BEYOND FIG LEAVES AND SCARLET LETTERS:
WOMEN VOICING THEMSELVES IN DIARIES AND BLOGS

by

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ABSTRACT

This project explores the reasons that women write in diaries and blogs and the ways that they reckon with audience and identity through private writing in public spaces. It observes that women write to work through difficult experiences, to give substance to the tasks of impermanence that fill their days and lives, to forge connections with other women related to issues of mutual interest and concern, and to assert themselves as subjects of their own making in the face of competing social constructions of who they should be. The importance of this subject matter lies in the ways that writing is a source of strength to individuals who have been silenced or otherwise isolated through the circumstances of their lives. I have chosen to look at the value of writing for women, but the principles that I set forth are applicable to other groups of people, particularly those who have experienced marginalization or loss of some kind.

The research traces the history of the diary and its significance for women, the evolution of the diary’s function as it has moved online, the relationship between the diary and identity formation for its writer, and finally, the relationships between writers and their audiences, particularly with the diary in its incarnation as the blog. I develop the metaphors of fig leaves and scarlet letters to represent the ways in which women negotiate the dynamics of truth, identity, and audience in textual practice and assert that emerging technologies such as the blog allow for women to move beyond the silences that these images symbolize, create communities, and give voice to their lives.
Trust in the Lord with all of your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.

I have found that writing, even academic writing, is a highly personal process. This project has caused me to examine myself and to struggle with my demons in ways unlike any other endeavor I have undertaken. Although the process has been highly personal, I would not have completed it without the generous support of numerous individuals. It is with gratitude that I acknowledge their roles in this journey.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

- Emily Dickinson

When I was young girl, someone told me that I should never write down anything that I did not want others to read. And although I did not always follow this advice, I had several occasions upon which to recognize its merit, with my diaries in particular. With personal texts, like diaries, the writer’s relationship to audience is paradoxical. Traditionally, people think of the diary as a place of confession and reflection, a private document in which one may sort through the things that one would or could not share with others. That said, the moment when thoughts become text, they take on the possibility, even the likelihood, of being read by someone other than the author. Diarists deal with the reality of audience in different ways. Adrienne Shiffman asserts that “any diarist who does not personally destroy her work must be aware of the existence of a possible audience, present or future, and will construct her text accordingly” (94-5). I generally agree with Shiffman, and would add that anyone who does destroy her work is also doing so because of the awareness of an audience beyond herself. The idea of constructing a personal text for an audience or with the possibility of an audience in
mind, suggests that the author will adjust her narrative to highlight or sublimate certain
details and to have a certain effect. This consciousness of audience underlies the images
of fig leaves and scarlet letters that I use in this project to characterize women’s personal
writing. Like the “slant,” the presence of fig leaves and scarlet letters serves to distance
and protect the writer from the reader and reflects an awareness of the audience as a
potential source of judgment. As Emily Dickinson’s poem suggests, there are
consequences for telling the truth to an audience, just as there are consequences for
feeling that one cannot.

While, perhaps, consciousness of audience may not be the norm with traditional
diaries, it is a fundamental characteristic of online diaries. Online diaries or blogs are, by
nature, public and interactive texts. It is taken for granted that what one writes online,
although it may be confessional and personal, is intended for public reception. In an
interview with Philip LeJeune about his study of traditional and online diaries, Ingrid
Merckx asked the author if he saw it as “paradoxal de confier son journal intime à
Internet?”1 LeJeune responded, “Pas plus que d’écrire des mots que l’on cache. En fait,
exhibition et intériorisation sont des variantes d’un même comportement qui consiste à
communiquer de façon indirecte”2 (Merckx). This tension between outwardness and
inwardness that LeJeune describes is at the core of the process of personal writing and is
one of the underlying themes of this dissertation.

Beyond placing physical controls on access to their personal documents, the most
common way for writers to create safe space is to write “at a slant.” By slant I mean

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1 “paradoxical to entrust one’s personal journal to the Internet.”
2 “not any more so than writing words that one hides. In fact, exhibition and interiorization are two sides of
the same behavior that consists of indirect communication.”
speaking obliquely or in veiled terms, perhaps telling only part of the truth. As Judy Nolte Lensink observes, "there is not always a correlation between what a diarist writes about and what really matters" (qtd. in Wink xx). Suzanne Bunkers observes that diarists use silence as a way of "encoding" their texts and referring to the truth indirectly. In Jennifer Sinor's "Reading the Ordinary Diary," the author observes that “in order maintain the veneer of uneventfulness, women wrote in omission, at a slant, and repetitively, using language to replicate a fictive domestic bliss" (148). Cinthia Gannett observes that women’s diaries from the nineteenth century and surrounding times are “littered with figleaves” (122), which is a wonderful metaphor for the type of circumspection that characterizes women’s writing about potentially sensitive topics.

Writing at a slant, indirection, and circumspection characterize the majority of texts by nineteenth century women writers, and, arguably, continue to characterize much of women’s writing today. Emily Dickinson's poem, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,” addresses the sort of necessary obliquity that women applied to their constructions of the daily. I think that circumspection or telling the truth “slant” may be the mechanism that secured the survival of the diaries of nineteenth century and early twentieth century writers, that the successful passage of the texts lies in circuity of their lines. Adrienne Rich writes the following about Dickinson:

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3 In my research I found two articles that used Dickinson’s poem to characterize the sorts of strategies that their subjects use to interact with others. Robert Klitzman and Ronald Bayer’s “Tell It Slant: Sex, Disclosure, and HIV” and Marcia Gaudet’s “Telling it Slant: Personal Narrative, Tall Tales, and the Reality of Leprosy,” address the realities of individuals who are stigmatized and misunderstood because of their medical conditions. The authors discuss the ways in which individuals with HIV and Hansen’s Disease (“leprosy”) learn to communicate about themselves in order to be more functional in society. Although I am not comparing being a woman to having a disease, I see the relevance of these articles conceptually. If a person is marginalized or disenfranchised in some way, as women have been historically, the truth of her experience is something to be expressed carefully. It is safer to mediate the harshness of reality for the benefit of both the individual and her audience.
The terms she had been handed by society--Calvinist Protestantism, Romanticism, the nineteenth-century corseting of women's bodies, choices, and sexuality--could spell insanity to a woman genius. What this one had to do was retranslate her own unorthodox, subversive, sometimes volcanic propensities into a dialect called metaphor: her native language. "Tell all the Truth---but tell it Slant---." It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment--that explodes in poetry. (162)

As Rich sees it, the slant is metaphor; it is making the truth palatable for those who might read or hiding it from those who might read but not understand.

This dissertation is a study of the reasons why women write in diaries and blogs and the ways they reckon with audience and identity through their writing. I have used qualitative data taken from interviews with four women who blog and multimodal analysis of a selection of personal blogs to understand the private literate acts that define the everyday lives of ordinary people and the variables that threaten to silence those who need this sort of writing most. This project, in part, responds to assertions by scholars in the fields of history, women’s studies, and English that validate the study of women’s diaries as an important academic endeavor. I see my study as an extension of the interdisciplinary work that has been done with the diaries of women because I examine the development of the sort of personal writing that takes place in diaries within a new medium, the weblog.

This project focuses on personal writing. More specifically, it explores the experiences of several women who regularly write online. While internet writing, specifically, blogging, is the mode used by the women that I interviewed, I am equally interested in the writing that takes place in paper and pen documents such as diaries and journals. There is a direct correlation between the sort of writing that takes place in diaries and on blogs. Although blogs, like blank books, are used for many different
purposes, one of their most common uses is as an online diary. During a time in which so many mechanisms allow for communication in writing, the personal blog has become the most important form of personal expression online. Blogs allow for a new definition of the public and private self, and therefore, of the writer. As LeJeune observes,

\begin{quote}
Du cahier à l'écran c'est la même schizophrénie. Alors que le cahier est tenu secret, Internet pousse à écrire pour des interlocuteurs réels qui peuvent réagir. D'une certaine façon, Internet, moins virtuel que le cahier, est un couloir qui ramène à la réalité. Et, là aussi, l'écriture s'en trouve modifiée.\end{quote}

(merckx)

With privacy settings and a more explicitly present audience, blogs offer a very different way to negotiate private and public space than diaries, therefore offering new possibilities for the writer.

My fundamental claim is that personal writing is especially important for women. For each of the women I interviewed, writing online is an integral part of her personal and social life. They all use writing somewhat differently, but each claims that it is an essential part of her day-to-day routines. One of my participants, Wynne,\(^5\) told me that she spends almost all of her free time interacting with people online through her LiveJournal.\(^6\) She has developed close friendships with a group of women who share some of her interests, and she pointed out that she can confide things with them that she would never share with her family or even her best friend “in real life.”

Beth Daniell, in her introduction to *A Communion of Friendship*, observes that for the women she interviewed, “private literate practice is of the utmost importance because

\(^4\)“From the notebook to the screen there is the same schizophrenia. While the notebook is kept secret, the Internet pushes one to write for real interlocutors who can react. In a certain way, the Internet, less virtual than the notebook, is a corridor that leads back to reality. And there, too, writing is itself changed.”

\(^5\)“Wynne” is a pseudonym. I do not use the real names of any of my participants in this dissertation.

\(^6\)LiveJournal is one of the most popular interfaces (others include DiaryLand and Blogger) for online diaries with, currently, over fourteen million users worldwide (“Statistics,” 12 February 2008). Of my five participants, three use LiveJournal and two use Blogger. I will discuss the features of LiveJournal and blogs more generally, in chapter two.
it aids the development and empowerment of the self” (1). I have found the same to be true of my participants. Daniell’s project focused on the literate practices of women in a specific Al-Anon group in a town where she lived, yet I believe that her observation is relevant to the personal writing of women more generally. I say this because the women that I interviewed and the women whose blogs I analyze all explicitly state that writing online has helped them personally in some way. Specifically, each woman indicates that having an audience, or the potential of an audience, for her thoughts and feelings is one of the most significant parts of online writing for her. For example, Claire, another one of my participants, talks about how several years ago she went through a time of illness that was very frightening for her. She describes how her partner was not very supportive and how she did not want to burden her mom, who was going through a divorce at the time. She turned to her friends online to get her through that process. “And even though in some ways I felt like I was just fishing for pity,” she explains, “some days I just felt like I needed that. I just felt so alone. In that way blogging was very helpful because I’m not going to sit around at [the coffee shop] talking to my friends about that stuff.” Claire’s statement echoes that of Wynne, above, reinforcing the idea that the online interface allows individuals to confide to others about matters that they otherwise would not feel comfortable sharing.

Personal writing is important because it allows writers to make sense of their experiences and to assert control over the events of their day to day lives. When this writing takes place online, there is the opportunity for others to serve as a sounding board for one’s feelings. As another one of the women I interviewed, Valerie, points out, “it’s cheaper than going to therapy.”
This sort of writing is also a form of self-preservation. As I will discuss later, I use the term *self-preservation* to reflect both creating a lasting record of the self and finding healing and help through putting one’s thoughts and feelings into writing. With the development of new technologies, more and more people are writing online rather than with paper and pen. This shift from physical texts to virtual texts is accompanied by a number of new variables that impact the nature and practice of personal writing. My discussion of audience, in particular, explores these variables and their implications for those who seek to preserve themselves in written form.

My research focuses on ordinary, nonacademic texts written by women and the importance of these texts for them both personally (politically) and socially. That said I am interested in the ways in which women have navigated the process of writing both inside and outside of the academy because texts by women represent a social struggle that differs from that of men. Historically, women have had to forge a space for themselves in the literary world and have had to argue for the legitimacy of their voices in the public sphere. There remains disproportionately little writing by women from before the twentieth century, and that which is available is primarily in the form of diaries and commonplace books, private writings. These facts highlight the significance of the diary (including the online diary) in particular as a site of scholarly interest. The diary has long been a space of order and refuge for women, a place of their own in which they can render an account of their ordinary tasks and the lives of their families.

The proliferation of blogs and women’s communities online reflects the importance for women of writing and connection with other women. For many, at

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7 I discuss the connection between women’s writing, academic discourse, and the personal writing of women who are academics in chapter five.
present, participating in the blogosphere through web communities like Blogher.org, for example, is a sort of merger between writing in a diary and participating in a massive women’s club. Feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun observed the following about the importance of women sharing their lives with one another through writing:

> Women, I believe, search for fellow beings who have faced similar struggles, conveyed them in ways a reader can transform into her own life, confirmed desires the reader had hardly acknowledged—desires that now seem possible. Women catch courage from the women whose lives and writings they read, and women call the bearer of that courage friend. (qtd. in Grigoriadis)

This observation by Heilbrun encapsulates the experience of blogging for many women, including most of those I interviewed. Through the medium of blogs, women now have the unprecedented opportunity to read one another’s writing and to “catch courage” from those of like mind. The possibility to communicate, simultaneously, with women all around the globe from the privacy of home or even a local library, is an empowering reality.

To provide a foundation for my discussion of blogs, I begin with some background about women’s diaries, the form of personal writing that is arguably the most private and most honest. Although all writing contains silences and slants, of the locations of writing that I explore in this project, the hand-written diary is the most intimate and unmediated representation of the author. By its very nature, the written diary bears the mark of its author in ways that an electronic document cannot.

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8 Anne Ruggles Gere discusses the women’s club movement of the nineteen-hundreds in her text *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women’s Clubs, 1880-1920*. Women’s clubs emerged in the period of time that Gere describes, to meet the needs of women in that era, to educate and mobilize women through the resources they created collectively. Similar things are occurring in this generation on the internet. For example, organizations like the National Organization of Women, BlogHer, and many other feminist collectives, have community sites that put women in touch with each other and provide educational materials as well as political support for the issues that are important to women in particular.
In the 1970s, as women were beginning to gain power in the academy, there began a more serious consideration of the dearth of female voices in print. Feminist scholars like Carolyn Heilbrun, Nancy Milford, and Adrienne Rich began to speak about the silences of women in literature and to urge researchers to seek out and publish documents written by women. Because women did not, for the most part, have access to publishing houses or public venues of communication more generally before the twentieth century, the diary was the most common and accessible form of writing. Thus, scholars in women’s studies, English, history, and other fields have sought to locate and publish the diaries of women in order to provide insight into the daily lives and experiences of women from the past and to create a body of published work by women that can be accessed more widely.

An important theme of this project is the relationship between oblivion and the individual writer, the person working on a small scale, with the events and experiences of her life, and making choices about how to record and represent the ordinary life in writing. Oblivion is the space of vagueness, of the inability to recollect, of dissipation. It is the place where things and people, particularly memories, are lost. Writing is an act that works against oblivion. People write in order to remember specific experiences (because time obliterates memory) and so as not to be forgotten by others (to make themselves memorable). The relationship, then, between oblivion and audience is direct. The presence of audience helps keep oblivion at bay.

In response to the fear of oblivion, writing is an act of preservation. Preservation may be understood in two different ways here. First, recording events in writing

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9 Anne Ruggles Gere discusses women’s lack of access to publishing houses as one of the motivations for (and issues taken up by) women’s clubs in the nineteenth century.
preserves the memory of the events for those involved and, essentially, preserves the event in some form for those who were not present. It allows those external to the event or thought to share in it. As Cinthia Gannett observes in *Gender and the Journal*, writing is important for women because their lives are filled with tasks of impermanence. Therefore, she asserts, “they have found ways to inscribe themselves, to make their own modest, but unique and lasting imprint, on texts” (136). Secondly, writing may be thought of as a form of self-preservation in a therapeutic sense. Some people find that through writing they are able to give voice to parts of themselves that they otherwise keep silent. Many use writing to work through difficult experiences and see it as an important part of the journey to emotional, psychological or spiritual well-being. The narratives of the women I interviewed confirm this experience. Writing often provides a way of processing painful or confusing circumstances. And, as all of the women that I interviewed affirm, writing online provides the added benefit of a sympathetic community of people who will serve as a sounding board for one’s thoughts and feelings. Amy Wink explains that, in their diaries, the women that she researched:

> brought the symbolic manipulation of language to bear on transforming not only their experiences but also to interpret the external conditions of their lives and to assert individual control over the psychically and psychologically overwhelming circumstances which necessitate their writing. (131)

The women I have studied use blog writing for exactly this purpose—as an effort to gain control over circumstances and to process what is going on in their thinking.

> Writing serves any number of purposes for people in different contexts. I classify writing in a diary as an ordinary or everyday practice simply because it is a form of writing that is common and that is not associated with any particular job or sort of person. Almost every bookstore and general store sells books to be used as diaries or journals
alongside calendars and memo pads. Harriet Blodgett offers the following explanation for
why she believes that so many women, over time, have kept diaries:

I suggest that diary keeping has been practiced so extensively by women because it has been possible for them and gratifying to them. The diary, by its nature as a
genre of personal record, by the opportunity it offers the diarist to record what is important to her, and by the daily time that it claims for itself, counters the
patriarchal attack on female identity and self-worth. A diary is an act of language
that, by speaking of one's self, sustains one's sense of being a self, with an
autonomous and significant identity. (5)

In the passage above, Blodgett speaks of the nature of personal writing in a way that
easily applies to the diary in its online form. Blogging is a practice that has held
significance for women in particular because it provides a space for them to affirm their
autonomous identities and to create community with other women in the process.

As I will discuss in greater depth in chapter two, there are numerous approaches
to, and motivations for, keeping a diary or blog. Some people maintain a sort of log of
events, while others have a more personal and confessional approach. Entries typically
vary according to the mood and experiences of the writer. In her description of the history
of diurnal practice, Harriet Blodgett observes that confessional or therapeutic sort of
writing was not the norm historically. "Although any personal diary enhances one's sense
of selfhood, remarkably few Englishwomen of the past used their diaries for active self-
creation or transformation. Many diaries are either public diaries, focused on others, or
just laconic memoranda" (4). These public diaries would be like many blogs where
events and ideas are recorded, shared with, and read by friends and family. This point that
diaries were not typically confessional is an important one to make in developing the
history of personal writing more generally. With a contemporary perspective, one might
assume that the freedoms and practices that characterize writing today were available to
or typical of people in the past. Blodgett continues, noting that a "related reality is that most of the women [in this study] are conventional in their assumptions about womanhood and hence in their aspirations. They also write against a background of centuries of female disparagement" (4). I take her point to be that the majority of women, the ordinary diarists, were writing with an acceptance of their daily and social reality, without the intention of being subversive or creating societal change with their words. They were simply creating a record of their lives, their selves. Certainly there are examples of women who quietly or openly challenged social norms, but, according to Blodgett, these are the exception. I believe the same could be said of today’s writers. As Daniell points out, “the kinds of reading and writing women do are still restricted, more these days—we are thankful—by convention than by statute” (1). There are many, perhaps a majority, who write just as women have written for centuries, with an acceptance of a separation of spheres between women and men.

Blogs and diaries share essential characteristics. Both blogs and diaries are media in which individuals can write. Both are used by ordinary people to document their day to day activities, experiences, and thoughts. Diaries and blogs are both used for periodic writing. That is, they are generally updated at regular intervals with sequential, dated entries. Finally, through writing in diaries and blogs, individuals are able to process their thoughts and experiences and to assert a form of control over their circumstances.

That said, there are a number of differences between diaries and blogs that distinguish the experience of writing in each, beyond the obvious differences of keyboards, screens, and HTML versus pen and paper. In her article, “A Blogger’s Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium,” Danah Boyd asserts that it is incorrect to call a
blog a diary because blogs function in many different ways. While people often use different metaphors to try to define blogs, she claims, blogs are a medium and not a genre. Blogs are often used as a form of online diary, but their use is not limited to that. Thus, it would be incorrect to say that blogs are simply online diaries. My claim is not that blogs are diaries but that a good portion of the personal, diaristic writing that takes place at present, takes place online on blogs. There are physical differences; for example, the interface of a blog provides the ability to easily integrate images and audio files into entries, as well as the possibility of editing or deleting entries without destroying the document. But the most significant differences between diaries and blogs are related to audience, privacy, and community.

Blogs change the traditional experience of diary writing because the medium is public. The writer has control over how public or private she wants the entries to be, but implicit in the act of posting is an acknowledgment of the potential reader. In studying scholarship on diaries, I have found that much of the discussion is directly relevant to blogs. For example, in *She Left Nothing in Particular*, Wink observes that "Each diary is in itself a place of transition, a work constructed of individual and independent moments which form the whole text, and a text to be read as a life writing, or more appropriately, a writing life" (xxiv). Stephen Kagle observes that very often personal writing or the initiation of a diary is born out of an inward sense of disequilibrium and ends when the author finds resolution. And even if the person is a lifelong diarist, it is often those times of disequilibrium or transition that end up being the peaks, the times of most intense writing and internalization.
It is important in this study to anchor or substantiate the process by which the ideas of truth, identity, and audience form a writer, how personal writing with these concerns offers a particular type of writerly subject. In the book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault offers some insight into how the person becomes a specific subject through actions and events. He argues that what counts as knowledge defines what is considered to be true, and that, therefore, truth is a form of power. Laurie McNeill observes the power for the writerly subject online:

This phenomenal proliferation of life writing spaces on the Internet marks an equally unprecedented interest in the lives of ordinary individuals who, before the internet, had few opportunities to publish their life stories on such a wide scale. Bypassing the commercial, aesthetic, or political interest that dictate access to traditional print media, and who decide whose life stories deserve to be told, online diaries can be read as assertions of identity, and arguments for the importance of an individual’s life. (25)

McNeill, here, points out that the practice of writing online allows individuals to bypass the traditional gatekeepers who would silence those voices that they see as irrelevant, inadequate, redundant, or otherwise unworthy of being heard.

