups’ beliefs that women have learned there is

something to be gained by employing them, as opposed to the notion that sexual assault has always been under-reported. In the case of the conspiracy rhetoric that structured parts of GamerGate discourse, the understanding of which narrative is “alternative” and which is “dominant” becomes especially important as the alternative narrative is read with increased credibility through the sheer fact of not being the story told by mainstream media. At the same time, an audience’s assumption regarding the dominant narrative an alternative narrative is working against deeply informs that audience’s interpretation of the narrative, as we can see in Dietrich’s case, where some audience members took of Dietrich’s story as proof that the dominant narrative of free speech rights in the U.S. is not entirely accurate. Because audiences need to understand alternative narratives in relation to dominant ones, alternative stories cannot be so alternative as to be incomprehensible to mainstream audiences if they are to circulate. While Liza Long’s narrative comes closest to foregoing dominant narratives altogether, she still paints her investment in a restructuring of the mental health care system in terms of motherhood, specifically her responsibility to her other children besides Michael.

Another thing that becomes increasingly clear through these cases is how the identity of an individual – as much as we can understand individuals as having stable identities – and their ethos – or the rhetorical reading of that identity – are shaped by audiences’ reception of their texts, especially in the case of personal narratives. Liza Long, Savannah Dietrich, Zoe Quinn, and Anita Sarkeesian all found themselves suddenly cast into the role of experts on mental illness in children, sexual assault, and cyberbullying because their texts were read as persuasive by certain hegemonic forces, including mainstream media and government officials. While these are success stories

that I believe forward better, more nuanced conversations regarding gender issues in several arenas of life, it is worth remembering how many stories of mental illness in children, sexual assault, and cyberbullying did not attain this status. Moreover, naming these four as “successes” highlights significant omissions in who can attain this kind of expertise: all four are white¹⁷, all four are cis-gender, and only one (Quinn) openly identifies as queer. All had access to the technologies and time necessary to craft and circulate their messages, suggesting a certain class privilege, and all were able to leverage “eloquence” in the form of easy command of standard American English to their advantage. One potential step to address this disparity would be to examine in greater detail the circulation, limited or otherwise, of the stories of, for instance, transwomen of color or of non-native English speakers in order to propose strategies for bringing these voices into wider circulation.

As I mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, one aspect digital circulation that warrants further consideration is the role of what we might call circulation sponsors, calling back to Debra Brandt’s sponsors of literacy, in pushing stories toward mainstream audiences. In the previous chapter, I pointed to Adam Baldwin’s creation of “#GamerGate” and recirculation of GamerGate texts as a primary reason that GamerGate arguments reached mainstream audiences as he used his celebrity to “signal boost” the voices of GamerGaters. In the case of Savannah Dietrich, her interview with Jason Riley of the *Courier-Journal* and its subsequent circulation by the Associated Press served to launch her story into a national spotlight, where it was further spread by commentary

17. Sarkeesian is of Middle Eastern descent but is fair-skinned and primarily identifies as Canadian-American.

from news aggregate sites like *Slate*, *Salon*, and *Huffington Post*. These same news aggregate sites, which are already well-integrated into social media, were also instrumental in the circulation of Liza Long's "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother," where Long's article was reproduced in full as well as commented upon by staff writers and others. While some sponsors, like Adam Baldwin or Jason Riley, perhaps viewed these stories as important information for the public, others stood to profit off the number of views a story received. That is, the motivations of circulation sponsors, much like those of literacy sponsors, are complex, political, and ideologically bound. As rhetoricians seek to understand digital circulation and even suggest strategies for political and social action, we should pay attention to role these circulation sponsors play in shaping both the messages they circulate and audiences' perceptions of those messages.

The notion of circulation sponsors gives us another way of identifying and understanding the moving part of digital circulation, perhaps the most challenging aspect of circulation studies. In tracing these cases, one thing that remained difficult was accounting for the interplay between human and non-human actants. Web 2.0 is dominated by spaces in which actions made by humans are mediated by algorithms and programs which, despite being made by other humans, take on agencies of their own once they are set into motion. The role of these non-human actants in the cases I have documented here cannot be understated, even as I have largely left them in the background in lieu of focusing on the choices made by humans. I made this choice in part due to my own lack of expertise – while I know that algorithms govern every I do and see on the Internet, I lack the technical know-how to identify and analyze them. But I also made this choice because of my interest in how the emotional reactions of humans govern

how they interpret and subsequently circulate personal narratives. While algorithms may be programmed to pay attention to emotion – for example, the way that Facebook is more likely to display posts on others’ feeds if they contain highly emotional words or the linguistic markers of major life events – algorithms can only understand what *is* emotional by humans ascribing emotional weight to particular words, grammatical constructions, or visual items like emojis or gifs, meaning that is ascribed through the collective, cultural agreement, as Micciche reminds us, of what a particular set of bodily phenomenon signals about our relationships to others.