The current project contributes to a growing body of research in rhetoric-composition that has studied the socio-cultural function of blogs. In *Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace* (1997), Laura Gurak discusses the problem of gender inequity in cyberspace. She describes the ways in which the internet held the promise of being a sort of neutral zone in which all voices might enjoy equal time, access, and value. The reality, as she sees it, has turned out to be very different. “Overtly misogynist attitudes are only one of the problems concerning gender in the online forums. In addition, many observers are beginning to note that men’s and women’s conversations via computer are often accompanied by extreme differences in communication style” (109). She continues by
citing Susan Herring’s (1993) linguistic work on discourse in cyberspace, in which Herring argues that features that characterize gendered discourse (“these included women’s tendency toward attenuated assertions, apologies, explicit justifications, questions, a personal orientation, and the supporting of others” and men’s tendency to “exhibit strong assertions, self-promotion, presuppositions, and sarcasm” [109]) have been evidenced in online interactions. She cites Deborah Tannen’s (1994) work on gendered discourse to support those observations. In the same vein, the work of Clancy Ratliff explores the disparity between men’s and women’s voices on the Internet. Her research follows the “where are the women?” debate, a recurring conversation online in which prominent male and female bloggers argue about the absence of strong female voices in the blogosphere. One of the strongest points that Ratliff makes is that there is a disparity between what is counted as political by many men and women. The media will acknowledge, for example, war blogs or election blogs as political, and bypass women’s discussion of reproductive politics and gender in the workplace. The actual interaction that takes place online, as well as its characterization in the media, reveals that it is not a space of equality in some senses, that while anyone who can gain access to a computer can publish (evidencing a new embodiment of freedom of speech), people continue to be marginalized online as they are in “real life.”

Just as scholars in literature have been critical of diaristic writing as a form, arguing that it is not a viable form of literature or even, possibly, autobiography, diary scholars are now struggling with how to accept and categorize online journals within their tradition. As McNeill points out, traditional diary scholarship assumes that diaries are private documents. Internet diaries challenge the boundaries of the genre, redefining it
in ways that are somewhat counterintuitive. This space of redefinition is the heart of my study. What are the consequences of taking a practice that is by many people’s definition insular, private, and confessional and making it communal and public? What is gained and lost? What does this shift indicate about those who participate, both through writing and reading, and about the development of communication and relationship in contemporary society more generally? How do we define the concepts of “public” and “private”? I attempt to answer these questions using examples from my interviews and online sources. I use Foucault’s work to discuss the woman writer as a subject and to address the problem of how a woman writer would potentially describe truths in the form of knowledge and ideas different from those held by others. If her description of experiences and ideas did not fit the accepted form of her social world, these would have to remain secret and private. To do anything else would be to challenge accepted descriptions of what is true, of what can be written about, and who the woman is, socially. Thus the private journal or blog takes on importance as a mode by which the individual can both address her difference from accepted norms and express what she believes is true about her experiences.10

My interest is in describing the process of becoming a woman writer through diaries and online blogs, and the way that the mode of online blogging and these three social concerns—truth, audience, and identity—define the writing that does take place. This idea of becoming, of a subject which is not yet realized and which occurs through an active engagement with the material and modes available to the person, is similar to what Judith Butler writes about in Gender Trouble when she describes the idea of a woman as a subject that is in process, not yet realized. What I want to bring to the discussion of

10 I develop this discussion more fully in chapter three.
personal writing is just this: how women define who they are by their ability to negotiate the difference between private writing and their public lives.

The Text

In one sense, a discussion of who tells the truth in writing is meaningless, for many would argue that all writing is a fiction. Even when one is seeking to render events and experiences in an honest way, there is always the selection and omission of details, and a series of conscious or unconscious decisions about how to create descriptions based upon one’s own impressions. Each narrative is unique, which is the beauty of personal texts. That said, there are personal, social, and contextual issues that affect the depth of detail and honesty that writers offer a given text.

One of my interests is what happens to those writers who want to tell the truth but feel that they cannot. In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, Adrienne Rich describes her struggle with truth thus:

I was writing very little, partly from fatigue, that female fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children's constant needs. What I did write was unconvincing to me; my anger and frustration were hard to acknowledge in or out of poems because in fact I cared a great deal about my husband and my children. (43)

With these words, Rich addresses the struggle of the writer to tell the truth, to voice the complexities and difficulties of her experience, without hurting the ones she loves. This struggle recalls Joan Bolker’s observation that "one of the most important prerequisites of the creative process for a woman is the assurance that her work will not rupture the most important connections of her life" ("A Room," 195). Women need to be able to speak the truth without it being a threat to themselves or the ones they love, to be able to speak in a
context that if safe, where one can say "this is difficult" without being mistaken for saying, "I regret the choices that I have made."

The primary need for a writer who seeks to write honestly is a safe space to write. If a text is open for public inspection, the author will likely write in a much more guarded manner than if the document is private. The women that I interviewed talked about this issue very specifically as they discussed privacy settings on the interfaces they use online. As I will discuss in more detail later, blogs allow writers to make entries public or private, and, therefore, allow writers to have more control over the creation of safe space than they would have with a traditional diary.

I am speaking of space here both literally and figuratively. Safe space means that one may write freely about the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that come to mind and may write honestly about them, without the fear of judgment. The concern is not to prevent others from reading what one writes but to avoid negative consequences for writing the truth of one’s thoughts and experiences. Penelope Franklin observes that the diary can be a “safe space” for the self and for voicing struggles that one has nowhere else to speak. It is the place to articulate those ideas for which one feels no support. “This has been especially important to women who are often isolated physically by the conditions of their lives or psychologically by restraints put on the expression of their feelings” (xix-xx). Diaries, as documents, are important because they can provide a way for the individual to protect the intimate information about her life, to maintain over time a document that would represent her development as a person.

_The Audience_
Ultimately, this idea of creating a safe space is closely linked to a writer’s awareness of and relationship with her audience. As I will discuss in more detail in my analysis of the interviews (chapter four), audience is an essential factor in how blogs function and in what bloggers choose to write. Blogs often become very collaborative and communal texts. The women that I interviewed consistently mentioned the readers of their blogs and how the presence of audience impacted the content of what they wrote. There are countless examples of writers editing their work because of a sense of circumspection or even a fear of censure. But there are equally numerous examples of authors editing their work to make themselves look better. As William Gass confesses: “If I know when I’m gone, my jottings will be looked over, wondered at, commented on, I may begin to plant redemptive items, rearrange pages, slant stories, plot small revenges, revise, lie, and look good. Then, like Shakespearean soliloquies, they are spoken to the world” (49). Many people are most concerned with how the audience will think of them. This motivation affects diarists both on and offline.

Women need to find a way out of writing for a judgmental audience, and very often the harshest critic is the writer herself. Rich notes how in rereading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* she was "astonished at the sense of effort, of the pains taken, of the dogged tentativeness, in the tone of the essay" (37). She was familiar with that tone in her own and other women’s work as that of "a woman almost in touch with her anger, who determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity" (37). Rich continues, “But to a lesser or greater extent, every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, she was
supposed to be addressing women” (38). Rich’s discussion of her journey as a writer, moving closer and closer to the "I," and gathering the courage to be present in her work, is an important example of the negotiation that women must have between themselves, their writing, and their audience.

People write for audiences because they need a witness. And while that acknowledgment is not the only motivation for writing, it is one of the central reasons why people are compelled to make concrete that which is only a thought or a dream. While much of my interest here concerns the need for privacy, for personal, safe space to write, it is also about the tentative relationship of both fear and need that writers have with their audiences. In the introduction to her essay, "The Tensions of Anne Bradstreet," Adrienne Rich addresses the importance of resurrecting the voices of women from the past to provide strength for those in the present who are seeking emancipation from lies, secrets, and silence:

I believe any woman for whom the feminist breaking of silence has been a transforming force can also look back to a time when the faint, improbable outlines of unaskable questions, curling in her brain cells, triggered a shock of recognition at certain lines, phrases, images, in the work of this or that woman, long dead, whose life and experience she could only dimly try to imagine. (22)

Today, women are witnesses to those voices from the past and we must also be witnesses, in the present, for one another. Through the immediacy of publishing entries and comments in blogs, women are able to enact this sort of support for one another in written form in unprecedented ways.

11 “We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on fire hydrants. We put on display our framed photographs, our parchment diplomas, our silver-plated cups; we monogram our linen, we carve our names on trees, we scrawl them on washroom walls. It’s all the same impulse. What do we hope to get from it? Applause, envy, respect? Or simply attention, of any kind we can get? At the very least we want a witness. We can’t stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down” (from Margaret Atwood’s The Blind Assassin).
Identity is defined by the events and experiences that a person accepts as occurring to her and as her own. The writer as subject is concerned first with how her writing defines who she is socially. This is not only the fact of describing oneself to others as a writer when producing diaries and online blogs, but more importantly for the current study, a way for the person to define her experiences to herself through the writing process. What one writes is who one is for the individuals in this study and for the many authors of diaries and online blogs.

The presence of audience complicates the discussion of the writerly subject, however, because it involves others, or the potential other, in the process of defining the self. Diarist Cynthia Asquith (1887-1916) asks, “I wonder if all diaries are as unrepresentative of their writers as this is of me” (qtd. in Weston 93). And, Virginia Woolf suggests that “very few women have written truthful autobiographies” (qtd. in Heilbrun 13). Suzanne Bunkers notes that the diarists that she studies “do not always tell the whole story” (Bunkers and Huff 232). Bunkers also observes that in the choices about what to include and exclude in their narratives, diarists develop “personae.” They shape the presentation of self, in her cases, as “the striving sufferer” or “the determined survivor” (235, note 18). Bunkers’s examples reflect the ways in which identities (like the texts themselves) are fictions, ways of constructing reality and shaping it to fit one’s perceptions or desired impressions.

In “Invented Lives: Textuality and Power in Early Women’s Diaries,” Judy Simons talks about the ways that women find empowerment through reinventing themselves in their private writings. Women, specifically the diarists discussed in
Simons’s work, use their writing “not just to explore the various varieties of female selfhood provided in preexisting models, but to promote an alternative series of identities for themselves that can counteract those models” (257). It is an act of autonomy, the shifting of one’s identity from that of object to subject (254). This is a powerful act, not only for the woman, but for those who would read her work.

Research Methods

In order to gain insight into the experiences of women writing online, I conducted interviews with four women who maintain personal blogs. These women represent very different backgrounds and life paths, sharing little in common other than blogging and graduate education of some sort. What interests me with regard to these interviews is looking at how very different people use the same medium to meet their personal needs and how successful they have been at building community online. In terms of my themes, I am looking at how each of them has negotiated writing online related to their text, identity, and audience.

My analysis of the interviews was informed by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw’s discussion in Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes. The authors describe a process that involves reading, analytical coding, open coding, creating initial memos, and then creating integrative memos. Following my transcription of the interviews, each of which was approximately ninety minutes to two hours in length, I carefully read the transcripts several times, making notes about themes that I saw emerging both within and among them. I then went through and coded passages according to themes and topics and made notes through which I discussed the themes and ideas more thoroughly. The process of coding and making notes was recursive rather than linear, almost like a conversation
between the researcher and the texts. I have included my interview protocol in Appendix A.

Participants

Wynne is a twenty-nine year old doctoral student who is writing a dissertation and working part-time on the campus of her university. She is Southern, Caucasian, single, and spends almost all of her free time online. Wynne has developed very close relationships with people on LiveJournal. Her online community consists exclusively of women and their common interest is reading and writing fan fiction. She is also a serious movie buff. She considers writing online “therapeutic,” “relaxing,” and “an opportunity to be really funny.” She says, “it’s just enjoyable. I don’t do it for anything except really the sheer joy of it.”

Margo is a thirty-one year old immigrant rights activist who was once a graduate student in comparative literature (“I’m finishing a PhD that I’m not finishing.”). She writes grants and maintains the website for a nonprofit organization on the west coast. Margo has a Thai mother and Caucasian father and was adopted and raised by a traditional, Southern family. She is married. Margo’s online community is made up primarily of friends from real life that she has kept up with as she has moved from place to place. Margo has written online longer than any of my other participants and has used

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12 I have changed the names of all of the participants as well as some of the descriptive details concerning them in order to protect their identities.

13 Fan fiction is a general term to describe fiction that is written by fans of a particular work (usually a book, movie, television show, or game) and that is not associated with the original authors or creators. The fiction will take characters from the original text and develop new adventures, relationships, and narratives for them, plot lines that extend beyond the original. Fan fiction texts are typically written by nonprofessionals and are unpublished other than in the specific forums designated for fan fiction itself. The fan fiction community is enormous and is organized according to very strict rules of practice. There is a structure for reviewing works of fan fiction and giving feedback, which is facilitated by the Internet. Those who read and write fan fiction have particular “fandoms” (movies, television shows, books, characters) that they follow. There is an extensive vocabulary associated with fan fiction as well, so it is easy to distinguish between “insiders” and “outsiders.”
a number of interfaces over the years. She currently uses LiveJournal and blogs about her thoughts and experiences in day-to-day life.

Claire is a twenty-five year old doctoral student at a university in the southeast who is teaching and finishing up her coursework. She is Caucasian, Southern, Muslim, and recently married. Her online community is a mixture of people that she has met both on and offline and is an even mix of both men and women. She met her husband online. Claire writes a lot about political issues and said “I come across as really opinionated, but you know it’s just that I like to be able to get my ideas in writing and see things in writing. I feel like it comes together when I see it.” She talked extensively in our interview about issues of privacy online. She explained that she used to put a lot of her personal information on the Internet and had the unwanted experience of someone tracking her down. She now blogs anonymously on LiveJournal.

Valerie is thirty-six and is an assistant professor at a university in the south. She describes herself as “a biracial, qualitative researcher who wants secretly to be a creative writing professor, who was born in Mississippi and grew up in a hippie family, lived on a commune, [and is] a sort of Buddhist who likes pork.” Valerie and her husband have been married for eleven years and she has a daughter. She has three separate blogs (and identities) online and has only a handful of readers for each. Almost all of her readers are women, either family or friends.

In order to protect the identities of my participants I will not be using any material from their blogs directly. In fact, I have not seen all of the blogs of all of the women in this study. I did not request to see their blogs because my primary interest is in their narratives about writing online. Thus, in order to provide material from blogs by women
to support the discussion in the following chapters, I have collected data from several blogs that represent some of the diversity of women currently blogging. I have read each of these blogs and have gathered answers to a series of questions related to the blogger and the content of the blog. Part of the significance of this survey is that I have found the answers to these questions through the information publicly available on these sites. The survey questions are in Appendix B.

Chapter Summaries

In this chapter, I have provided an introduction to the project, including a discussion of the importance of personal writing for women, the relationship between diaries and blogs, the relevance of the themes that the project will explore more fully (telling the truth slant, identity, and the presence of audience), and the nature of my methodology. The following three chapters will discuss women’s personal writing in traditional and online diaries more fully by addressing the categories of text, writer, and audience.

Chapter two focuses on the nature of the blog as a text, looking at the online diary as a physical and virtual object. The chapter is in large part a discussion of the diary as a genre. I draw upon Carolyn Miller’s explanation of genre as social action to discuss the functions that diaries serve for those who write them. The chapter includes a more detailed history of the blog’s development as a form, as well as descriptions of the interfaces that are most popular for online diaries. With that I provide a discussion of the features of blogs that distinguish them from traditional diaries (privacy settings, “friends” lists, comments, links, and so on) and the ways that these features are used by bloggers to represent themselves and to form communities. I am particularly interested in Laurie
McNeill’s question, which is “What does the Internet bring to the diary genre, and the diary genre to the Internet, that has made this pairing of form and media so felicitous?” (25).

The discussion moves, in chapter three, to the writer of the diary. Because the emphasis of this project is on women who write online, this chapter will include a more detailed discussion of issues related to gender and writing in the online environment. I look, first, at the construct of identity through the lens of feminist theory applied to Foucault’s discussion of the subject. I then discuss issues of subjectivity related to blogging and the ways that the technology of the online interface facilitates agency for women who seek to transgress the dominant social narratives concerning the woman’s identity and participation in social discourse.

Chapter four follows with an examination of audience, specifically, the role and impact of audience related to online diaries. The discussion will address the tension between public and private material and the ways that authors craft texts with an awareness of audience. These issues highlight the ways in which audience (through technology) has redefined the diary as a form. The women that I interviewed talk extensively about audience, both in terms of how it impacts what they write and how fundamental it is to their experiences of writing online. This chapter includes extensive material from those interviews.

Ultimately, in chapter five this project finds its way to a discussion of the relationship between personal and private writing and academic discourse. I do not argue that people should write in diaries and blogs or that they should write confessional texts for academic purposes. However, I do argue that the compulsion that people have to write
confessional texts both privately and publicly, the catharsis that people have when they express the truth of their experiences and have a witness, the overwhelming popularity of interfaces and sites online like LiveJournal, Blogger, PostSecret.com and Twitter, reveal that personal writing is powerful and should not be dismissed. People seek out safe spaces in which to express themselves and, like Peter Elbow, I simply believe that the classroom should be one of those places. As William Perry points out, the teacher has the responsibility to recognize the “costs of growth” that students experience in the process of education. Many in composition studies recognize those costs related, for example, to the acquisition of academic discourse. I agree with feminist scholars like Helene Cixous, who have challenged women to validate their personal experiences through realizing that they are political, and I argue that teachers should encourage students to explore the ways in which the personal is also political and academic. It is through the personal that powerful change occurs in every sphere of life.
CHAPTER TWO: THE DIARY AS TEXT, GENRE, AND SOCIAL ACTION

I write in my diary more frequently when I am trying to work out something particularly painful. This observation may seem commonplace, yet it represents a standard function of diary writing for many people. In my personal experience there have been significant periods of time when only the difficult events or experiences have been given voice. This practice reflects the observation by Virginia Woolf (as paraphrased by her husband) that “one gets into the habit of recording one particular kind of mood—irritation or misery, say—and of not writing one’s diary when one is feeling the opposite. The portrait is therefore from the start unbalanced” (Writer’s Diary viii). Such a diary is not written primarily for the purposes of leaving a record of the individual or her loved ones. It is written for what it accomplishes, in the act of writing, for the author herself. And while the author may want to keep a record of the struggle that represents a particular period of time – something that those I have interviewed have specifically described as valuable – the primary motivation for writing about these experiences stems from the catharsis that comes from taking the turmoil that one feels and putting it into a tangible form. This act of making the invisible visible often brings clarity to the writer and a sense of control over circumstances that are otherwise overwhelming. If nothing else, the writer can choose how to render the events and/or emotions. She can articulate that which she may not have the freedom to say to the actual individuals involved in ways that would alienate (or perhaps already have alienated) those to whom
she might otherwise confide. The diary can provide a release of tension, like lancing and draining an infected wound. One would imagine that the diaries that serve this function are the least likely to survive.

For many years I would take my diary with me everywhere I went, making multiple entries a day in the moments of transition about what I was thinking and feeling at the time. Now that I have a partner, a person with whom I share continuity, experiences, and time, I write in my diary less and less. I realize now that my diary functioned in many ways as a place-holder for that person and that I need writing differently now. It has become the sort of diary that Woolf describes, one that only captures a fraction of my life and would make it appear deceptively dreary to a reader.

Something has happened, though, that tells me that the rituals of writing the daily and the mundane have purpose beyond simply needing someone to talk to. I find that I continue to make regular notes about tasks, feelings, family events, illnesses, and so on, but that they have shifted to another space. I have a pocket-sized Sudoku puzzle book that I carry with me so that I have something to do when I am waiting in carpool line or in a doctor’s office or when I need a break from school work. The book has one square puzzle with white space around it on each page. At some point I began to write the date at the top of the page I was working on and then a note about where I was and what was going on. Looking through the book I can chart my level of tension, boredom, or procrastination by the number of puzzles sharing the same date, as well as by the comments I have made around the margins of the pages. The book represents a period of time in which my mind, occupied by the large, long-term, open-ended task of writing a dissertation, craves small, measurable, repetitive challenges that have clear ending points.
The puzzles, comprised of filling in 81 squares with the correct numerals, provide the perfect space for my brain to relax a bit and process the larger tasks and responsibilities filling my subconscious.

Whatever its form, the diary is a personal text, one that in some way—however mediated or distorted—bears the likeness of its author. It is a text that renders life in medias res. Its entries record life as it is lived. In her work on diary and genre, Carolyn Sjoblad characterizes the diary as simply “a text written in the first person, with dated passages in chronological order, where the writing subject speaks not only of events in her surroundings, but also about her feelings and thoughts concerning these events” (517). Sjoblad contrasts the diary with the autobiography/memoir and observes that the “diary-writer is surrounded by her daily life with all its complications; choices and feelings abound, and when represented in the diary, these often produce a fragmentary, repetitive, and emotional text” (519). To some the unique and often “unliterary” qualities of the diary are off-putting, but as Rebecca Steintiz explains, reading a diary involves engaging the experiences and memories of the writer as they are rendered:

[T]he diary is, and has been throughout its history, an eminently communicative genre. As long as diaries have been written, they have been read, by their own writers and by others, in manuscript and as published texts. What they communicate, though, is not a message but a particular kind of representation of experience, a representation whose structure and rhetoric enables a reader, any reader, to occupy the space of the writer, to inhabit his or her memories, as it were. (44)

The diary serves to preserve snapshots of the self at particular times that can signal memories of emotions and experiences. As a text, the diary takes many forms and serves many functions for both the writer and reader.
The word “text” has multiple meanings. Within this chapter I use it to refer both to a document (like a book or a blog) and to a document’s contents (words and images). The ambiguity of this term reflects the blurred lines between form and content more generally. As I argue in the following pages, the form and content of written documents are intertwined and integral to creating or conveying meaning. In *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray’s Diary*, Jennifer Sinor devotes significant discussion to the form that Annie Ray’s diary takes. Annie Ray composed her diary in a ledger book originally printed for keeping accounting records. Sinor explains that the book is large, with columned and numbered pages. Annie Ray’s book contains some records of household finances, but the entries primarily take the shape of diary-like records of the daily events, tasks, and thoughts of the writer. Sinor observes that Annie Ray’s interaction with this text and use of the lines and the margins, reveals information about her and about the things that she records. For example, Annie writes afterthoughts or statements of emotion in small script in the margin alongside given entries. These statements are an example of fig leaves. They give the reader a sense of how Annie’s interior world is pushed to the periphery in the challenging daily routines of farm living. Her fears about her husband’s safety and loyalty and about her difficulties with infertility, while undoubtedly keenly felt, haunt the edges of her text that chronicles more explicitly the practical tasks of cooking and cleaning, as well as the neighborly interactions, that structure the family days. Annie Ray’s diary provides a useful example of the way that the form of discourse creates and conveys meaning.

In this chapter I explore not only the form and content of traditional and online diaries, but the functions that they serve for those who write them. I use Carolyn Miller’s
discussion of “genre as social action” to explain the categorization of diaries according to the ways that they function and to support the connection between traditional diaries and blogs.

Genre as Function

Within a discussion of a text, it quickly becomes important to address what genre the text represents. It is natural to attempt to categorize texts for a number of reasons, including ease of communication. Labels, like those of genre, provide shortcuts to understanding. As Kathleen Jamieson explains, “the human need for a frame of reference lures the mind to generic classification” (167). But, as I will discuss below, genres are living, contextual, and contested. While they may aid in communication, they can also be a source of misunderstanding or stricture. Genre is defined by a convergence of form, content, and context/situation. While one may discuss form and content separately, the boundaries between the two are indistinguishable. Bakhtin writes that “Form and content in discourse are one” (qtd in Devitt 574). Traditional perspectives on genre have sought to define it according to specific characteristics of form and content, but, in practice, forms “trace but do not constitute genre” (Devitt 575). Rhetorical theorists such as Miller and Jamieson have made the important observation that an adequate conception of genre depends upon how a text functions. As Miller asserts, “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). What does the text do in relationship to the author, the audience, and the situation?

Genre is created by situations and, in turn, creates situations. Because recurring situations elicit responses that are similar in nature, practices become ritualized and
create expectations on the part of audience. As Devitt puts it, “once we recognize a recurring situation, a situation that we or others have responded to in the past, our response to that situation can be guided by past responses. Genre, thus, depends heavily on the intertextuality of discourse” (576). Jamieson develops this idea of intertextuality in her discussion of genre, observing that when an utterance or text seems new it is simply pushing on the bounds of the audience’s expectations of a particular generic situation. “The impact of the speech cannot be attributed to the originality of its content. Similar sentiments [have] been voiced before. Its effect can be attributed to its breach of the generic contract” (167). In a discussion of the term “grammar” that could easily be about genre, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen explain that the beliefs and expectations about a given form (here, genre) become evident when someone uses them in “ungrammatical” or inappropriate ways (“Colour” 346). Genre is tied to context.

Because genre is an act of differentiation that represents recurring situations and practices, it is easy to think of a genre as a closed system of limits that clearly differentiates one text (its content, form, and function) from another. The same perceptions are often attributed to language and discourse more generally. Language reflects the practices of those who create and use it. It is living and evolving. There are rules and practices of languages (like grammars) that allow people to communicate in consistent and complex ways. Yet as one may observe through traveling or reading texts from different periods of time, language changes according to numerous variables of context and use. Devitt writes:

Genres are existing and somewhat normative constructs, some more rigid than others, but so too are all language forms. All language constrains the individual to the extent that language is an existing set of forms: however, as Bakhtin points
out, “Speech genres are much more changeable, flexible, and plastic than language forms are.” (579)

This understanding of language helps to explain the nature of genre as both a system with limits and an entity that is active and growing. A traditional approach to genre suggests that it is possible for the reader or researcher to interpret the “intention” or correct purpose of the document, the meaning of specific elements, and the hierarchical relationships that they have to one another. Such a description suggests that there is a right way to read the text in order to find “the meaning” and a right way to organize a multimodal document such that the meaning is more transparent. Yet meaning is different for different parties, different times, different situations, experiences, and so on. There is not one correct and valid meaning or interpretation to be had. Thus, while visual and rhetorical elements may be logically incongruous, inconsistent, or confusing for one reader, such inconsistencies may very well be ancillary, inconsequential, or central in terms of the significance/interpretation of the text for others. Meaning and value depend on the social context of production and reception. Characterizing genre as living and evolving is really saying that it is a social concept, that people regularly use and interpret language forms in adaptive ways. Miller writes:

What recurs cannot be a material configuration of objects, events, and people, nor can it be a subjective configuration, a “perception,” for these, too, are unique from moment to moment and person to person. Recurrence is an intersubjective phenomenon, a social occurrence, and cannot be understood on materialist terms. (156)

Because recurrence, as Miller describes it, is not based in material circumstances, the assignment of genre relies on perception and interpretation. Such a perspective on genre acknowledges both an author and an audience/interlocutor in a particular situation who are making interpretive choices in their uses of language.
The functions of genres are multiple, various, and, at times, contradictory. As my personal narrative above seeks to illustrate, a particular genre, here the diary, may serve multiple functions for the same person at one time and over time. Aspects of genre may be understood in terms of discourse. When studying theories of discourse it becomes clear that in any given moment, a myriad of discourses are working simultaneously to create a given subject, situation, or community. Barthes observes that the text, as the author, is not a stable or univocal entity:

the text is not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. (146)

Discourses converge and overlap with one another. The same is true of genres. While there are ways to define genre descriptively through observing recurring, similar elements, such definitions are acts of interpretation. It is useful to recognize that a text is not only made up of multiple genres (as discourses of various kinds filter in with the interrelatedness of language) but that it may function, simultaneously within multiple genres. The multiplicity of genres may be present in the practices of an individual with a given text, as with my “sudoku diary,” and they may be present through the various functional interpretations of the text by different people. The blog is not one, monolithic genre because its features serve numerous functions that overlap with and extend beyond the traditional purposes of diaries.

(The Evolution of the Blog)

Diaries come in many forms. I discuss two particular forms of the diary throughout this project: the paperbound diary and the online diary or blog. These two forms are media within and around which there are infinite variations. For the purposes
of my discussion, unless I indicate otherwise, I use the terms online diary and blog interchangeably. It would be inaccurate to conflate blogs and online diaries within a more general discussion because many forms of blogs do not function as diaries. People create topical blogs that do not contain personal information or reflection. Many companies and agencies have blogs that function like newspapers. Some blogs promote bands or products or serve as forums for topical debates. While the content and function of these blogs differ from those of online diaries, they are similar in form. Thus, before developing my discussion of blogs as diaries I will give an overview of the evolution of the blog as a whole.

Blogs began in the 1990s as pages for users of the Internet, primarily computer programmers, to catalog and share interesting information that they found on the World Wide Web. These programmers had personal web pages on which they would provide a series of links to sites they found as they searched the web on a daily basis. The page would have the date and then a series of links to other sites with brief commentary about each. As Rebecca Blood describes in We’ve Got Blog, originally only about twenty people maintained these sorts of sites online. They would read one another’s updates daily and interact by making comments on one another’s sites. Some people would compose more personal entries about their lives or op/ed type pieces about current issues in politics or technology. However, most followed the format of providing links with a little bit of descriptive information. In 1997, Jorn Barger referred to these pages as Weblogs (as in, “web logs”), and the term eventually became shortened to “blogs.” It followed that those who maintained these sites were called “bloggers,” and the act of writing on them was called “blogging.”
A significant shift in the practice of writing online occurred in 1999 when blogging software became available online for public use. Because this software was free and easy to use by anyone with basic computer skills the number of blogs jumped from one hundred to one thousand and grew rapidly to the millions in existence today. Users were no longer required to have significant knowledge of computer programming to begin and maintain a blog. In the edited collection of web-based narratives, *We’ve Got Blog*, several authors describe the changes that took place in the internet community as the general public gained access to the spaces and practices that were once defined and frequented by only a small (and relatively homogenous) group of people. One big change that took place was that the blog became commonly used as an online diary.\(^{14}\) As Rebecca Mead observes, “Most of the new blogs are . . . intimate narratives rather than digests of links and commentary; to read them is to enter a world in which the personal lives of the participants have become part of the public domain” (49). The internet quickly became a place where anyone and everyone could easily write his or her letter to the world. Miller and Shepherd observe that the blog “was adopted so quickly and widely that it must be serving well established rhetorical needs” for those who write and read them. They assert that a major function of blogs is to find stability of self within the instability of this cultural moment:

> [O]ur point is that the blog might be understood as a particular reaction to the constant flux of subjectivity, as a generic effort of reflexivity within the subject that creates an eddy of relative stability. Infinite play, constant innovation, is not psychically sustainable on an indefinite basis. In a culture in which the real is both public and mediated, the blog makes “real” the reflexive effort to establish the self against the forces of fragmentation, through expression and connection, through disclosure.

\(^{14}\) Some online diaries existed before blog technology formally emerged. However, nearly all online diaries are blogs.
According to Miller and Shepherd, this fragmented and unstable medium paradoxically provides a way for individuals to construct an authentic, integrated self.

**The Features of the Blog**

Madeleine Sorapure notes in her research of the online diary that diary scholars have frequently emphasized the importance of “seeing the diary both as artifact and text, of attending to the pen, the paper, the book—in short, to the material traces of a writer in a particular context” (3). When the medium of the diary is a computer and a collection of electronic impulses, the analysis of the artifact involves a completely different set of questions and implications from that of the pen and paper. As Sorapure discusses, there is a different physical relationship between the writer and the text, there are different situational variables that affect the processes of composition and consumption, different decisions that the writer must make concerning the construction of the document, and so on: “In short, the physical characteristics of the diary influence the act of writing, and the diary as a material artifact contributes to our understanding of the particular context that shapes the writer’s life” (3).

In her research on classifying blogs, Danah Boyd argues that the blog is a medium that fits the purposes of numerous genres of writing. She notes that the blog is consistently defined through the use of metaphors of other writing forms, like the diary or journalistic writing, which limits and confuses the discussion of the form and practice of blogging: “While the content produced by blogging can logically be categorized in terms of genre, defining the blog itself as a genre obscures its role in distributing and representing expression” (“Blogger’s Blog”). Boyd notes that popular blogging platforms, such as Blogger, LiveJournal, and Typepad, reference known genres of
writing, diaries in particular, in order to attract users with something familiar. This transfer of practices brings a new set of opportunities and challenges to the writer. As Boyd observes, comparisons to genres of writing assist in defining emerging technologies and become less relevant and useful over time. She suggests that a more accurate comparison would connect blogs with another medium, like paper:

> Paper and blogs are used for everything from creating grocery lists to publishing innovative research, drawing pictures to advertising furniture for sale, tracking personal bills to writing gossip columns. Mediums are flexible, allowing all different sorts of expressions and constantly evolving. (“Blogger’s Blog”)

There is no uniform description of a blog in terms of structure, practices, and values. These variables are interrelated and shifting. Boyd observes that one can discuss a “prototypical” blog as having “many of the features supported by the most popular tools: commenting, links, trackbacks, time stamps, reverse chronological posts, and syndication feeds” (“Blogger’s Blog”). However, like Miller, Boyd points out that the material properties of the prototype “do not define the boundaries of the medium nor do they convey value or normative practice. As technology changes, the properties of the prototype will also change” (“Blogger’s Blog”). Similar observations may be made about the diary manuscript, in that not all have locks, lined pages, or even daily entries.

To say that the blog is a medium may make it seem like a neutral device. It is easy to think of a medium as an empty vessel, a passive conduit of information; however, it conveys meaning through concealing, revealing, and ascribing limits to concepts. Therefore it is not neutral. The screen is the bearer of the symbolic fig leaves and scarlet letters as it mediates between writer and audience. A medium is made up of tropes and paradigms, signs and discourses, that are themselves actors and agents, in many cases gatekeepers. Such functions emphasize the link between the terms *medium* and *mediate.*
Viviane Serfaty uses the metaphors of the mirror and the veil to describe the function of the computer screen, that which holds the text, as it relates to writer. Serfaty writes that the screen, like the page of a book, both reflects (the mirror) the author and serves as a mediator (the veil) between the author and the audience. In the literal sense, here, the mechanism of the computer and the online interface provides the context through which people can exchange information. On a different level, the fact that the communication is mediated allows some people to be more open. Because the interaction is not face to face, the script is not identifiable like handwriting, and one may completely control the amount of information one desires to disclose, people may feel safer about communicating things that are close to their hearts and minds. The screen or the text is both a mirror and a mask for the author.

The features or “tools” that characterize online diaries vary among the particular programs that people choose to use. However, some features are constant. At its most basic, a blog consists of typed, dated entries, usually organized in reverse chronological order. Every blog has a title and an online address. Typically the address will be related to the title and indicate which company, such as Blogger or LiveJournal,\(^1\) “hosts” the

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\(^1\) Two of the most popular, free, programs for creating online diaries and blogs are LiveJournal and Blogger. LiveJournal is a blog hosting site that allows users to use its software to create “a private journal, a blog, a discussion forum or a social network” (livejournal.com). The company differentiates between the private journal and blog, presumably, based upon the user’s decisions concerning privacy settings. If one defines a blog at its most basic form as a series of dated entries on an online interface in reverse chronological order, then the difference between a private journal and a blog is not clear. Although the various interfaces allow users to make any sort of document private, a blog is typically a public page that may be viewed by anyone with access to the internet. A private journal, then, may be a blog on which one has enabled the privacy settings in order so that it may only be read by the author and, possibly, a select group of other people. LiveJournal, in particular, offers several layers of privacy for the users to choose from. Whereas some programs, like Blogger, give the user the global option of making the entire page public or private, LiveJournal extends the choices to each individual entry that one makes. Thus the blogger may have a completely public entry, and then categorize the following entry as completely private. Other options include only allowing “friends” to read the entry or only allowing LiveJournal users to read. These choices reflect the fact that there are different sorts of information that people record in their diaries and that there are different levels of vulnerability that these types of information represent.
blog (unless the page is independently owned). The title is created by the author and commonly reflects something about the content of the blog and the personality of the blogger. Blogs often include page features such as columns (“sidebars”) to the right and/or left of the main entries that contain information about the author of the blog as well as other information of interest to the blogger. Beyond the dated entries and title, however, little is uniform about the documents. The same can be generally said for traditional diaries as well. Some blogs are simply text-filled boxes arranged on the screen, and some are covered with photographs, images, video clips, audio files, and up-to-the-moment updates (“twitters”) on the thoughts or activities of the blogger. All of these elements converge to reveal and conceal the author as a subject, just as the jottings and doodles, the pages torn out or scraps taped in, have provided portraits of diarists for centuries.

The types of sites for personal writing online follow a spectrum of usage, moving from the internal and insular to the public and social. Although different companies target specific sorts of writing and interaction, depending on the software, the whole range of functions can be accomplished on one site. For example, basically every writing program online includes networking mechanisms. Networking occurs through making “friends,” filling out personal interests on an “about me” page, or creating a blogroll on one’s sidebar, among other things. Networking features relate to genre in that they allow the blog to function as a site of community exchange. As a part of creating community online, some interfaces limit access to one’s writing to those that one identifies as friends. The concept of friendship online involves defining relationships, but it occurs somewhat differently than “in real life.” “Friend” is a designation online referring to the people that
one allows access to information about oneself, including documents that one has created or posted on one’s site. Thus, a friend may be a person who is a friend in real life and with whom one also communicates online. But a friend may also be a person that one does not know but who, for one reason or another, one has allowed to access one’s page. Boyd concludes that “By tying Friendship to privacy settings, social network sites encourage people to choose Friends based on what they want to make visible” (“Friends” 8). I will discuss the intricacies of online “friend”ship in more detail in chapter three when I explore the relationship between the blogger, text, and audience. It is simply important to explain here that there are elements geared toward social networking on almost every kind of personal writing site online. The standardization of this feature implies that a fundamental function of writing online is to connect with other people.

A link is an essential navigational feature of the blog interface that builds a sense of community among bloggers by creating connections among conversations and personal spaces. Links are a basic form of “hypertext” that connect documents or pages together on the internet. A link is a piece of text, image, or space on a web page that, when clicked, directs the web browser to another page. Usually links are highlighted or underlined on the page and are otherwise identifiable when the cursor moves over them. They are a fundamental feature that creates the web-like nature of the online environment, as they are the mechanism through which everything is connected. As a basic component of any webpage, links may be found throughout blogs serving different purposes. One will find links on page elements such as the masthead (like a heading that contains the blog name) that allow the user to work through the site like an interactive table of contents. Links often appear interspersed among the text of posts as bibliographic
material, taking the reader to the documents (sites and posts) being cited or referenced. If a blog contains advertisements, they are linked to external sites where the products and services are featured. Often bloggers will have one or more “blogrolls” in a sidebar that represent collections of sites that they frequent.\textsuperscript{16} Links are an important way of giving credit to others. They also serve as a way to track conversations around the web. Services like Technorati track links that bloggers make to one another’s posts and through simple searches allow bloggers to see all the links and conversations that have been made concerning certain pages.

An “about me” page is a page linked to one’s blog on which the writer answers a number of questions about him or herself, ranging from general demographic information to lists of favorites. It creates a writer’s identity and often sets out the genre of the blog. One function of the “about me” page is that it allows the author a separate space to define and describe herself. It serves as a sort of crib sheet or meta-document for the more specific and lengthy self-portrait that is the blog itself. The page, like everything else about the blog, is always open-ended for the author, endlessly editable. The “about me” page also functions as a way for readers to find out information that would indicate if they share interests or concerns with the blogger. The “about me” page is often one of the first places readers will look in order to see if the blog or journal is something that they would be interested in reading. Various blog sites organize the “about me” page differently. However, a common feature is for the items that people list in their answers to the various questions to appear on the page as links. For example, if a person lists

\footnote{There are unstated rules of etiquette concerning blogrolls and many people choose not to have them because of the expectations involved. For example, it is common for people who are trying to increase their readership to have extensive blogrolls. Such individuals might add one’s blog to their blogrolls and then expect that one will reciprocate by adding their blogs. Such practices and expectations bring choices and complications similar to those of “friending.”}
*Blind Assassin* as one of her favorite books, one could click on that title on her page and it would pull up a page that listed all of the different bloggers on that server who also listed *Blind Assassin* on their pages. These links also appear for the blogger’s listed location, educational institution, interests, any information that she decides to make public. This linking feature of the “about me” page functions to help writers and readers to find other people who share an interest in a certain topic and is an example of the embedded social networking features that many blogs employ.