While I could sidestep questions of non-human actants to some degree in how I analyzed my case studies, I could not deny the effect that they had on how I collected artifacts for analysis. Gries comments on the problem of search algorithms that have become personalized what they think we want to see – the “filter bubble” of Eli Pariser – for the new materialist scholar, encouraging the use of multiple search engines and digging extensively into the results. I also took to heart her call to explore the “psychogeographical attractions” in a search, clicking links and finding new artifacts in a way that was not always necessarily systematic but that allowed me to move outside the proscribed bounds of the search algorithms that Google and others had designed for me (99). Moreover, my choice of case studies was deeply informed by my own social media practices. All three of these cases first came to my attention through my Facebook feed, and my initial impressions of them were directly shaped by what I saw there. For instance, because of the ideologics and arenas of circulation that I inhabit as a young, white feminist, I only knew of the Savannah Dietrich case as an example of rape culture, despite the fact that I was living in the city where it happened, when it happened. It

wasn't until I began deliberately searching outside of the algorithm ascribed to me that I found the conversations regarding local class structures and free speech rights, conversations that my networks – with both human and non-human elements – did not include.

This network of human and non-human actants increasingly controls what individuals see of public and political debate, as many have pointed out with varying levels of paranoia, but these networks also influence the pathways between emotions and actions in our ideologics. If, as Edbauer argues, individuals believe that an expression of outrage is the ultimate political action, then social media has both been structured by and encouraged this view, with Facebook providing a list of trending issues and then asking users “What’s on your mind?”. Undeniably, these requests for emotional engagement often play out along troubling, hegemonic lines; terrorist attacks in Europe, for instance, are met with outpourings of sympathy and hashtags of solidarity while more horrific violence in the Middle East or Africa is often invisible, and the outrage in these latter situations is more often that Western media is so clearly biased rather than that these attacks happened in the first place – that is, people are outraged that no one is outraged. Perhaps a healthier practice for the good of democratic engagement would be to treat emotions like outrage as the precursor to and/or motivation for action, as Cooper argues is the case, rather than an end unto itself. But then we must consider what counts as action, especially in the age of digital democracy. The term “slacktivism” has been used to denounce the shallow ways Millennials understand political engagement and action as sharing a post, signing a petition, or documenting their opinions on their own social media accounts, as opposed to the physical and material enactments of political dissent of

previous generations (sit-ins, boycotts, marches, public demonstrations, etc.). While proponents of digital civic engagement often point out that discourse online often serves as a precursor simultaneous action to more “traditional” political action, we should also consider the ways in which digital civic engagement allows previously underrepresented groups to participate, for instance disabled people who may be unable to leave their homes and working class individuals may be unable to participate in marches or sit-ins without putting their incomes at risk. Many activists have come to consider signal-boosting as an important and valid form of participation, and in some cases, it is a *preferred* form of participation because it allows privileged individuals to circulate and support the voices and viewpoints of minorities without mediation through hegemonic voices. Consequently, slacktivism – even through the most basic act of recirculation, of sharing another’s words on one’s own social media site – serves an important role in contemporary public rhetoric, and the available means of imagination is one way of lending validity to these practices that have been so frequently derided in the past.

Perhaps it is because I am a Millennial myself that I have long been resistant to the idea that contributing to digital circulation was what people did when they were too lazy to do “real” political work. When I began this work, I was already committed to the idea that personal narratives matter, that they are key to how we understand the lives of others. I also began this work believing that the empathy that is developed through reading and listening to personal narratives could – and perhaps *should* – serve as the basis for collective, political action – that the way the stories we hear and the ways we interpret those stories deeply influence what we imagine as a “good” lives for ourselves, our contemporaries, and those who will follow us. I have come out on the other side of this

project a little more cynical (at least some days), finding, much like Segal, that the stories with the most potential for radical change are often the ones least circulated. At the same time, I feel I have a better sense of what directions in which to hope; while the networks that govern digital circulation remain subject to what I and others who share my ideologies might think of as regressive impulses, this dissertation suggests that there are ways to game the system, to circulate stories that can lead to more complicated, nuanced, and messy understandings of complex political issues in the public imagination.