Although the online interface provides features that help diarists to creatively develop their identities and make connections with others, a number of details are lost in the shift from a manuscript form to a typed one. Sinor addresses these losses in her description of the process of transcribing and publishing a diary manuscript: “the spacing, the feel of the paper, [the] handwriting, the doodling – all the things that let us know a real and unprofessional writer is writing this text – are lost” (xiii). With the manuscript diary the diarist has the possibility of writing in the margins, crossing things out, sketching, all of the personal fingerprints that make it a living document in ways that differ from electronic documents. While there is great flexibility with online documents in terms of fonts, color, background design, and integration of images, there is also a great deal of limitation that comes with the templates and boxes that are the basis of the programs. And while there is increasing possibility for mobility with computers and word processing technology, there are also limitations that come with the need for electricity and internet connection that one doesn’t have to worry about when working with a paper and pen.

*The Generic Functions of Blogs*
“Online diaries are inherently unstable objects—constantly changing, sometimes disappearing altogether. . . . [I]t is difficult to determine the object of analysis when it is constantly changing and when moreover, the text itself differs depending on the path the reader has taken through it.” (Sorapure 19)

Blogs serve many diverse purposes. Many users create and maintain social-familial networks; people often maintain online journals and blogs to keep in touch with family and friends when they have moved and to post pictures and stories from travel experiences. Blogs also document social events and personal experiences; there are war blogs, pregnancy blogs, dieting blogs, favorite television show blogs, spiritual blogs, and political blogs. Almost every aspect of life has found its way into the blogosphere.

Blogs, like traditional diaries, memorialize the quotidian. In her discussion of ordinary writing and the difference between the literary and “the daily,” Sinor observes that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that “the inscription of nothing is as complicated a rhetorical act as the fabrication of something” (“Reading” 123). Similarly, Carolyn Miller observes that our everyday uses of language “tell us something theoretically important about discourse” (155). She continues:

To consider as potential genres such homely discourse as the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report, the ransom note, the lecture, and the white paper, as well as the eulogy, the apology, the inaugural, the public proceeding, and the sermon, is not to trivialize the study of genres; it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves. (155)

The following discussion explores the relationship between the medium of the blog and the genre of the diary through examining two online diaries. Of particular interest are the following questions: What pragmatic functions do blogs serve, and how does visual design help to serve that function?
In *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, Kress and Van Leeuwen provide a framework for analyzing multimodal documents, documents that contain a mixture of different media such as written text and images. The researchers suggest four distinct but interrelated elements that work together to create multimodal texts: 1) discourse, 2) design, 3) production, and 4) distribution. Kress and Van Leeuwen’s categories are arbitrary in that they lead to a problem, similar to that within the field of rhetoric or English studies, of determining the relationships among the text, author and audience. The authors state that the four elements relate paratactically rather than hierarchically and that in many cases it is difficult to distinguish between them. The challenge is to meaningfully apply this system of relationships analytically.

In considering the first category, discourse, one immediately faces the problem of disentangling this element from the others; the potential for analysis grows exponentially as one considers the realities of existing metadiscourses, discourses of design, discourses of production, and discourses of distribution related to any given text. Then one could address the *designs* of discourse, production, and distribution, and so on. But if one identifies or categorizes all of these different relationships, what has been achieved? What is the value of labeling everything? I propose the addition of a fifth element to the four, oriented to pragmatics, i.e., that seeks to address the purpose or meaning that these elements have socially. What is the relationship, meaning, and function of these variables on a human level? I do not necessarily mean looking at authorial intention but at the purpose fulfilled for the actors on the spectrum of practices between the author and
Multimodal documents are complex texts made up of numerous variables, yet, as the following chapters address, the significance of these variables emerges in the ways that they create meaning on the social continuum between author and audience.

The first blog I discuss is called “Her Bad Mother.” [Illustration 1] Aside from the explicit clue provided by the blog name, “Her Bad Mother” could be characterized as a “mommy blog” because the majority of the posts relate directly to the experiences of the blogger as a mother. Mommy blogs serve particular functions that distinguish them as a genre and are generally identifiable by specific features that represent these functions. Mommy (or parenting) blogs function to create memory logs of children’s growth and development, which typically take the form of descriptions, narratives, and quotations related to the children interspersed with pictures and video clips. Some people describe the function as creating a virtual baby book where important developmental events and experiences are recorded. These functions related to the children are typically integrated with a different function, which is creating a place for the blogger to process the journey of motherhood. This latter purpose often becomes the predominant focus of such blogs, taking the form of reflective posts, rants, bewildered meanderings, and requests for advice from other mothers. Posts on mommy blogs often reflect the heightened emotions that moms experience related to sleep deprivation, the biological processes of pregnancy and postpartum recovery, and social/personal transitions related to parenthood. The creator of “Her Bad Mother,” Catherine Connors, writes openly and extensively about her experiences with pregnancy, breastfeeding, and sleep deprivation, as well as the effects of

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17 The fifth category may be applied from any number of theoretical positions. Thus, someone could discuss it in terms of authorial intent or reader-response. The goal is simply to include an element that explicitly addresses social meaning or purpose within the given framework.
parenting on her relationship with her husband and the challenges that she encounters concerning her own changing identity.

A final function of mommy blogs related to processing the journey of motherhood is finding/creating community with other people who are going through similar experiences. Many mothers find such community important at a time in which they are more homebound and in which their social relationships change. Connors has used her prolific writing to engage and create an extensive community of women, most of whom are mothers. She writes frequent and lengthy posts on “Her Bad Mother,” maintains a secondary site called “Her Bad Mother’s Basement,” is a contributing editor within the BlogHer community, and regularly posts on at least three other collaborative sites related to women and/or parenting. Although some of the functions of mommy blogs, like the virtual baby book, are not diary-like by a conventional confessional definition of the genre, these elements combine with the other functions to create a document that represents the person and her interests, values, and experiences over a specific period of time.
Illustration 1: Screenshot of “Her Bad Mother”
“Her Bad Mother” is a visually busy blog. At the top of the page is a customized masthead (a box that usually combines text and images to create a heading). On left of the masthead is a picture of “Wonderbaby,” Connors’s firstborn, with her mouth open wide, overlaid on an image of the front of an old punk rock club. The images are black and white and the right side of masthead is almost completely black. On the bottom right is the blog name in a bright green, old typewriter font, and below the name, in smaller turquoise letters, is the byline “bad is the new good.” The combination of the child looking somewhat shocked in front of the club and the title of “Her—seeming to refer to the child—Bad Mother” conveys a sense of irreverent “coolness” that contrasts with pastels, flowers, and flourishes common to many other mommy blogs. I chose “Her Bad Mother,” rather than a more prototypical mommy blog because Connors is an example of a “scarlet letter” blogger. She flaunts her sameness and difference and takes ownership of her imperfections in ways that (as I discuss in chapter three) are often empowering for herself and others.

The byline “bad is the new good” echoes the phrasing often associated with fashion trends like, “red is the new black” – meaning, black was stylish last season, but now everyone is wearing red. The phrase is one of many cues on the site that Connors is creatively engaged with pop culture, including a link to a blog called “Mama Pop” where she is a frequent contributor. “Bad is the new good” renders at least two different interpretations, both of which fit the image that the blogger develops through the site. First, it suggests that “bad,” as in rebellious or going against the grain, is good. The blogger may post about the intersection of parenting and pop culture and discuss her
interest in tattoos, but for the most part, her “rebellion” takes the form of feminist activism. She is very engaged in the forums within the Blogher community, which is a blogging community created for and by women that highlights women’s issues in every aspect of life. She advocates various women’s issues in her posts and is outspoken about the special needs of mothers in the public sphere. A second interpretation of the phrase is that it is good and acceptable to be an imperfect mother. This also fits the nature of Connors’s online persona. She writes extensively about the ups and downs of motherhood, posts pictures of her daughter romping around in costumes and mismatched (or with missing) clothes, and confesses to the ways that she has ceded to her child’s force of personality and free-spiritedness. Ultimately, “Her Bad Mother” demonstrates that she is in fact a very good mother, one who is consistently engaged and thoughtful about the parenting process.

The cluttered sidebars that frame the posts on “Her Bad Mother” evidence the blogger’s engagement with communities of women and parents throughout the blogosphere. These sidebars contain the equivalent of three and a half pages of material as one scrolls down, mostly in the form of links of different kinds. Because it is marginal, sidebar material is visually and rhetorically secondary to the main text of the blog. Bloggers change sidebar matter infrequently, so it becomes a relatively static representation of the blogger’s motivations, interests, and personality. The sidebars on Connors’s blog are full of links, lists, and advertisements. Most of the blog’s advertisements are connected to sponsors of the Blogher community, so they relate to women’s issues and interests in particular. The top left sidebar contains a list of the sites that Connors either contributes to or runs, followed by a list of links to posts that is titled
“Best of Bad Mother.” Reading the “Best of” list provides an introduction to Connors and to the topics that are most important to her. She has a box that contains her recent “twitters”\(^\text{18}\) and recent photographs uploaded into her “Flickr” account. She links to her blogrolls and to blogrolls that she participates in, as well as numerous other mother-related blogging groups. The volume of information that is immediately available about Connors and her interests conveys her investment in community in a visible way. It is clear that she finds support through blogging and that she seeks to make available a community of support through linking herself with an extensive network of others who share her commitment to the interests of moms.

1. Discourse(s) the self, parenthood, marriage and family relationships, feminism, activism, pop culture, everyday life, community, womanhood
2. Design(s) personal narrative, diary, informal conversation, complaint/rant, query
3. Production online interface, including: text, photographic images, embedded video, links, advertising, and search features
4. Distribution public blog posting; linking through different networks, communities, and individual blog sites; “advertising” blog and address through various speaking and networking venues (both in person and online)
5. Genre(s) Parenting (“mommy”) blog: creating of memory log of children’s development, processing the journey of motherhood, and finding/creating community with other women and moms

Table 1: Multimodal analysis of “Her Bad Mother.”

The second blog that I discuss, “A Cautionary Blog,” differs from “Her Bad Mother” in that it is written anonymously and was created as an alternative space for the blogger to write about specific issues. In contrast to the “scarlet letter” mode of “Her Bad Mother,” “Cautionary Blog” functions as a “fig leaf” blog, as evidenced by the anonymity of the writer and the visual layout of the space. Despite these differences, the

\(^{18}\) I discuss Twitter in chapter four.
blogs share the function of engaging the support of a community of readers as the bloggers process new experiences.

“Cautionary Blog” [Image 2] is an example of a blog that was created at a time of transition with a very specific function in mind. The blogger, who calls herself “Cautionary Girl,” writes primarily about her trial separation from her husband and the emotions and new experiences that are a part of that process. She discusses living alone for the first time, shopping for herself, selling the home that she and her husband had found together, feeling lonely, and continuing the interactions between her and her husband as they attempt to move toward one another again. I categorize this blog, generically, as a blog of transition, which, in this case, combines the functions of processing her current experiences in a confessional style (therapeutic writing) and engaging community support. In the following excerpts, Cautionary Girl provides an explanation of her need for this blog and the way that it functions for her in the context of her present situation:

I started an anonymous blog because I found that I was not able to be as honest about my life as I wanted to be in my writing. My previous blog was read by everyone I knew, and a lot of people I didn’t know, and this fact, for whatever reason, made it impossible for me to, well, be me.

As my audience grew, I watched the topics I felt comfortable writing about grow narrower and narrower. My boss was reading, so I couldn’t write about my job. My husband was reading, so I couldn’t write about my marriage. My husband’s family was reading, so I couldn’t write about sex or religion. My family was reading, so I couldn’t write about my childhood. My priest was reading, so I couldn’t write about church. … I was living life completely in secret, and my blog was a front. And it showed. In the end, all I wrote about was my dog and politics. (“A Proxy”)

Cautionary Girl continues by explaining that she shut down her old blog sent emails to certain regular readers and friends to let them know about her new blog. In this way she was able to sidestep the problem of not feeling free to write and to hand-select a
community of people that she felt would be accepting and supportive of her in the process that she is working through.

It’s only been a month since I began writing here, but the experience has been completely different from my previous blogging experience. Every day I write because I want to, not because I have to. About things I actually want to write about. Things I’m actually experiencing and feeling and thinking. The freedom of it all blows me away, and so many changes in my life have been set into motion these last few weeks simply because I’m stretching my legs and being me for the first time in years. (“A Proxy”)

Through creating an anonymous blog, the blogger has found a way to address her needs for reflection and communication with others. “Cautionary Blog” provides a safe space for her to write about her marriage and to interact about it with others.

“Cautionary Blog” highlights the critical importance of genre. Once the purpose for writing changes, writers typically create a new blog rather than attempting to change the existing one to fit a new genre. Because the features and organization of the blog reflect the text’s function, it is simply easier to create a new space than to completely remodel the existing one. Although there are times when it becomes important to do so, bloggers do not necessarily shut down or erase old blogs when they need a change. It is not uncommon for people to have multiple blogs that serve separate purposes. For example, one of the women I interviewed, Valerie, has a professional blog, an “artistic” blog, and a personal blog. She explains that the purposes of these three spaces diverge and intersect because they each reflect aspects of her fragmented but integrated self. She finds herself moving posts from one blog to another because she decides that the content is more suited for the purposes of one or another space. It became clear through our conversation that Valerie would prefer to have a single blog where she could bring together all of these pieces of herself, but the fragmentation reflects her reality at this
time and the ways in which she must compartmentalize in response to her relationships with others. She attributes her decisions about content to her perception of her readers, which suggests her sense of audience expectations regarding what constitutes appropriate content generically.

Because “Cautionary Blog” is a space that Cautionary Girl does not share with her husband, the blog becomes a material manifestation of the separation taking place in their relationship. The blogger does not post daily but she addresses the aspects of her life that have changed now that she is living alone and that she is trying to come to terms with. In the initial posts the blog seems more like a space where she is keeping people updated on her life than where she is doing the serious work of questioning herself. The posts do not contain much of the self-doubting/self-righteous meanderings of the person who is seeking to find resolution within herself, wrestling with the thoughts and desires and actions of herself and others on the page. Instead, the writer seems removed and numb. Although she is clearly wrestling, her early posts are tidy, informative, and careful. Over time, the reader can begin to see the freedom that the blogger says she feels as she writes with more vulnerability about her anxieties and hopes for rebuilding the relationship with her husband.
Illustration 2: Screenshot of “A Cautionary Blog”

A proxy.

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In January, after writing a cryptic final post, I shut my blog down. Some of my readers told me about my new blog. Most I didn’t. Some found me. Most haven’t.

It’s only been a month since I began writing here, but the experience has been completely different from my previous blogging experience. Every day I write because I want to, not because I have to. About things I actually want to write about. Things I’m actually experiencing and feeling and thinking. The freedom of it all blows me away, and so many changes in my life have been set into motion these last few weeks simply because I’m stretching my legs and being me for the first time in years.

I have a friend who has some secrets she would like to share. I believe she’s experiencing a similar self-censorship on her own blog, except she’s strong enough in her own identity not to let it get the best of her. But, spurred on by the 25 Things craze on Facebook, she decided to write down 19 secrets, and I told her that I would post them here as her proxy.

I urge everyone to strive for honesty, whether it be on their public blogs, on their anonymous blogs, on their friends’ anonymous blogs, with their loved ones, or simply with themselves. You wouldn’t believe the difference it makes.

Much love.
In contrast to blogs like “Her Bad Mother,” the form of “Cautionary Blog” is extremely streamlined. The blogger utilizes the basic, free features of the Wordpress interface, including one of the predesigned mastheads. The masthead is a closeup image of grass with blue sky peeking through in the background. The choice of an image of something alive signals hope on the part of the blogger, but the surrounding text makes clear that the hope is very guarded. Above the masthead, in the “byline” spot, is the following phrase: “My Cautionary Life: How Not to Live.” The blog title and subtitle reflect the familiar descriptor “a cautionary tale” and indicate that the writer is warning readers about the perils of following in her path. At the same time, the repetition of the word “caution” reflects the author’s tentativeness. She is tentative about revealing her identity and her feelings and she is tentative about the choices that she has made that have led to the break in her relationship with “Cautionary Husband.” One can see both the need for caution and the caution that the blogger conveys in the emptiness of the blog itself. Below the masthead, the rest of the blog is white with standard, black font text. A sidebar to the right of the main entries includes a search box, a list of recent entries, and a list of links to blogs that the blogger reads. The posts contain primarily text with almost no links. A couple of entries have included pictures, but they were simple images, like an empty apartment and a houseplant. There are no advertisements on the blog. The unembellished style provides the reader with little to look at apart from the entries themselves and suggests the temporary condition of the space as might a white-walled, sparsely decorated room.
1. Discourse(s)  the self, marriage and separation, everyday life, human relationships
2. Design(s)  anonymous, personal narrative, diary, conversation
3. Production  online interface, including: text, images, and links
4. Distribution  public blog posting and linking through comments on external sites
5. Genre  blog of transition: processing the challenges of a new situation and engaging community support

Table 2: Multimodal analysis of “A Cautionary Blog.”

The social functions of the blog provide a clear contrast with what would be possible in a traditional diary. One would not use a handwritten diary to keep in touch with numerous people simultaneously, whereas a blog serves that function naturally. A traditional diary could, however, provide the writer a private place to write that is not available to her husband because the couple is living separately. Just as with a paperbound diary, the blog is easy to initiate during a time of transition. And although one may find more flexibility and sense of freedom in writing in a book, the blog allows for the response of others, in time, in ways that are often critical to the sorts of transition that prompt the writing in the first place.

In the next chapter I explore the ways that bloggers construct their identities online and argue that one of the greatest determinants of a woman’s identity online is how she responds to the gaze of the reader. I discuss the images of the fig leaf and the scarlet letter to develop this claim.
“Women’s autobiography can be viewed as a feminist technology of the self because the subject plays an active role in her own self-constitution” (McLaren 152).

This chapter discusses women who blog and the ways that they perform their identities online. I look, first, at the construct of identity through the lens of feminist theory applied to Foucault’s discussion of the subject. I then take the idea of the female subject and look at the ways that it is constructed in the online environment. For the purposes of developing this discussion, I use examples drawn from posts and discussions by women on several blogs. Although it would be inaccurate to say that women’s identities are completely formed by their relationship to their bodies, because biological factors constitute the substantive issues around which many women’s communities are formed, a discussion of the body and the ways that a woman identifies with/by her body provides a useful frame for understanding the practices of women who blog. Thus, a substantial part of the chapter is spent exploring identity as it relates to the body. I also include a discussion of the ways that the technology of the online environment facilitates agency for women who seek to transgress the dominant social narratives concerning the woman’s identity and participation in social discourse. The chapter concludes with an application of the images of the fig leaf and the scarlet letter to the conversation about women’s identities and personal writing online.

*Identity in Theory*
In this section I discuss the concepts of identity and subjectivity and the ways that identity is developed through the construction of the subject. I begin with an overview of Foucault’s work with subjectivity and develop this discussion with the work of theorists who have applied Foucault to Feminist thought. The purpose here is to introduce the ways in which women find themselves constructed socially in order to understand some of the dynamics involved for the woman who writes online.

The work of Foucault teaches us to look at the practices that structure social systems and the ways that they define what it is to be acceptably human. Foucault uses the phrase *discursive practice* to represent the material events or conditions that allow for the fundamental beliefs of a society about what is right or wrong. He identifies specific material factors rather than ideological elements, such as concepts and values, as determining the social construction of reality. These practices provide the support structure for epistemology, beliefs about the ways things should be and why. *Discourse*, then, involves more localized discussions or arguments about what happens in society as a result of these fundamental practices. For example, there are discursive practices related to the woman’s body or motherhood and discourses about breastfeeding. It is in the context of discursive practices that subjectivity, the condition of being a subject, occurs (“Subject and Power” 331).

The subject is formed within a set of discursive practices and is not stable because discursive practices overlap. Thus, in a particular environment, the discursive practices that create the subject of the woman as a sexual object may present themselves alongside practices that create the subject of the woman as administrator, mother, or politician as

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19 I draw principally from Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*, “Truth and Power,” and “The Object and Power,” as well as Dreyfus and Rabinow’s *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, for my description of Foucault’s theoretical perspective.
well as a multitude of others. The material reality for the woman involves navigating among these different subject positions that variously define who she is.

Two conditions mitigate against a structurally determined subject. The first is that the constant proliferation and change of material practices in a society make it important to describe any one subject identity as an inherently unstable process rather than a fixed, static construction. The subject is a snapshot of a particular moment and a particular convergence of discursive practices. The second element against a pre-determined, fixed subject is that the person in her subjection is capable of action against a specific description of the self and any one set of practices. Because the individual has the possibility of determining deleterious practices that form the self and thereby finding ways to prohibit their recurrence, a discussion of discursive practices and discourses is important. In the context of such a discussion feminist theorists raise the question, “To what extent does our material reality determine the ability to change the description given to us of the world and of ourselves?” Is it possible to change who we are, if with Foucault we argue that our consciousness and our identity as particular subjects is given by practices of material articulation and formation? It is in response to these questions that feminists explore the nature of the subject.

Feminist theorists\(^{20}\) have argued that Foucault’s discussion of the subject is damaging or at least counter to the agenda and politics of feminism because they interpret the instability of the subject as eliminating the possibility of agency. Some claim, for example, that if there is no way to define what it is to be a woman, the possibility for the woman as a member of a class or community to fight for specific rights and conditions is

\(^{20}\) See McLaren’s *Foucault and the Subject of Feminism*, for a thoughtful and thorough discussion of the feminist critiques of Foucault’s theories of subjectivity.
eliminated. This conclusion is incorrect. Taking the instability of the subject into account, I agree with Margaret McLaren, who sees the potential for feminist agency in Foucault’s work. The post-structural elements of the fragmented subject (partiality) and a form of feedback by the subjected against the materiality of their constitution (the mind), imply that the embodied subject is able to critically assess her subjection. The value of analyzing social narratives and discursive practices is to provide agency to the subject, meaning, to allow the subject to transgress the discursive practices in order to create a new way of being. As McLaren writes, “Exposing the social norms and disciplinary practices, that create these divisions as operations of normalizing power helps to empower those who are disenfranchised and opens up possibilities for resistance” (156). Looking at the social forces that create subjects allows the individual to gain agency, not by changing the structure of available discursive practices but by understanding how she might choose a different path of empowerment and emancipation within the practices by which she is composed. This idea of the subject that is embodied, literally inscribed with the material practices of definition to allow for specific social purposes, as the mother, the wife, the sister, the nanny, the sexual object, is important because its definition makes possible the presence of something outside these practices in the human subject, that can stand against their proliferation and entrenchment in the social world. Along with Foucauldian feminists who argue for the importance of Foucault’s discussion of the care of the self, I believe that the identification of embodiment (the practices of subjection) is crucial because doing so allows for practices of difference and an understanding of ourselves which does not reinhabit spaces of gender oppression. As I will discuss more
concretely in the following section, the blog and the internet provide for such possibilities.

Agency or transgression does not mean that the individual has the power to eliminate particular narratives that constitute her self as a subject. The individual simply has the power to emphasize one or another narrative or practice among the many that are present at any given time. Thus, the narrative of the woman as sexual object may be present but the woman may select to develop her identity according to the narratives (or aspects thereof) of mother and academician. On her blog, “Her Bad Mother,” Catherine Connors writes primarily about her experiences as a mother. Connors is an academic, but she makes very few references to her professional life. Instead she focuses on the contradictions that she finds in her journey as a woman and a mother, from a feminist perspective. As I will discuss later in the chapter, the blogger who calls herself “Professor Zero,” has sought to eliminate the effects of certain discursive practices by making elements of her identity anonymous. Initially, she sought to blog without indications of race or gender, but eventually she revealed these details about herself. Her choices about what to attempt to hide or what to disclose, however, suggest the discursive practices that affect her “real life” interactions, practices that she is seeking to avoid in her writing online. Through choices of anonymity, Professor Zero attempts to eliminate certain narratives, but they continue to hover at the edges of the blog.

All subject positions are not equal. The value or impact of subject positions shifts because particular subjects involve power relationships that impact the individual in different ways. There are social, political, and personal differences, for example, between the woman as a pornographic image and the woman as a graduate student.
In his later work, Foucault talks about the relationship of the subject to the self and describes technologies by which individuals may “transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or mortality” (“Technologies” 18). Foucault observes that these technologies are different in various time periods, but that they include activities such as dream interpretation, discipline in diet, letter writing or maintaining a journal. McLaren notes that although Foucault spends little time on contemporary technologies of the self, discussing instead, practices in antiquity (and only those of men), there are relevant applications of his ideas to contemporary feminist practices (145). Specifically, she categorizes autobiographical or self-reflective writing as a technology of the self, something that Yahui Zhang, in her research on Chinese mother bloggers, extends to include the practice of blogging. Through activities of the self, like reflective writing or truth-telling, one can enact an emancipatory process for one’s identity. Within her discussion of consciousness-raising groups of the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s, McLaren observes that:

Discussing topics often seen as trivial or “silly female stuff,” such as housework, childbirth, child rearing, orgasm, fear of aging, and beauty, women discovered some commonalities in their experiences. Even more important, sharing their experiences enabled women to see their problems not as individual pathology, but as social and political issues. (156)

Through blogging, women are finding validation for the ordinary tasks and experiences that characterize their lives and finding the possibility of alternative narratives for themselves. Zhang notes Xiaojiang Li’s research concerning feminist thought in China. Although the circumstances are different, the truths are applicable to women in the United States as well:

Our generation of women can take our own life experiences to prove that the feelings and emotions of real life are the most effective weapons with which to
overturn a dominant discourse of power. … Real-life experiences enable us to say ‘No!’ to discourses that try to construct and regulate our lives. (Zhang 123)

The following section explores the ways in which women are engaging and resisting such discourses through participation in blogging communities.

*The Virtual Body*

In this section I discuss the connection between the body and identity and the discourses surrounding the representation of the female body online. I provide examples of the discursive practices that create the subject of the woman as defined by her body, and the ways that individual women both reify and resist these practices.

The pressures and constraints that women feel to embody a certain form of beauty and manner of femininity are socially constructed. Susan Bordo observes that women are conditioned to accept ideals that are ever-shifting and elusive and to be guided by a constant need for improvement. Such habits of being define women by what they lack. Bordo discusses the ways in which social control is evidenced on the physical bodies of women, a condition that has been revealed through the “disorders” that are characteristically feminine in different time periods, such as hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia. She demonstrates that each of these disorders represents a debilitating form of protest against the controls set up against women – that they be dependent and emotional, that they stay at home, and that they be thin and self-controlled. The idea of women being defined by their insufficiency plays out in numerous ways other than the disorders Bordo describes. The discursive belief that women are in constant need of improvement results in any number of social practices, from the rituals of wearing makeup and hairstyling to dieting, obsessive shopping, plastic surgery, photoshopping/airbrushing, and exercise.
What is the relevance of these discourses concerning the physical body to practices online? How do the material practices concerning the body translate into a virtual environment? In a completely virtual space where the material body does not exist, the body is created and represented through text and images. Just as some women are very modest about their bodies in real life and others are more liberal, people function with regard to the body in different ways online. Although some women are very circumspect, even silent about their bodies, many women write very candidly about body issues in ways that mirror “girl talk” sessions online.

The dominant description of women in the media in general and online in particular, is highly sexualized. For many people, mentioning the representation of the female body online brings to mind the preponderance of pornography on the internet. The presence of pornographic images (and what becomes defined as pornographic) online reflects the predominant practices and beliefs that make up our social structure. Pornography is not a static entity/subject in itself, but I refer to it as a set of practices that serves as an example of the subjectivization of women’s bodies to the oppressiveness of patriarchal normative discourse. What constitutes pornography has a great deal to do with how the female body is constructed as both enticing and shameful, rather than simply nakedness or the suggestion of nakedness. Within the culture of breastfeeding moms, for example, many women have found that society has more of an issue with the “functional” woman’s body than with the sexualized woman’s body. Women who choose to breastfeed in public spaces are frequently asked to cover up or otherwise treated as if they are doing something inappropriate. Blogger and academic Catherine Connors suggests that women encounter such responses because the larger social narratives sexualize
women’s bodies, regardless of the ways that individual women seek to construct themselves through nonsexual practices.

There is a great deal of discussion of this problem among the extensive community of nursing moms and breastfeeding advocates online. Women who participate in this community frequently record anecdotes and personal narratives about the social pressure they feel concerning their beliefs and choices about when, where, and how long to breastfeed their children. In a blog post titled “Under the Blanket,” Connors records a narrative about her experience of trying to discreetly nurse while traveling on an airplane. The flight attendant repeatedly tried to give Connors a blanket to cover herself and the baby, which Connors repeatedly declined. The attendant continued, leaning across both mother and baby and offering to cover them herself. Connors declined. The blogger describes that the baby was already swaddled in a blanket and neither the baby nor the mother’s breast was visible because she was shielding them by the way she was sitting. She writes that she felt bullied by the attendant for no substantial reason and how new mothers, especially in such a situation, are extremely vulnerable.

Connors reaches the conclusion that if the woman’s body were not constructed as a sexual object, the act of public nursing would not stir up such controversy. Women are made to feel ashamed of this act of feeding their children for a number of reasons, such as where they do it, how they do it, how long they do it, or, often more difficult, whether or not they are able to do it. The shame comes from different sources, many of which are other mothers, and degrades the mother’s sense of self. The internet provides a space for women to share their experiences and find encouragement, but it also provides a space for all of the narratives from which the same women are seeking to break free.
In *The Imaginary Domain*, Drucilla Cornell uses John Rawls’s idea of self-respect as the primary good, to develop a principle or constraint called the “degradation prohibition.” She observes that the opposite of self-respect is “crippling shame” and this can happen in an environment where others are degrading one’s values or practices of personhood by communicating that a person’s state of being is less worthy than their own. Cornell asserts that in order to create a society in which all people are allowed equal personhood, we must seek to eliminate mindsets and practices that degrade the worthiness of individuals’ pursuit of happiness. This is an ideal that has very practical applications in discussions of sex, race, and disabilities because it concerns the intersections of people in a social environment and the ways that people harm one another through degradation of their values. Cornell offers the example of a socially conservative man being offended by a lesbian couple expressing affection in a restaurant. While the behavior of the couple offends the man, it does not impact his practice of sexuality or personal identity. But, his response to the couple attacks the worthiness of their identities and choices. He is in an uncontested social position – uncontested except for the behavior of the couple. The couple asserts, by their behavior, that there are other norms to which one may subscribe, which violates the man’s sense of propriety. But, as Cornell points out, it does not “degrade him in his person” (11). Cornell’s discussion of degradation articulates the limits of reasonable interaction and provides a gauge for individuals who experience shame. Shame reflects a structure of degradation and indicates the individual’s position of subjection.

Women experience degradation as a result of discursive practices that equate their value with the degree to which they meet physical or material ideals of “authentic”
womanhood. In the Salon article, “First Lady Got Back,” Erin Aubry Kaplan writes that she feels empowered because Michelle Obama has the body of a “real” black woman. Accompanying the article is a picture of the First Lady in profile that is cut off just below her hips. The picture contrasts with the typical shoulder or upper-torso shot that most photographs capture and focuses the viewer’s attention on the shape of the First-Lady’s body. Kaplan contextualizes her comments within a brief discussion of the difficulties that black women in particular experience, being trapped among competing discourses about what the ideal body is to be. She notes the history of fetishization that has characterized the black female body and discusses the culture of mainstream women’s magazines that promote dimensions that are not only nearly impossible for the average woman to attain, but that are decidedly “white” in their presentation. Kaplan’s tone in the article is playful, and a number of those who wrote responses to the article accepted that tone and engaged with Kaplan’s perspective in positive ways. The majority of respondents were not so accepting. Beyond the comments on the Salon site itself, several bloggers responded to this article with disgust, noting the strong tradition of fetishizing the bodies of women of color as a reason that such a discussion is unfortunate. On “Diary of an Anxious Black Woman,” one blogger comments,

Yeah, nevermind her Ivy League education, her career, and her devotion to her children and husband. NO! Let's belittle all of her educational, professional, and family accomplishments (and her *humanity*), and gossip over her ass, as if she's no different than the nearest video-girl! (eye-roll) Ah, another shining example how women's -- especially WOCs' [Women of Colors'] -- bodies are public domain...thanks ingrained, societal misogyny and racism! (Pseudo-Adrienne)
Blogger Mark Anthony Neal articulates his critique of the Salon piece with an image of the Hottentot Venus (Saartjie Baartman). This image is particularly relevant because of the Kaplan’s description of Obama:

From the ocean of nastiness and confusion that defined this campaign from the beginning, Michelle rose up like Venus on the waves, keeping her coif above water and cruising the coattails of history to present us with a brand-new beauty norm before we knew it was even happening.

Although it is unclear whether or not Kaplan meant to invoke the Hottentot image by her discussion, her article becomes an example of getting caught in the discourses of one’s own oppression. Kaplan demonstrates the extent to which she herself is implicated by the dominant cultural narratives and reveals ambivalence about her acceptance of these norms. She exemplifies Bordo’s observation that power is not one group of people exerting oppressive control over another, but it is a set of socially integrated practices, institutions, and technologies in which everyone, including the oppressed, is participating and implicated. As Latoya Peterson observes in her post about the article, part of the reason that this piece was unsettling is the context. Peterson suggests that the material is more suited for a publication, like Essence or Clutch, that regularly addresses issues of body politics for African American women than for a mainstream art and culture periodical like Salon. In one sense, Peterson is suggesting that it does not feel right for a black woman to discuss what it is to be a “black woman” in a public space, which reflects the sensitivity of the subject – not only in the sense of being considered socially unacceptable, but also as being vulnerable to the judgment found in existing racial narratives. Peterson’s observation implies what bell hooks observes in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, that there is solidarity to be found in the margins. She concludes

21 For a discussion of the Hottentot Venus, see Sander Gilman’s Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness and Anne McClintock’s Imperial Leather.
that her problem with the Salon article is not so much what was said, where, or by whom, but that

articles about Michelle Obama’s wardrobe, booty, and mom duties are what is fit to publish, what is seen as relevant to a mass audience. And everything else - like a reflection on how Michelle’s “makeover” was to make her more palatable to a certain set of Americans and what that says about race and gender in this country - seems to fall by the wayside, stuck in the niche analysis category.

Peterson draws attention to the material impact of normative discourse and the ways that articles like Kaplan’s affirm racist and misogynist narratives. She calls for more discussion online of discursive practices and the ways that they erase and construct women in damaging ways.

Many women write online from a feminist perspective and explicitly resist normative discourses that are degrading to women. Throughout the blogosphere, these voices are linked by common subjection and are easy to find among the blogrolls and discussions of women who blog. Feminist voices are easily outnumbered online, but they have a presence that is strong enough to provide a powerful community for those women who desire to resist the narratives of degradation and shame that others attach to their ways of being. Outspoken feminist blogger Susan Reisman launched the “Swimsuit Brigade for Honest Photos” on the BlogHer community, in which she called for readers (i.e. “ordinary” women) to post pictures of themselves in swimsuits. She observes that as a result of the media’s representation of women she has managed to develop an attitude of insecurity and loathing for the way that she looks. “Enough is enough,” she says.

Let's fight back by reminding people that there is nothing wrong with flab, wrinkles, and character. I’m taking the first step. While generally I regard myself as a person with an average physique, thanks to the constant onslaught of unrealistic images that assault me every day, I tend to hate my appearance.
Numerous women participated in the “Brigade,” both on the community site and on their personal blogs. Although the project was uncomfortable for most who participated, and it did not eliminate the enormous social pressure that they feel concerning their bodies, it allowed the women to make a concrete statement of resistance and gave them the strength that comes from solidarity with others who share one’s experience. For participants there was a clear moment of realization of subjection as an embodied woman. In a similar vein, Reisman previously did a post on her blog in response to the annually televised Victoria’s Secret fashion show, in which she created a duct tape model of her body and dressed it in a number of selections from the season’s collection. Her intent was to demonstrate what these items look like on an “average” woman’s body. As she says in her discussion of swimsuit photographs, “Models don't speak for us, and airbrushed ones even less so. Let's represent ourselves.”

The reality is that most women have a difficult time being satisfied with how they look. Many women admit/indicate on their blogs or in their comments on the blogs of others that they are ashamed of their appearance. Bloggers like Connors and Reisman represent women who actively struggle against the messages that the media and other social narratives provide. Realizing the importance of being able to articulate and engage with others in the struggles that women face, Connors created a secondary communal blog called “Her Bad Mother’s Basement,” where women may post anonymously. The “Basement” provides a space for women to write, anonymously, what they do not feel the freedom to say on their personal blogs and to find the support of others in response. Connors posted on the Momtourage community to promote “Love Your Body Day” and used the text of an anonymous post from “Her Bad Mother’s Basement” as a way to
exemplify the importance of women loving their bodies, not only for the sake of themselves but for the sake of their kids. In the post, the anonymous blogger writes of her childhood memories of her mother’s struggle with body image and how the mother’s self-hatred damaged the daughter’s sense of her own body. She found that she never believed her mother’s comments to her about being beautiful because she felt that she looked just like her mom. The writer tells that as a result of her internalization of her mother’s struggles, she eventually developed eating disorders and fears having kids because she does not want to communicate the damaging messages that she received to children of her own. The responses to the post indicate that the woman’s narrative reflects a material reality for many of those who read the blog. One woman says that she wishes she had heard the writer’s narrative before her daughter was born, because she has been guilty of transferring her body issues to her daughter as well. Another woman talks about how she has been consumed by weight/body issues for most of her life, and that it is a constant topic in her interactions with her mom. She talks about how much of her life is consumed with trying to control her weight and writes, “What a waste it is, when my body won't be perfect no matter what I do.” This last phrase encapsulates Bordo’s assertion that women are defined by their inadequacy and expresses the sense of helplessness that such discourses foster.

In many instances, blogs and blogging communities function as confessional spaces for women, where they can voice their struggles with subjectivization. McLaren observes that confession reflects both an acceptance of and deviation from normalizing discourses. It means that one accepts the norms enough to articulate in a formalized way one’s deviation from them. Yet it also shows the ways in which one is defining oneself
and making independent choices. According to McLaren, “confession serves as a link between Foucault’s discussion of the practices of domination that result in the objectification of individuals and the practices of subjectification that signal selfconstitution” (146). Confession reveals the dissonance that the individual feels between the expectations from society about the way she should look and about the way that she wants to feel about herself. This dissonance represents a crucial moment in identity formation. The ideal situation is when the individual feels as if she has the power to resist or as if it is worth the struggle to resist. She can find support for resistance (of whatever sort she desires) online. The internet is full of oppression, but, simultaneously, full of potential for the oppressed to explore their material identities as women.

The technology of the internet allows women to create a new media message concerning the female body, to reclaim the biological processes and natural journeys of womanhood from representations that come from airbrushed or otherwise unnatural images (like those of celebrities or models) proliferated in the media. “The Shape of a Mother” is a blog that attempts to combat the images of pregnancy and postpartum recovery that are offered or made invisible in traditional media. The creator of the site, Bonnie Crowder, developed the blog as a way to bring attention and honor to the bodies of mothers. She describes seeing a mom at a restaurant lifting up a baby carrier and briefly exposing a postpartum belly with extra skin similar to her own. In that moment Crowder began to think about how the postpartum body is completely hidden in society and how, instead, we are bombarded with images of airbrushed, toned, celebrity supermoms who show little or no evidence of having gone through pregnancy and

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22 I was introduced to this source through the research of Lesley Husbands in “Monsters and Miracles: Media Representations of the Pregnant Body.”
childbirth. She writes, “a post-pregnancy body is one of this society's greatest secrets; all we see of the female body is that which is airbrushed and perfect, and if we look any different, we hide it.” Her blog is an attempt to bring this issue into focus and to give women confidence concerning the processes that their bodies are going and have gone through. The site contains images of ordinary women in different stages of pregnancy and postpartum recovery, and functions like a communal blog. Individuals may post pictures and narratives and those who visit the site may leave comments.

Most of the women who post on the “Shape of a Mother” blog are in the process of coming to terms with how their identities have changed as a result of becoming a mother. The women evidence the extent to which their identities and sense of self-worth are tied to their bodies through what they write. A large percentage of the women who post are young and accustomed to being relatively small in size. The process of pregnancy changes their bodies tremendously and many of them express that they worry about the presence of stretch marks and extra pounds. Some women write on the site about working hard to lose weight and post updates at intervals to show their progress. Others indicate that they completely accept the changes of their bodies, observing that their stretch marks and extra skin represent the life that they brought into the world. The majority of the dialog on the site centers on the issue of women’s acceptance of their subjection in practices of female embodiment. These women struggle with the social pressure to be a certain size and shape. And even if they find encouragement through seeing other women, actual women, going through a process similar to their own, the reality is that they still have to live, day in and day out, in an environment that is working
against them, telling them that they are not enough, and that they should be smaller, smoother, tighter, and so on.

While the site does not consistently take the next step of problematizing the social controls that suggest that women should find celebrities as ideals, from a feminist perspective, “The Shape of a Mother” is a powerful site because it seeks to break the silence about real women’s bodies going through a process that is universal and yet almost completely invisible. Although many of the women on the site are still clearly accepting and wrestling with the norms that society offers, they are at least realizing that they are not alone and are finding strength in the idea that there are different definitions of beauty.