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- “Identification through Responsivity on Social Media.” Thomas R. Watson Conference. Louisville, KY. October 2014.
- “Personal Narrative and Public Rhetoric: The Sandy Hooks Shooting.” Feminisms and Rhetorics. Stanford, CA. September 2013.
- “Swatching Rhetoric: An Assignment in Listening, Imitating, and Analyzing.” Conference on College Communication and Composition. Las Vegas, NV. March 2013
- “Speculative Fiction, Ethnography, and *The Wire*: What are we to do with Hamsterdam?” The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900. Louisville, KY. February 2013.
- “‘I am like the girl, I am the girl’: China Miéville’s *Embassytown*, Sophistry, and the Vice of Metaphor.” National Conference of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. Boston, MA. April 2012.
- “Al Gore, Former Vice President, Former Tobacco Farmer: An Analysis of Gore’s Use of Personal Narrative in *An Inconvenient Truth*.” The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900. Louisville, KY. February 2012.
- “Tina Fey is Totally the New Christine de Pizan: *Mean Girls* as a Modern Day Conduct Book.” National Conference of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. San Antonio, TX. April 2011.
- Computer Connection Poster Session. Conference on College Composition and Communication. Atlanta, GA. April 2011.
- “The Female Body, the Female Mind: The Embodied Rhetoric of Arcangela Tarabotti.” The 10th Annual Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality Symposium. Oxford, OH. February 2011.
- “Rhetorical Experience: Multimodal Personal Narratives for Social Action in the First Year Composition Classroom.” North Carolina Symposium on Teaching Writing. Raleigh, NC. February 2011.

SERVICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

Assistant Director of the Virtual Writing Center (University of Louisville)

- Summer 2014 – Summer 2015.
- Responsibilities included:
 - Working with distance education students and faculty on writing, both academic and personal
 - Performing consultations through MyWConline as well as Google Hangouts
 - Informing distance education faculty of the Virtual Writing Center resources available to their students

- Writing student usage and feedback reports at the end of each semester

Social Media Coordinator – Watson Conference (University of Louisville)

- October 2014
- Developed guidelines for graduate student Twitter volunteers for expanding local conference conversations to include scholars unable to attend

Rhetoric Society of America – Local Graduate Student Chapter (University of Louisville)

- Served as President Fall 2014 – Spring 2015
- Responsibilities included scheduling and organizing meetings of the monthly Rhetoric Reading Group

Graduate Student Representative – Search Committee (University of Louisville)

- Fall 2013 – Spring 2014
- Responsibilities included:
 - Facilitating meetings between graduate students and visiting job candidates
 - Collecting feedback from graduate students on candidates.

English Graduate Organization (University of Louisville)

- Served as President Fall 2012 – Spring 2014.
- Responsibilities and achievements included:
 - Scheduling and conducted officers meetings
 - Coordinating social events for graduate students and faculty
 - Establishing informal workshops on topics suggested by graduate students
- Participated in the inaugural EGO summer writing group.

Composition Pedagogy Workshops (University of Louisville)

- Workshop (October 30, 2012): “Alternatives to Blackboard: Wordpress, Google Docs, and Others.”
- Workshop (September 4, 2014): “Using Whole Class Workshops as Peer Review.”

Lunch with the Digital Writing Cooperative (Miami University)

- Workshop (October 12, 2010): “Composing Voices: Digital Audio and Spoken Performance in the Writing Class.”

Oxford Magazine (Miami University)

- Submission reader and scorer, Summer 2010.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Louisville

- *Introduction to College Writing* - ENGL 101 (8 sections)

- *Intermediate College Writing* - ENGL 102 (4 section)
- *Business Writing* – ENGL 306 (2 sections)

Miami University

- *College Composition* - ENG 111 (3 sections)
- *Composition and Literature* - ENG 112 (2 section)

COURSEWORK

University of Louisville

Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy Studies

- Teaching College Composition, *Dr. Joanna Wolfe*
- Research in Composition, *Dr. Debra Journet*
- Composition Theory and Practice, *Dr. Karen Kopelson*
- Work in English, *Dr. Bruce Horner*
- Rhetorics of Health and Medicine, *Dr. Karen Kopelson*
- Digital and New Media, *Dr. Mary P. Sheridan*
- Academic Writing in Theory and Practice, *Dr. Bruce Horner*
- Critical Theory in Composition and Literacy Studies, *Dr. Bronwyn Williams*

Literature

- Serial Narrative and Narrative Theory, *Dr. Debra Journet*
- The Work of Ethnography, *Dr. Debra Journet*
- The Teaching of Literature, *Dr. Beth Boehm*
- Gender and Science Fiction, *Dr. Dawn Heineken*

Miami University

Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy Studies

- The History of Composition, *Dr. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson*
- The History of Rhetoric, *Dr. James Porter*
- Composition and New Media Studies, *Dr. Jason Palmeri*
- The Theory and Practice of College Composition, *Dr. James Porter*
- Issues in the Profession, *Dr. Cynthia Lewiecki Wilson*

Literature

- The Body in Early Modern Culture, *Dr. Cythnia Klestinec*
- Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in British and Irish Modernism, *Dr. Madelyn Detloff*
- Theories and Their Histories, *Dr. Britton Harwood*