Many of the women who post on “The Shape of a Mother” write that they struggle with the process through which their bodies have gone from approximating the social norms for beauty and femininity to becoming almost unrecognizable and distorted. The volume of posts to that effect presents a strong case for the fact that the mother’s body is not valued and respected in our society at large. Rather than celebrating or at least honoring the body for what it has accomplished and what it represents, there is tremendous pressure for women to try to look as if the process never happened. Those who accomplish the disappearing act are saved from the dreaded label of those who have “let themselves go.” In an anonymous post on the site entitled “New Mum, 22, How can I love my body again?” a woman writes about her difficulty with accepting the changes that her body has gone through as a result of pregnancy and childbirth. The writer describes feelings and experiences that are commonly found on the site as she writes:

I just wish so much that I could love my body and stretchmarks and extra weight like so many other [moms] on here seem to be able to do. [I’m] scared that I will
never feel confident or sexy again. I just cry and cry when I look at myself and
[I’m] trying so hard to be positive and thankful, but I just can’t seem to get past it.
The feelings of shame, anger, and embarrassment will almost consume me if I let
them.

The post includes two pictures of the woman’s torso, one from the front and one from the
side. She is wearing a shirt that is raised to expose her marked and rounded stomach,
sides, and abdomen. The images combine with the writer’s narrative to create the sense of
a woman who feels vulnerable and is uncertain about where her identity is located. As
she says elsewhere in the post, “[I’ve] never considered myself to be especially vain or
image obsessed . . .. I am so happy [that] my baby is healthy and happy.” One reader,
who identifies herself as Alicia, responds to this post, asking: “[D]oesn’t it make you
wonder? [W]hat are we ashamed OF exactly? [W]hy are we embarrassed, what have we
done to be embarrassed of? [W]ho is our anger directed toward?” (Alicia). Alicia both
acknowledges and identifies with the anonymous writer’s feelings. She joins the writer
and asks what mothers have done about which they should be embarrassed or ashamed.
Alicia continues with the observation that the longer she hides and worries about her
body, the further she propagates the myth that there is something for her to be ashamed
about.

The words shame, anger, and embarrassment, in the original post and the
subsequent comments reveal the tensions that the women feel about their identities in
relationship to their bodies. The presence of shame suggests anger at the self for being
unable to control one’s deviation from what form of being is socially acceptable. This
anger with the self combines with the dissonance that exists between the individual’s
natural processes and the social narratives that require the individual to perform in
unnatural ways. Although the anger should presumably be directed at the discursive
practices and the norms that arose therein, the common response is for women to internalize this dissonance and to feel shame for something that is out of their control. Blogging allows for the opportunity to externalize and further negotiate what this form of subjection means for women. Crowder, the creator of the “Shape of a Mother” site, brought Alicia’s comment forward as an example of what she is seeking to do through the blog. She writes: “We are all, of course, here to work on ourselves as individuals – and that is deeply important work. But, I hope we are all here to change the world a little bit, too. Even one comment at a time can have astounding effects on people.” Similar to the work being done by bloggers like Connors and Reisman, Crowder’s blog allows women to recognize their subjection and to find the strength among others to resist.

Resistance involves struggle. And, as Bordo describes, the process of resistance for women is tied to the body:

I view our bodies as a site of struggle, where we must work to keep our daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of “docility” and gender normalization. This requires, I believe, a determinedly skeptical attitude toward the seeming routes of liberation and pleasure offered by our culture. It also demands an awareness of the often contradictory relations between image and practice, between rhetoric and reality. (28)

Many of the women who post on “The Shape of a Mother” use the phrase “battle scars” to describe their stretch marks and other physical markers of pregnancy. Some of the women take issue with this description, saying that these things are gifts, indications of a new stage in life, and evidence of having gone through a beautiful process. Characterizing the marks as scars and invoking battle indicates something about the struggle that the authors are going through within themselves and with the pressures around them. They feel embattled about their bodies and defensive about the process of defining and reclaiming them. The discussion of embattlement provides an example of
how the site is a mixture of both subjectivization and subjectification. Just because these women are breaking taboo and breaking silence, transgressing, in one way, does not mean that they do not accept or remain trapped within the narratives that they have been given about their bodies. The narratives that many of the women post alongside the images they present, as well as the comments that many of the women give in response to one another, reveal that even the majority of women are not moving beyond the pressure to be beautiful in a certain way. At the same time, many women are finding strength and acceptance in ways that are counter to the norms. For example, some women post pictures of themselves in which they are wearing make-up and posing in ways that approximate the looks of models. These women demonstrate their subjectivization to the social constructions of what it is to be acceptably feminine in our culture. By contrast, the transgressive moment occurs with those who refuse to sexualize themselves and who turn away from the norms by posting pictures of themselves, unaltered. These two positions reflect the practices of the embodied woman as she functions in “real life.” The self that is projected in the virtual world often reflects the politics and practices of the self in the material world. The online environment provides unique opportunities for women to find alternative practices and communities that support resistance to the oppressive constructions/forces that they encounter in their material lives.

Apart from the practices of the individual women posting, “The Shape of a Mother” blog, itself, is transgressive because it provides a space for discourse that resists affirming the false representations of the female body that proliferate in mainstream media. The site works against the messages that make women feel isolated and ashamed about the processes that their bodies are going through, and allows women to confide in
one another in ways that are otherwise becoming increasingly difficult in a fragmented
and mobile culture. The fact that the site exists and draws such strong responses from the
women who comment reflects the pressure that women feel related to their bodies, how
lost many of them feel when something so natural and fundamental is not talked about.
With privatization of health care, brief hospital stays, and a more transient society,
women are desperate for the sort of interaction that sites like this offer, a virtual
sisterhood that approximates the sort of support that one might have found in the more
intact, insular communities of the past.

As I discussed in the first chapter, one of the most important functions of writing
is to help women to work through the transitions in their lives. While a great deal of the
substance of journaling or blogging involves recording mundane and repetitive events,
the practice of personal writing also allows writers to articulate the experiences and
feelings that they have in the process of going through significant life-changes. Stephen
Kagle observes that people often begin keeping diaries (and I extend this to blogs) during
times of transition in their lives. Writing serves as a way to express things privately or
publicly and to find in oneself (or others) a sounding board in the midst of change. The
“Shape of a Mother” blog helps women with the transitions related to the body and self-
image involved in becoming a mother. Another example of an issue that blogs allow
women to address is that of hairstyle as it relates to race. Latoya Peterson wrote on her
blog about the transition she went through in growing out her hair. In her article, Peterson
explains that while she found numerous sites that support the decision of black women to
wear their hair natural, she found no one online who talked about the difficulty of making
the transition from chemically straightening to wearing a natural. Her post discusses the
process for her, and the difficulties that she encountered practically, socially, and politically along the way. Peterson’s blog post sparked a conversation in the comments where numerous women talked about having had similar experiences and how much they appreciated someone bringing the discussion forward. Because the body is a politicized space, the decisions that a woman makes concerning every aspect of her appearance have the potential to be sensitive.

Because women’s identities and concerns are linked to their body processes and appearance, the presence or absence of “body talk” is fundamental to the sort of identity that the woman develops online. Some bloggers write about their bodies constantly and specifically. This is often the case with “mommy bloggers,” perhaps because they are chronicling a time of life where the body undergoes remarkable changes, many of which are hidden. Many women will write extensively about their weight gain and loss or the intimate discomforts of pregnancy and recovery. Such entries are typically met with responses of empathy from other women to whom the journey is familiar and fall into the category of “silly female stuff” that McLaren refers to. Other bloggers seek to avoid discussions of themselves as physical beings altogether.

Bloggers have the possibility of being completely invisible and genderless online. Yet, those who choose not to reveal their gender in some ways signal an even greater attachment to the body and all that it symbolizes than those who do. Hiding the body throughout online interaction allows a person to work around issues that may overshadow face-to-face encounters or to simply emphasize other aspects of themselves. “Professor Zero” indicates that, for political reasons, she intended to write on her blog without signifiers of her own gender or race. She eventually identified herself as female and
“white” because she found it increasingly difficult to write about subjects that mattered to her without revealing these details about her identity. While Professor Zero was seeking to make a statement about subjectivization by blogging without specific identity cues, she found that there comes a point where it may be more important, politically, for oneself, to voice oneself as a woman, as a person of color, as a man who is engaged with issues of privilege, etc., than to remain anonymous. Although the content of her blog is generally esoteric and her identity in many ways masked, Professor Zero occasionally includes surprisingly concrete details about herself. In a discussion of her own racial identity, for example, Professor Zero talks about her body and the way that she carries herself as signaling or performing race in ways that don’t match her stated identity. While she identifies herself as Anglo, she is often mistaken as Chicana or Creole. Professor Zero goes so far as to talk about how jeans typically worn by people from one community are the only ones that will fit her, attributing some of the confusion about her identity to her wearing that brand. Such discussions feel out of place on the blog in some ways, but they reveal the more personal side of a person who is otherwise elusive to her readers. These statements about her body signal how difficult it is to sustain dissonance with the socially inscribed normative roles that constitute gender and race.

Anonymity is in tension with identity formation. The decisions that a person makes about blogging anonymously often have to do with concerns for safety or privacy, but seen another way, they reflect the limits of the individual’s willingness to engage

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23 I visit Professor Zero’s blog (http://profacero.wordpress.com) regularly and have looked at the posts in her “about me” section concerning the development and revelation of her identity, repeatedly, in the process of researching identity and anonymity online. In the process of editing this chapter I returned to the site and found that Professor Zero had disabled the links to the two posts “Why I am ‘Mexican’” and “Professor Zero and Me” in which she reveals more specific details about her identity related to gender and race – the details that I discuss in this section. By disallowing readers access to these entries, Professor Zero seems to have returned, at least partially, to her original intentions in the blog. This shift shows how the online environment allows for the construction and reconstruction of identity as a recursive process.
certain subject positions. As Craig Scott has noted, it is useful to talk about the construct of anonymity as a continuum. People either blog as themselves, by name, or they blog with some degree of anonymity. In the context of communication theory, Scott describes anonymity as “the degree to which a communicator perceives the message source is unknown and unspecified” (387). He develops a model of anonymity based upon a relationship between two continuums: the degree of source specification and the degree of source knowledge. Source specification refers to the extent to which the source of the communication is distinguished from other possible sources and source knowledge refers to the degree to which the receiver of the communication is familiar with the source (389). In the context of a discussion of blogs, the level of anonymity depends largely on the amount of information the blogger reveals about herself in terms of distinguishing information such as photos, discussion of work, details about her family, or specifics about geographical location. For example, some people will blog anonymously but still have photos on their sites. What they choose to include or exclude has a lot to do with why they are trying to keep certain aspects of their identities private. If it is simply for safety, a person might have images of herself but no information that would give her real name or location. A person who is trying to avoid identification by those she knows, however, would not be likely to have images on her site.

Anonymity is not a neutral device. It is a choice that has implications and consequences. In a sense, every degree of anonymity defines a certain relationship to the politics of identity formation. Thus, for example, Professor Zero’s original intention to be “everyone and no one” in her blog, meant that she was not engaging the identity politics of a specific community. Such a position is difficult to maintain and potentially
dissatisfying for both the blogger and the readers. But it can also serve to shift the focus of the content away from personal matters to other issues of importance to the blogger. Anonymity can serve to hide a person from others but it can also be a means of revelation and access to community. As I noted in the first chapter, one of the primary concerns for women who write is the impact of their writing on their personal relationships. Women often feel that they have to write in ways that do not engage certain subject positions or identities in order to maintain equilibrium in their personal lives. A degree of anonymity can allow women to connect with one another and to access different aspects of their subjectivity than they would otherwise be free to develop. It also makes it easier for women to find commonality within spaces of dissonance. There are different degrees and functions of anonymity. For example, a woman may choose to write with a pseudonym so as not to be identified by family and close friends. With the protection of anonymity in this way, she may feel released to actively participate in communities and conversations online in which she engages and develops aspects of herself that are not otherwise acknowledged in her day to day life. A pseudonym, itself, as a construction of identity, can empower the writer to develop her identity in new ways.

While the internet reflects and solidifies discursive practices, because it is not located in one community or set of practices or environment, it equally allows for agency or transgression. The subject of the woman blogging is a transgression against the traditional construction of the woman as silent, isolated, and relegated to tasks concerning the home. Blogging is a form of care of the self that allows women to interact publicly, to engage in community, and to take charge of the discourses that form their identities.

*Fig Leaves and Scarlet Letters*
In conclusion, I discuss the images of the fig leaf and the scarlet letter as symbols of the ways that a woman’s identity is tied both to her body and to the larger social narratives concerning her physical self. I then apply the discussion to the subject of the woman writing and examine the ways that the images of the fig leaf and scarlet letter emerge in the practices of personal writing online.

The image of the fig leaf as a covering emerges from the Biblical narrative of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The couple, having eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in direct contradiction to God’s instructions, became aware of their nakedness and were ashamed. They then covered themselves with fig leaves in order to feel less exposed – to one another and to their God. As coverings, fig leaves may be adequate but are insubstantial enough to make what is underneath vulnerable to discovery. The leaf is visibly obvious and suggestive of the fact that there is something being hidden. When applying the image to personal writing, the fact that women’s private documents are “littered with fig leaves” is a direct response to discursive practices.

The fig leaf is a form of subjectivization that represents a response by the individual to dissonance with discursive practices. In an act of submission (like confession) or subversion, the individual attempts to erase or hide a subject position in order to eliminate or minimize evidence of dissonance with accepted practices. The fig leaf can reflect feelings of shame and the internalization of degradation, thereby indicating an acquiescence to social pressures and expectations. This may take the form of writing obliquely or not at all about “silly female stuff,” because of a recognition of a hostile audience and the belief that the subject matter is inconsequential. It could involve erasing a post as a result of a controversy or the fear of conflict. However, the fig leaf can
also represent an act of resistance. Because the fig leaf is self-imposed, it can be empowering in the sense that one is choosing what subject positions to emphasize and withhold. Like Professor Zero, the individual may choose, for transgressive reasons, to sublimate (make anonymous) certain aspects of her subjectivity online in order to achieve specific goals. In this interpretation, the fig leaf may be an assertion and a form of control by the individual in response to practices that construct her in ways that she resists.

The enduring image of the scarlet letter represents transgression and isolation but, as with Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, it can create a space of refuge and freedom for its subject. The scarlet letter represents the dangers of the woman as a sexualized being and the fallen woman. It is something that is imposed rather than chosen and is intended as a sign of degradation. Like the use of the phrase “damaged goods” to describe a woman, the one who invokes the scarlet letter suggests that the woman has degraded herself, but is in fact enacting the degradation by implying that the woman is a commodity that must pass inspection. The scarlet letter reveals dissonance with discursive practices and between subject positions. Accepting the scarlet letter can become a powerful position for the woman because it is visible and she creates dissonance through the representation of resistance to normative discourses.

This chapter is about the ways that women navigate among discourses and practices that construct them as subjects. The images of the fig leaves and scarlet letters reflect the possibilities for women both to be subjected and to take control of their subjectification. In the following chapter I explore the ways in which the presence of audience shapes the practices of identity and the writing process for women who blog.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE PRESENCE OF AUDIENCE

Once upon a time, I started a blog. I approached it as a place where I could do freewriting for my dissertation and develop some ideas that interested me. I also wanted to write about my family and experiences as a new mom and a graduate student. I hoped to interact with other people who could identify with my experiences. I thought that I would not only be able to write freely, but that I would naturally draw a small crowd of women from around the blogosphere who were in a stage of life similar as I, and with whom I could be friends. After a couple of months, I had accumulated a handful of regular readers, but I found myself dissatisfied with our exchanges. Those who read and responded to my writing did not engage the issues that were most important or compelling for me, and I took their silence to represent either disagreement or lack of interest. I found myself changing what I wrote about in response to their nonresponses, which, in turn, left me increasingly dissatisfied with blogging and unmotivated to write. Part of my difficulty with blogging stemmed from a lack of clarity about my desires and decisions related to audience. How much should audience matter? I wanted a space to write to people as if they were my friends and family – meaning I wanted readers who cared about my ideas, my family, and my work. And, I didn’t want to tell my friends and family about my blog. Writing for the people in my day-to-day life felt too risky. In retrospect, the problem seems pretty clear. I was putting unrealistic expectations on perfect strangers and shutting out the people who might actually be able to respond to my
felt needs. At the time I believed that the internet would offer the camaraderie and community that I lacked elsewhere. I saw that blogging communities could be a link to the outside world for people, like new mothers, who feel isolated, fragile, and unsure.

I eventually became stymied by having an immediate audience of strangers for my writing. While the blog was a space that I created and defined, I began to realize that I had invited an unlimited number of unfamiliar people into my personal space and was, in essence, performing my life for them. Had I invited people that I knew to read the blog, they would have served as a buffer between me and the unknown masses (granted, “masses” of people were not actually reading my blog). When I created the blog I felt as if writing anonymously would give me a greater sense of freedom. In reality I found it difficult to write for strangers who were markedly different from me and one another. I was always losing some of my audience with the things I wrote.

Community and connection are available online, but they do not necessarily occur quickly. The majority of bloggers either begin writing with an audience of friends and family, or they become active members of an online community and then create a space of their own that is connected to people from that community. Writing for known entities allows the blogger to address and interact with specific people, aside from those who simply happen upon the space. For example, one of the women that I interviewed, Wynne, participated in a community of people who were fans of a particular group of movies and who would write “fan fiction” (narratives that build upon the stories of movies or shows that the fans follow) about them.

Wynne: I was on a different sort of forum before I had my actual journal. … We were all writing on fanfiction.net. And you communicate on that by commenting on people’s stories and their responding. So there’s a lot of back and forth. And then eventually an email will get exchanged. So there was already a community
built up over there. And then for some reason we all migrated over to Livejournal. And it wasn’t an organized thing. Nobody said “let’s all get Livejournals.” It just sort of happened that we all opened journals at the same time and so that allowed just a lot more freedom of what you could do and how you could communicate. And I’m still friends with everybody I was talking to in that first sort of introduction.

An approach like Wynne’s provides a natural development of relationship online through the sharing of a common interest. She describes the process of finding the original community as similar to finding friends in real life:

I remember when I first started getting involved in some of this stuff that I remember seeing, just like you see on a school campus, cliques of people. And I remember thinking, “They look, they seem fun” and almost following them around… virtually.

Most people start blogs that are read by those with whom they have existing relationships. Having an audience of people one already knows eliminates some of the risks related to writing about one’s personal life, but it also creates other risks.

This chapter is about the ways in which the presence of audience defines the practice of blogging. In the chapter two, I laid the groundwork for a discussion of women’s blogs by demonstrating that many blogs by women fall into the genre and lineage of personal diaries. Although there are many different sorts of blogs by both men and women, the most common type, the focus of this project, is the online diary. This chapter continues the discussion of personal blogs by exploring the tensions between the blogger as creator of a personal textual space and her readers as participants.

Following a brief discussion of the diary as a public text, this chapter is divided into four sections, each of which provides insight, through qualitative data and textual analysis of selections from actual blogs, into the dynamics surrounding the role/presence of audience in the blogosphere. In Section One, I explain that the blog serves as “a room
of one’s own” for many women and argue that audience complicates the process of creating and sustaining the blog as one’s own space. In the second section I show how the blogger’s construction of audience is a rhetorical maneuver that enables her to write and to protect her interests. In the third section, I explain the importance of the mundane to the diary genre and explore the ways that writing about everyday material creates intimacy between bloggers and their readers. In the final section, I argue that practical issues of privacy have a material impact on the limits of one’s virtual room.

The Diary as a Public Text

The public nature of the blog, while a seeming contrast to the diary, actually reflects a return to the practice of early diary traditions. Although most people consider diaries to be private documents, this conception reflects a twentieth-century use of such texts. Suzanne Bunkers explains that in the process of writing her collection on the diaries of Midwestern American women and girls, she realized that for the women she studied (covering a time period of 150 years), “diaries have not necessarily been the intensely secretive texts that come to mind when most present-day readers imagine diaries with little locks and keys” (10). She observes that while most diaries in the nineteenth century and before were private texts in that they were not published, they were, in fact, often openly shared with family and friends. Many times diaries were collaborative texts, maintained by different members of a family (typically female) as a way to create a document, or “an artifact of material culture,” for generations to come. Bunkers asserts that “based on its complexity of purpose and audience, the diary occupies a unique place in literature and history as a text that can be both personal and communal” (10). These qualities of the diary that Bunkers describes, that it may be “both personal
and communal,” correspond with the sorts of writing that are taking place online. It follows, then, that a “public” diary, such as an online diary or blog, is not a contradiction in terms. Rather, it is a return to, or a continuation of, a tradition that has a long history in written form. The blog or online diary is an example of Carolyn Marvin’s observation that “new practices do not so much flow directly from technologies that inspire them as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings (qtd. in Renov 287). Through the dynamics introduced by writing online, the blog combines the traditions of the diary as both a communal and a private space to write.

For many women, the traditions of the diary as an open text included an awareness of writing as a vulnerable, and at times risky act. Because women’s writing has historically been located in the private realm and concerned topics related to daily tasks and events within the family and home, the documents have been more vulnerable to the judgment, censure, misunderstanding, hostility, and dismissal of others. The images of fig leaves and scarlet letters reflect this vulnerability. Women writers have always had to be concerned with audience. They either write with the circumspection of fig leaves or expose themselves to the censure of the scarlet letter. Elizabeth Pepys, for example, wife of the famous diarist, Samuel Pepys, faced censure of her writing at the hand of her husband. Ironically, knowledge of her writing exists only as a result of her husband’s record of destroying her papers. As he accounts in his diary of January 9, 1663, upon hearing passages of her personal writings that she shared with him, he demanded that she tear them up. When she asked that he not make her do so, he responded thus (an excerpt from his account):

I forced it from her and tore it, and withal took her other bundle of papers from her and leapt out of the bed and in my shirt clapped them into the pockets of my
breeches that she might not get them from me; and having got on my stocking and breeches and gown, I pulled them out one by one and tore them all before her face, though it went against my heart to do it, she crying and desiring me not to do it. (qtd in Simons 252).

From that point on there is no evidence that Elizabeth Pepys wrote at all. It is her husband whom historians credit with the valuable account of the Restoration era. As Judy Simons observes, Elizabeth Pepys “has been allowed no independent life, nor evidence of any independent thought, apart from that subsumed in [her husband’s] interpretation of events.” Simons points out that this incident offers insight into “the buried practice of female diary-keeping and the reasons why many such documents presumably failed to survive” (253). Elizabeth Pepys’s writings apparently served as a threat to her husband’s sense of structure and identity. Although he admitted her unhappiness and her feelings of entrapment, he offered no outlet for her to express them. If Elizabeth Pepys continued to write, it is clear that she had to be very circumspect about what she put to the page.

Narratives of silencing and censuring personal writing are not unusual, nor are they limited to the spouses of women who ventured to write. Many diaries are edited extensively, even destroyed, by diarists themselves or by other family members, either in an effort to protect and preserve a given image of the diarist and family or, perhaps, because the document is not seen as valuable to keep. In the introduction to The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing, Jennifer Sinor records an account of a conversation that she had with her great-aunt, Billie Schuneman, in which her aunt testifies to the importance of writing in her life as well as the pain of the disregard of others. Sinor asked her aunt about writing and Schuneman responded that she wrote quite a lot when she was a young woman. One day after she got married, Schuneman was looking for her box that had all of her papers in it:
[A]nd I was looking for [my diaries] one day and I asked [my husband] where they were – where was the box of my things – and he said, Oh, I took them out and burned them – said, you don’t want any of that stuff – I burned it. My heart. Take your writings and it’s like killing your child – I just – I looked at him and I thought who is this person? I don’t know him. I’ve known him since he was thirteen. I didn’t know he was a murderer….I mourned. (Extraordinary Work 3)

There is no way of knowing if Schuneman’s husband was truly indifferent to her work or was acting more aggressively, as with Pepys. In either case, the result was that the woman was silenced and hurt. Pepys and Schuneman’s experiences represent conflicts between the differing values and expectations that people attach to literate practices. In each case the husband did not value the woman’s writing. It was either considered, as by Samuel Pepys, dangerous and inappropriate or, conversely, by Schuneman’s husband, inconsequential. Schuneman invokes the idea of incarnation in her accusation of her husband as a murderer. She indicates that the diary is an extension of the self and asserts that an act against one’s writing is an act against the person. The diary that is edited or destroyed represents the person that has received such silencing and dismissal.

Blog writers also fear silencing and censorship. One of my fundamental assumptions in this project is that blogs, as they are currently used by millions of people, fall within the lineage of personal writing that has taken place for centuries, in diaries. As with diaries, the idea of audience is a complicating factor for bloggers and presents an element of risk for the writer. In many ways, the presence and nature of audience serves as a point of contrast between the two mediums. However, as this chapter explores, in blogs, as in diaries, the tension between author and audience defines the writing process for both.

*Claiming a Space of One’s Own*
I approached this project with the belief that blogging is a way for women to create “rooms of their own,” yet the narratives I have found reveal that creating a space for oneself online is complicated and often thwarted by the presence of an immediate audience. For those women who write in diaries and blogs, the physical diary or the virtual space created by the blog becomes a symbolic room that belongs to the woman alone. She may choose to let others in, but the degree to which she has control over that space is the degree to which she has the freedom to write. Virginia Woolf’s claim in “A Room of One’s Own” is that a woman needs both a room of her own and financial support in order to write. For Woolf, it seems that money means independence from the constraints involved in either earning money to live on or in maintaining relationships upon which one is dependent for support. For some, however, emotional support is just as critical as financial. Women need people who believe in the power and ability of the writer and who are involved in the writer’s process in ways that bring her strength and allow her the space, either through presence or absence, to voice herself without fear of judgment. Many people have a supportive audience both on and offline. However, more often than not, writers must also face those who express criticism or judgment, when they put their thoughts online.

Like traditional diarists, blog writers sometimes experience censorship and silencing in their efforts to create a safe space to write. One of the women I interviewed, Valerie, describes a time early in her blogging experience when her husband confronted her about her writing. She had unintentionally left her blog page open on the computer and he found that she had written about him by name.
Valerie: He said something like, “you know I’m sure you think it’s cute to have a blog and really fun and all to be writing about whatever it is you want to write about. But, keep my freaking name out of your blog.”

Valerie describes being chastised for writing about her husband by name and without his knowledge. She goes on to admit that she had not thought through the implications of writing about her husband in a specific way and accepts as fair his demand that she stop using his name:

It’s fair. I can’t really…maybe I had some illusions about what is public and what is private and how he would feel. If he was writing things about me in a blog, I would feel upset. So after that I stopped using his name. … I’m sure he knows that I still blog but I don’t flaunt it. When I finish posting I’ll clear out my cookies so that he can’t go back and read it. … I don’t talk about him in the same way that I was at that particular moment, which, to be fair, was a really rough moment for us as a couple.

Valerie explains that the line between what is public and what is private when it comes to writing one’s life online is sometimes unclear. Her husband, however, had strong feelings about the limits of privacy, and she allowed him to define at least some of the parameters of the space for her. Apart from the issue of boundaries that the couple negotiates in this example, the way that the husband characterizes his wife’s writing exemplifies a sort of antagonism and dismissal that one may observe in the Pepys and Schuneman narratives. In this situation the husband does not physically destroy what she has written, yet he treats it as both silly (“cute,” “really fun and all”) and dangerous. Although Valerie does not directly speak about her husband’s dismissal of her writing, she does mention several changes that she made following that conversation. Valerie’s experience calls to mind Joan Bolker’s observation that “one of the most important prerequisites of the creative process for a woman is the assurance that her work will not rupture the important connections in her life” (195). As becomes evident over the course of her narrative,
Valerie’s writing was both a response to tension and a source of tension in her personal life.

Writing online involves emotional risk. As Wynne observes through a description of her writing community, posting things online often creates a vulnerable position for the writer. She observes that, “even if it’s anonymous, [online writers] are still exposing themselves to a very large peer group and opening themselves up to comments.” In the face of such exposure, the presence of supportive readers becomes critically important to the writer and the functioning of the community more generally. In our interview, Wynne described the ways the writers responded to one another in her community. Her discussion captures the essence of what I have observed in many blogging communities; that is, women (and, in this example, girls) are taking risks with their writing, supporting one another, and defending against those who are critical. Wynne says that she has never written negative comments about someone’s writing online, “even if it was garbage,” because it does not make sense to “crush” someone who is taking risks with her writing. She concludes that the writers seem to gain confidence from the experience of posting their work and having others respond to them, even if the responses are not all positive.

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24 The community that Wynne describes in this example is the fan fiction community that she participated in before she and other members of this community “migrated” to Livejournal and began blogging. Wynne explains that she and the women in her blog community continue to write, read, and review one another’s fan fiction. They simply post their creative writing on their blogs now, in addition to other posts about their thoughts, experiences, and interests.

25 One might expect that a community that involves teenagers would be involve more crass or cruel exchanges than a community of adults, and that, therefore, the comparison of this community to communities of women online is imbalanced. The reality is that the relative anonymity provided by the internet allows and often motivates individuals to use a level of discourse that is more harsh than they would use in face to face interactions. Although there is typically more maturity among adults than adolescents who write online, the principles that Wynne describes are echoed among communities of all ages. I have observed some extremely cruel exchanges on “mommy blogs,” for example. Often, with age, people simply become more sophisticated in their nastiness.
[The women who blog in the fanfiction community] get an internet street smarts about them. They do get a thick skin from there, if they’ve never left the corner of the gym [or participated much socially] in real life. You know, they’re completely isolated, but they’ll take on a troll\(^{26}\) in a fanfiction community. And a troll is a person who just goes and leaves nasty comments for no real reason. So, they’ll stand up for themselves there and they’ll find other people who will stand up for them because one thing is that all of the cliques and peer groups that are so entrenched in junior high and high school are gone. […] So, you’ve never said a word to anybody in your school, in your class – you may find that you have a completely loud voice on the internet and…I think that some of these girls find that some of these girls will support them, either from their own age group or have, say a twenty-nine year old come in and say “that was fine and don’t worry about her. She’s just being ugly, you know, in her comments.”

As Wynne observes, it is common for bloggers to encounter “trolls” or people who are responding to their writing in a way that is judgmental or hurtful. Some people, like those who are new to blogging, are more vulnerable than others to these sorts of negative engagement.

Bloggers find different ways to protect themselves from the negative responses of others, and one of the most effective forms of protection is writing within the context of a supportive community of other bloggers. Women’s blogging communities, like Blogher.com organize around many different topics, including art, business, body image, travel, sports, entertainment, and politics. One of the largest categories for women is those who write about motherhood and family, “mommy bloggers,” and who use their blogs as a place to post pictures of their kids, to exchange narratives about pregnancy and

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\(^{26}\) The presence of “trolls” is a serious issue for writers online. Because of the anonymity of the internet, there is little real accountability for people’s comments. In his *New York Times Magazine* article on internet trolls, Mattathias Schwartz describes the problem of people posting anonymously as creating “a panopticon in reverse – nobody can see anybody, and everybody can claim to speak from the center.” Most publicly available interfaces have instituted a series of steps (such as requiring users to log in to make comments, allowing other readers to flag comments as inappropriate or abusive, and having software that blocks certain language) to reduce the ease with which trolls can harass people on these sites. Yet, the reality is that people have a lot of freedom to make cruel and hate-filled comments almost anywhere online and there are standard ways that people use to circumvent the various safeguards that companies put in place. There are countless stories of very abusive exchanges that occur online, including what is termed “cyber-terrorism” – more aggressive emotional and character assaults that may ultimately result in real life violence.
childbirth, and to voice struggles with particular aspects of motherhood. Mommy bloggers can be very friendly and supportive of one another, but there are countless examples of women who post on topics like breastfeeding or potty training and receive a storm of sharp comments in response. In her “Superhero” blog, Andrea Scher posted about the difficulties she was experiencing with getting her son to sleep at night and found that she was not prepared for how controversial the post would be:

So I have to admit that I’m not sure it was a good idea to share our sleeping woes in real time… and was naïve not to realize that it would be such a sensitive topic. (I’m obviously a new parent!) A friend of mine read my last post and said, “Uh oh… Andrea doesn’t know this is a landmine…. ” I appreciate how respectful and supportive this community is (thank you for your support!) and also noticed how hard it was to hear anything at all that casts doubt on the way we were doing things. This parenthood business is full of insecurity and vulnerability… And there are clearly no right answers. (March 24, 2007)

Here, Scher implies that she probably would not have written about this issue as she did, had she realized how controversial the subject matter would among her readers. She admits that she is new to this sort of conversation, which brings to mind Wynne’s observation that bloggers develop an “internet street smarts” over time. Bloggers learn, through the responses of others and how those responses impact them as writers, what topics are safe and what topics are potential “landmines.” This example represents the sorts of highly personal topics that women bring up online and demonstrates how vulnerable such topics can make the writer feel, particularly because the response is so immediate (“in real time”). Scher emphasizes the support she feels but is clearly affected by the sense of judgment that emerged in some of the responses to her post. This tension

27 Mothers are a particularly vulnerable population of bloggers because the people and topics that they write about concern the heart and home directly. More research needs to be done on the discourses of motherhood, specifically as they play themselves out among women within the blogosphere.
between the support and judgment of audience shapes the writing process and experience for those who blog.

One of the things we can see from these examples is how the immediacy of blogging causes the document to become, in some ways, a co-production between author and audience. In her study, *The Mirror and the Veil: An Overview of American Online Diaries and Blogs*, Viviane Serfaty distinguishes between the diary (both traditional and online) and other forms of autobiography, making the observation that diaries take place *in* time, as opposed to in retrospect. In her discussion of Serfaty’s text, Sarah Michelle Ford notes that the distinction between the traditional diary and the online diary or blog is “the immediacy of the reader.” Ford observes that while traditional diaries are sometimes published, their publication almost always occurs at a time much later than when the documents were actually written. Whereas, she claims, “blogs bear a greater resemblance to a serialized novel than to a published diary….The reader ‘watches’ the events unfold in something vaguely approximating ‘real time’” (Ford). Because the writer is conscious of this immediate audience, the reader naturally impacts the production of the text.

In addition to its immediate presence, the audience naturally becomes a co-producer of the blog through the comments feature. Readers of blogs may leave comments on specific entries by clicking on a link at the bottom of the entry and typing in a response. The blogger has several choices related to controlling comments, such as leaving them completely open, disallowing anonymous comments, only allowing friends to comment, or only allowing comments that she specifically approves to show up on the page. Serfaty observes that comments “set up a dense network of echoes and correspondences between diarist and audience” (52). Ford goes a bit further to suggest
that “the blog as a text consists not only of the entries created by the diarist under the influence of their [sic] readers (both known and unknown), but also of all comments appended onto an entry. While the blog may be ‘officially’ authored by only one person, in fact the text is actively created by that original author along with all commenters” (Ford).

In order for women to maintain a sense of the space as their own, it is important for them to be able to set limits on the “co-production” that occurs through the comments they receive. Blogs and online journals are interactive by nature, but there are ways to sidestep interaction. For example, if a blogger would like to post about something publicly but simply is not interested in receiving the feedback of others, she can turn off the comment function on the post itself. This use of comment control reflects a degree of “internet street smarts” on the part of the blogger because it indicates that the blogger understands her power, her own limits, and the potential of others to challenge the choices she makes or expresses through writing. One of the women I interviewed, Claire, offers an example of a time that she closed comments as an assertive gesture.

A couple of years ago I just posted about how depressed I was about living in the South. I just had a bunch of bad things happen, like one after the other. […] And this one friend of mine […] posted something and he said something to me that was very racially inflammatory. I was just appalled and I thought he’s such a smart guy. Why is he saying that? So the day after I made a post saying, “look, if you’re going to post comments in my journal you can say things that are sexually explicit and you can use all the foul language that you want, but I’m not tolerating any sort of racist language. That’s just my rule.” And in my head I thought, and I don’t give a flip what you think about it. So I just turned off the comments. And it was funny because that dude defriended me. Even though I didn’t single him out but I think he got the point. And I’m like oh well. Good riddance. And so, I didn’t take that post down, although I did delete his comment, because I’m thinking, I’m not even going to let him have a voice. I’m sorry. […] I just made that post very matter of factly, like look, these are my rules and if you don’t like them well then just too bad. And I guess he took the hint. But I didn’t intend for him to not want
to read my blog or for me not to read his. I just feel as if I want to create a certain space and there’s just no room in my space for that kind of stuff.

Claire’s narrative exemplifies the way in which bloggers can protect their space through controlling access and editing (in this case, removing) unwanted material that others bring. Claire used her no-comments-allowed post to establish some rules about the interaction on her blog and demonstrated that although there is a certain amount of co-production that occurs, ultimately the “room” belongs to the writer. As Amy Wink observes, “More than any form, life writing, encumbered as it may be with social and personal constraints, is the story the writer gets to tell” (xxii).

A power dynamic plays out between writer and audience in the commenting process. Through her decisions about access to comments, the blogger communicates something about her relationship with her audience and, implicitly, how she wants them to respond. In an example that contrasts with Claire’s narrative, Wynne links turning off the comments with a blogger’s feeling down or depressed. As she explains, “It’s usually a signal to all of us that if you turn off comment you don’t want anybody to say anything about it, that you’re really low, because you don’t even want to talk about it.” Wynne’s point that turning off comments is generally an indication that the writer doesn’t want to open up the subject at hand for discussion, holds true throughout the blogosphere. What differs from case to case is why the writer does not want discussion. Here, Wynne’s explanation is that the writer is depressed. Interestingly, the example that she offers to demonstrate the use of turning off comments seems to serve a different purpose than she purports:

It was like feeling really bad, no details, everybody have a nice summer. You know, really cryptic, melodramatic, kind of like I don’t know when I’ll be seeing you again kind of stuff. And I turned my comments off. And a girl in Mississippi
sent me an email that evening and she was like *everything okay? Like, you doing alright?* People usually know that when you turn comments off, something’s wrong.

Through Wynne’s explanation of herself as writing things that were both “cryptic” and “melodramatic,” it becomes clear that she was saying one thing and wanting another. She “said” that she did not want anyone to contact her by turning off her comments. Yet, she wanted the people in her online community to respond to her emotional needs and to check up on her, as her friend from Mississippi did. Otherwise, she would not have written anything. She seems to provide a test for her readers and friends, requiring them to put forth the effort to work around her control of the comments in order to demonstrate their care for her. She wants a response, but because she is feeling bad about herself, she makes it harder for people to be supportive. Thus, they either do not respond, thereby confirming her doubts about the situation being desperate, or they persevere and show her how much she is loved. Rather than asserting control over the space as Claire did through her “comments-off” decision, Wynne uses it as a strategy to indirectly engage her readers.

*The Audience as Subject*

The presence of an immediate yet invisible audience is a challenge for bloggers because they must engage readers in ways that are simultaneously mediated and direct. Like fig leaves and scarlet letters, the relative anonymity and physical distance offered by a virtual space mediate the interaction between the writer and reader; yet the immediacy of the audience makes the intellectual and emotional engagement more direct. As I discussed in the previous section, bloggers use different strategies to control the interactive environment in order to keep themselves from being too vulnerable to readers.
online. In the discussion that follows, I address the rhetorical strategies that bloggers use to create the audiences they desire or need. As Walter Ong points out in a discussion of writing more generally, it is not really possible for one to know one’s actual audience. He concludes that writers create fictional audiences for themselves as a way to overcome this impossibility. Ong’s conception of audience is useful to explain how the blogger deals with an invisible yet immediate readership as well as how the blogger assigns specific roles to the readers through the composition of different posts. The writer creates an imaginary or likely audience, based upon her own experiences as a reader as well as her personal desires for the reception of the text. The reader of the text then is faced with the choice, as Ong observes, to either accept or reject that role assigned by the author.

Even if the blogger is writing for the audience that she hopes to create, the fictionalization of audience is only an experiment. The writer cannot count on the audience’s acceptance of the role assigned to them, but she can use rhetorical strategies to engage the sort of audience that she desires. A common strategy that bloggers employ to both engage and maintain distance from their readers is the use of humor. Vivienne Serfaty observes that humor plays with a mixture of form and content and “condensation and displacement,” adding that “by warping language ever so slightly, humor therefore points to the existence of a chasm yawning underneath ordinary words” (71). Humor is a form of telling the truth at a slant, allowing the writer to conceal and reveal information simultaneously.

Humor allows writers to address potentially sensitive topics with distance and to communicate to readers a desire for them to do the same. The ideas of displacement and the chasm beneath ordinary words become particularly relevant to a discussion of one of
Margo’s posts. Margo’s online community is made up of people from her life, and she writes openly about personal and political issues. Because of her reported ease with writing in the online environment, it initially seemed as if all of the questions that were of interest to me, all of the issues surrounding writing for myself that brought me to this project, had no relevance to her experience. Then we got to the question about truth. Margo felt that she was the same in real life as she was online, that she had nothing to hide. But, when I posed the question, she said, “Do I tell the truth when I write? That’s an interesting question.” She talked about self-censorship and the way that we recount events so as to make them seem less embarrassing or incriminating. She addressed the way that we give meaning to events by selecting to describe them out of the thousands of things that happen to us. Then, I asked her how she thinks audience plays into that process of selection and recounting. The following excerpt is a part of her response.

Margo: I’ll give an example of the way that audience plays into it. So, here’s one thing that happened to me that was really humiliating, and I’ve told this story again and again. Except for my mother being completely homophobic, probably the worst case of public homophobia that has ever happened to me was in the Paris metro where two drunk guys argued about whether I was a guy or not. And I ended up writing about this on Livejournal in a really funny way. I reformulated it so that it was hilarious, like oh my god I can’t believe this really happened. It was so funny...let me tell you guys about this. But it was incredibly painful at the time. So I think, is that telling the truth? Not exactly. It’s not exactly telling the truth because it’s making something else of a situation that was painful. I mean I told the truth, the facts are there in the story, but….

EM: Did people respond...did they see through that?

Margo: I don’t know. I don’t think that anyone was oh my god are you okay? I think it was oh my god that was hilarious because I made it hilarious because that’s what I do. Like when I retell that story, and I dramatically enhance it, it’s really funny stuff. But it was not funny when it was happening at all.

Margo’s response provides an interesting example of telling the truth “slant” as Emily Dickinson puts it. Through her words Margo guides the audience to a position in which
they are willing to accept her presentation as the truth; they are able to substitute the way she makes them feel (entertained) for the way that she felt at the time (embarrassed and hurt). This substitution exemplifies the idea of displacement that Serfaty describes. As I attempted to reflect in my question (“Did they see through that?”), I was surprised at the response of Margo’s readers. To me, the “chasm” beneath her words was immediately evident. One would expect her audience to be more in tune with her actual feelings, as these are people from real life that she is communicating with. Yet there are several other factors that may explain the general interpretation of the story. First, Margo is a gifted story-teller. She has the ability to engage and guide her audience to respond the way that she intends for them to respond. She can make virtually invisible those things or feelings that she desires to hide. Second, as she pointed out elsewhere in the interview, at least some of her “friends” are actually acquaintances, people from work or elsewhere who happen to have Livejournal accounts. Third, there are at least some in her friend community who are very familiar with the sorts of homophobic experiences that she describes here, and who laugh with her in the knowing way of those who choose to laugh instead of cry.

But, in the end, what is the truth of the situation that Margo describes? Is it true that it was a funny experience? Clearly not. Later in the interview she talks specifically about the difference between experiences she finds funny and those that are simply painful:

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28 After writing this section, I looked back in Margo’s archive and found the post that she describes here. There were only two comments from others on the post, and neither treated the incident as funny. Both friends seemed at a loss as to how to respond. One asked if this sort of thing happened more frequently in Paris than where Margo lived in the States, and the other just said how much she cared about Margo and sent her hugs. Margo responded to each comment. I don’t know how this information changes the telling of the event in the interview because clearly the response to the story more generally has been for people to laugh. At least that has been Margo’s impression.
But it happens to me, I’d say, once a week. Someone calls me “sir” or, you know, I’ve had it happen in really egregious ways where I’ve been “sir”ed throughout an entire meal or [people think] I have the wrong bathroom. … So, on Livejournal I actually have a tag29 called “gender trouble” and so I would write these humorous stories about getting mistaken for a guy under the tag “gender trouble” and they are usually comical situations but sometimes they’re painful. Like I don’t care; I cultivate the masculine in my appearance. It’s not like I’m surprised. So when it’s a mistake it’s funny but when it’s homophobic it’s not. And sometimes it’s a really thin line.

At the end this passage Margo clarifies that the difference between an experience of mistaken identity being humorous or painful lies in the position of the audience. The difference, for her, is in the presence or absence of prejudice, because for the communities that she has created, this is the fulcrum for determining whether they understand her experiences. The use of humor provides a shield of sorts, a mediator that allows her to simultaneously share the experience and control for the responses of others.

The idea of controlling the responses of others manifests itself in different ways among those I interviewed. Humor provides one way to control the response of the audience because the author basically says to the reader, “this is how I want you to see this event. Please just go along with the interpretation that I am offering.” Of course, the most effective way to maintain control over a particular issue and to prevent the responses of others from being hurtful or frustrating is simply not to post about it. For example, Margo says that she never posts about her weight—“Because it’s incredibly personal for me and because I don’t want to deal with the people who are going to be like oh my god! Way to go!” Margo’s rationale that the subject of weight is “incredibly personal” reveals that she is conscious of audience and evidences the fact that for her

29 A “tag” is way of creating categories or files for one’s posts on a blog. Whenever one creates a post one is given the opportunity to identify a tag (or several tags) that usually consists of a key word related to the topic(s) of the post. It is common to have multiple tags for some posts. Each tag word becomes a link and if one clicks on the link, it will bring up all of the posts on the blog that have that particular tag.
there are definite limits to what she is willing to write online – limits that might not exist in a paperbound journal. The narratives about gender demonstrate that she does write about highly personal subjects online, but the statement about weight reveals her desire to keep some topics private. Namely, she does not want some things to be open for conversation.

*The Intimacy of Sharing the Mundane*

Bloggers must negotiate a tension between simply writing for themselves and writing for an audience. This tension may surround any number of subjects that the writer hesitates to publicly engage. Sometimes, however, it is not the sensitive topics that give bloggers pause, but the overwhelmingly mundane. The reality of personal writing is that it is primarily made up of regular accounts of ordinary happenings.

Writing about the ordinary and the daily is different when there is an immediate audience, such as writers encounter in the blogosphere. In my conversations with my participants, it became clear that having an actual audience with whom they are actively interacting affects the ways that these women write about their daily routines. Each woman alluded to a desire to entertain her readers, which naturally complicates the process of writing about the ordinary aspects of life. Even for Valerie, who claims that she has almost no readers, the idea of audience is central. She talked about her obsession with keeping track of who visited her blog:

> I have a counter[^30] so that I can look at ISPs [internet service providers] and returning visitors and first time visitors and where on the map they are coming from, and so far, from what I’ve seen, it’s pretty true that I visit my blog the most.

[^30]: A counter or “sitemeter” is a feature that one can add to a blog. It keeps track of how many people visit the blog, how long they are there, what they look at, and where they came from. There are a lot of implications that this little modification carries with it, not least of which, the ability to track one’s audience more directly. The counter service can identify the code (ISP) that links back to an individual’s internet provider.
And then at a very far second, for both my personal and professional blogs, one or two people that come to it. Although, there was one person, somewhere in California, who kept coming to my personal blog...I was so curious, like, who is this person? And it’s interesting, at one point I was trying to write better because [this person] was like my one authentic return reader. It was my readership of one, outside of friends and family.

Once she realized that someone outside of her “real life” circle of friends and family was reading her words, Valerie was more conscious of the things that she wrote. The person was considered “authentic” and therefore a source of motivation for writing in interesting ways. The idea here is that an authentic reader is someone who is not connected to one in “real life” or, someone who does not have any personal obligation to read one’s material. In a sense, there is greater pressure from these authentic readers because they are strictly reading based upon the nature of the blog content. Those who have no personal commitment to the blogger are simply looking for something interesting or informative to read and may have no compulsion to persevere through boring material.

Sometimes the awareness of audience causes bloggers to worry about their posts being considered boring. The consensus among my participants was that no one wanted to bore her readers with the details of her days. As Wynne said, “I always sit down with the goal to make it funny because people don’t want to read me moan and groan.” Claire adds an observation about the mundane, saying

I try not to keep my stuff too mundane because one of my friends does kind of do that. I don’t mind so much because she’s kind of funny, but I’m like I don’t care what you knit today. Sometimes she posts good stuff too. I try not to [post mundane material] because I feel that it’s sort of gratuitous.

In her statement, Claire claims that writing about the ordinary or “boring” aspects of one’s life is gratuitous. Her observation suggests that the writer is self-indulgent to write about the mundane details of her life, and that the reader is right to expect streamlined
and “interesting” content. Claire’s remark that her friend sometimes “posts good stuff too” reveals her assumption that the reader is in an evaluative position with regard to the blogger’s personal accounts. Her position implies that the blogger should be more consumer-minded, which is not unusual for more topical or overtly political blogs. Yet, within the context of a personal or life-blogging community, this perspective represents a sort of judgment and entitlement on the part of the reader that adds negative pressure to the blogging process.

The idea that one should seek to maintain the interest of readers with one’s content is a common point made within the blogosphere, one that prompted the success of books like Margaret Mason’s bestseller, *No One Cares What You Had for Lunch: 100 Ideas for Your Blog*. In her introduction, Mason asserts the following:

> Like any endeavor, you make a choice when you start a blog. You either put in some effort to make something engaging and creative that builds community, or you toss a “me too” onto the growing pile of repetitive, navel-gazing content.

(Mason 2003, xiv)

Mason’s opinion is that good blogs require effort and they seek to engage an audience. The book contains a series of one hundred writing prompts for bloggers to use as ways to write about themselves more creatively in order “keep visitors coming back.” Mason believes that audience matters because blogging is about community, not just the self. With this community (i.e. audience)-focused perspective, Claire’s sarcastic quips about the gratuitous mundane (“Yeah, it’s great that you went out for Italian tonight, really.”) have a rationale.

Bloggers often apologize for “boring” content as a way to communicate self-awareness. Such deprecation is a direct response to those, like Claire or Mason, who feel that certain content is so ordinary that it is better left unposted. Vivienne Serfaty suggests
that people use self-deprecating statements, a soft form of humor, to offset criticism, to communicate self-awareness, and to avoid oversentimentality (77). Of the women that I interviewed, Wynne talked the most about entertaining (versus boring) her audience with her writing:

   Everybody puts on their journal as a form of entertainment for their friends. … In fact, when you get the more straightforward posts, people almost always put an apology at the end. “I’m sorry this was boring. … I couldn’t come up with anything today.”

She affirmed Serfaty’s claim when, in the midst of her explanation she asserted, “If nothing else, I have a robust sense of self-awareness.” But what does it mean to try to persuade others, or oneself, that one is self-aware? It functions as a form of protection, of averting the judgment of others by addressing one’s fallibility, frivolity, or culpability, such that others would be redundant and rude to make the same observations. Margo also uses the term “self-aware” to describe the practice of apologizing for content:

   Yeah, I will write about things that are long and boring and I think that something interesting about Livejournal[^31] is that people will often, if they are self-aware, preface it with something like, “this is a really long and boring entry. Don’t feel compelled to read on.” And when I first started reading Livejournal… I would read everybody’s posts, every day, all of it. And now that I have thirty-three friends and a life, when somebody says, this is really boring, I’m like, you’re right. It probably is. And they just felt the need to write about it.

In contrast to those who would say, “don’t write about it because nobody cares,” Margo and Wynne suggest that the apology functions to deflect criticism and create a space in which one can write as needed.

[^31]: Livejournal.com is one of the most popular online journal sites at present. There are over a million diaries on this server and while one can pay for special features, the basic service is free. Three of the four women that I interviewed use Livejournal (LJ). They talked extensively about the privacy features in particular. One can set the security of each individual post such that it is accessible only to the writer, only to the people she specifically selects, only to those on her “friends” list, or to the public. There is also a comment feature that one may turn on or off.
The tension between the needs of the writer and the desires of the readers evidences itself in the presentation of the mundane. Again, Claire expresses strong opinions regarding worthwhile content. When asked if she felt she was maintaining her journal for her friends or for herself, Claire said that she writes for both:

I feel like I’m doing it for myself but at the same time I don’t feel like I have to preserve for posterity the fact that I went to Gino’s for dinner or something, you know? And there is a certain amount of audience consideration in mind because I wouldn’t want to read that. I’m like, I don’t care.

Although she says she writes for herself as well, all of Claire’s comments are focused on audience perception and reception. She concludes that if it is not something that will be worth reading in the future, it is not meaningful for her audience to read in the present. This consciousness of audience impacts bloggers because, for the most part, the day-to-day is made up of routines and rituals that are not particularly remarkable. The blogger must choose to write through ordinary or simply wait for the extraordinary.

The fact that the mundane makes up the substance of the majority of diary and blog posts leads one to wonder what causes readers to regularly read them. Given the responses of those I interviewed, it would seem that writing about ordinary things in ordinary ways is a liability for bloggers. There is truth in this perspective. However, there are motivations beyond entertainment, for reading and writing blogs. As I argue below, readers who keep up with the mundane details of the life of others in the blogosphere, such as what they eat, where they shop, and how they feel on a daily basis, develop a form of intimacy with the writer. In chapter one I observed that recounting the mundane serves the purpose of bringing structure and validation to the ordinary experiences and routines of the writer’s life. My claim here is that it often serves the same purpose for the reader.
In addition to providing a sense of continuity and insight into the daily life of the blogger, the written narratives concerning ordinary aspects of life give readers a gauge for their own experiences and tasks. This function of reading is particularly relevant for “mommy bloggers” who often find themselves both isolated and immersed in routines and tasks related to the development and care of their children and home. As Laura McKenna writes in her article about mommy bloggers, “Clearly parents – in many cases parents who are very isolated from adult interaction for much of the day – are seizing the opportunity to form a community without having to abandon their household duties.”

These women find strength and validation in the narratives of others that echo their own experiences. As McKenna observes, mommy bloggers “provide a window into a world that until now has been largely hidden” and what they write “provides respect and legitimacy for the work of parents.” She references a post from Heather Armstrong’s Dooce.com, where Armstrong writes:

I know I am not alone when I say that when I sit down to update my website I do it to connect with other people, I do it to reflect on the absurdity of everyday life with the hope that the people who read it will find similarities in their own routine…this is a community of women coming together to make each other feel less alone. (May 2, 2008)

Here, Armstrong explains that blogging about everyday life serves as a way to find connection with other moms because it helps those on both sides of the screen to realize that others are facing similar challenges in their own lives. Her use of the word “routine” reflects the substance of daily life and speaks to the ways that blogs validate the ordinary for both bloggers and their readers.

Writing about the ordinary events of life creates intimacy between writers and readers. No one post or piece of information is crucial to that end, but all of the routines
and nuances come together to create a cumulative portrait of a life being lived. As Sinor writes about the ordinary diary, “As a reader I am forced to be fully present with you. No foreshadowing. No climax. No closure. You grant me a tiny space, a ledge it feels like, really at the edge of your ordinary” (*Extraordinary Work* 11). Her observation highlights the reader’s position of being “in time” with the writer as well as “over time.” In his *New York Times Magazine* article, “Brave New World of Digital Intimacy,” Clive Thompson researches “the effects of News feed, Twitter, and other forms of incessant online contact” and finds that this sort of connection within a community of people can create a “small town” dynamic, in which everyone keeps up on the minutiae of everyone else’s life. This dynamic is fostered by a recent explosion of microblogging tools.

Microblogging is a relatively new form of blogging in which users create short, textual updates that are published online. These updates may be posted from a computer or various handheld devices, like cell phones, and typically contain a brief (up to 140 characters) statement of what the blogger is thinking or doing at the moment. The most popular microblogging interface is Twitter, which emerged in 2006. Those who use Twitter have a page on the Twitter website that lists all of their posts or “tweets,” and they can put an automatically updated Twitter feed on their blog that will show the entries as well. Other popular interfaces have update functions that are similar to the Twitter concept. For example, Facebook has a “status update” box that shows up next to one’s name as well as a “news feed” that shows every change that users make to their pages. Many people change their “status” multiple times a day to indicate what they are eating, thinking, or preparing to do.
The emergence of microblogging or “ambient” tools, such as Twitter and newsfeeds, have accelerated ways in which bloggers develop intimacy with their readers. Microblogging technologies allow for a new level of communication as people are able to update their thoughts from cell phones or other mobile devices while they are in situations where regular blogging would not otherwise be possible, like riding the subway or sitting in a meeting. This new phenomenon provides what social scientists refer to as “ambient awareness.” As Thompson explains, “it is…very much like being physically near someone and picking up on his mood through the little things he does – body language, sighs, stray comments – out of the corner of your eye” (2). There is something about the “ambient” details of life that creates a sense of continuity, a fuller picture of a person’s life, and allows for connection in time, with those with whom someone might otherwise have little or no contact. Those who actively microblog may update twenty times a day, compared to a longer post or two in the regular blog format. Often people simply use the microblogging function to vent frustration or express a quick thought about something like traffic or a television show. Here are a series of “tweets” from Margaret (“Maggie”) Mason’s Twitter page:

- She owed me 9 cents but just gave me the dime. Somehow this turned my day around. (4:27 PM, 26 Oct. 2008)
- just shook Al Gore’s hand. (7:18 PM, 26 Oct. 2008)
- Added ‘wash hair’ to my to-do list to up my sense of accomplishment. Also adding ‘take vitamins’ and ‘have lunch.’ Tomorrow, the world! (10:53 AM, 22 Sep. 2008)
Microblog entries take seconds to create and seconds to read, so they do not represent much of a commitment on the part of the writer or the reader. The result is an even more personal and up to the moment picture of the blogger’s thinking and doing.

The intimacy resulting from the use of blogging technologies most notably impacts the writer’s secondary relationships. As Thompson reports, while constant contact online enriches core relationships, it does not typically increase the size of one’s “circle of true intimates, friends and family” (6). He points out that these “deep” relationships remain dependent upon “face time.” The relationships that are most dynamic online are acquaintances or those with whom one normally has “weak ties.” The internet allows people to easily reconnect with old classmates or colleagues and linking up with such people online allows both parties to keep up with the daily aspects of one another’s lives, at a distance. In her interview Margo observes how her relationships with her friends changed when she was overseas according to their online practices.

I had maybe three friends in Chicago that had Livejournal, and when I left Chicago I didn’t really keep in touch with anybody on a personal basis. But when I would go back to Chicago and I would see all of my friends, the ones who were on Livejournal and I would just pick up like nothing had lapsed. And the ones that weren’t on Livejournal I was like, you know, I don’t remember that much about you.

Margo found that the depth of her secondary relationships depended upon whether or not they kept journals online. Her relationships with those who also had journals deepened and her connection with those who didn’t have journals dwindled away. Margo’s experience reflects the description of a “co-presence” offered by one of Thompson’s interview subjects who observes that when he and his friends socialize face-to-face, it feels oddly as if they’ve never actually been apart. They don’t need to ask, ‘So, what have you been up to?’ because they already know.
Instead, they’ll begin discussing something that one of the friends Twittered that afternoon, as if picking up a conversation in the middle. (2)

While Margo is talking about blogging and Thompson’s subjects, microblogging, for each, the technology functions to provide greater depth and continuity to his or her relationships.

Blogging also facilitates artificial or “parasocial” relationships. The idea of parasocial relationships and interactions first emerged in media studies to describe the sorts connections that people form to fictional characters, like those in television programs. Thompson likens such relationships to those with “peripheral people in our network whose intimate details we follow closely online, even while they, like Angelina Jolie, are basically unaware that we exist.” The sort of material on blogs makes readers “feel” closer to the writer because they know about what is going on in her life, but it does not actually make them closer. There are more people who read or “lurk” on blogs than actually comment, which creates an environment in which the anonymous reader eavesdrops on one’s personal life in ways that would not work in “real life” interactions. Serfaty discusses the problem of “the gaze” online and the way the space allows one to break social taboos.

The paradox lies in the invisibility seemingly enjoyed on the Internet by both writers and readers. Thanks to the screen, diarists feel they can write about their innermost feelings without fearing identification and humiliation, and readers feel they can inconspicuously observe others and derive increased understanding and sometimes power from that knowledge. “Making oneself invisible means one no longer is a mere transparency anyone can see through, but that one has turned into a gaze that no taboo can stop.” (Serfaty 13)
Online we are given entrance into the personal thoughts and fears, dreams, of people we know and people we don’t know, in ways that rarely occur in day to day interactions. We can look at images or text in ways that we would not publicly do, allowing us to form relationships that, in essence, do not exist. Online, one may ask questions and find answers that wouldn’t be appropriate or at least comfortable to pursue in person. One may to be identified or anonymous. But having invisible readers involved in the minutiae of one’s life is not necessarily an intimacy that one always wants. In the final section, I will explore the material impact of those “invisible” visitors on the lives of those who write online.

Privacy Concerns

A misguided notion of audience can create problems for women bloggers. Some writers forget the existence of the passive or unknown reader. However, as Heather Armstrong, author of the popular blog, Dooce.com learned, neglecting to consider the invisible audience of one’s blog can have serious consequences. Armstrong became one of the most infamous examples of the danger of writing openly about one’s life online when, in 2002, she lost her job because of the content of her blog. In a time when blogs were just beginning to gain popularity, she made the mistake of blogging explicitly and negatively about her boss and people at her workplace without considering that they would have access to the things that she had written. In the wake of, and, arguably, because of, this high profile incident, Armstrong has become one of the most popular female bloggers online, comfortably supporting her family with the profits from advertisements on her site. Although her errors found a favorable end, Armstrong’s story
serves as a cautionary tale for those who write about their professional and personal lives online. The invisible reader is often the most dangerous.

Sometimes readers cross the line between one’s virtual life and one’s actual life in unanticipated ways. Margo describes how she was confronted with the unexpected convergence of her on- and offline lives when she was living overseas. She occasionally posts pictures on her blog and said that, as a result, she has had encounters with total strangers who knew who she was.

I’ve had people come up to me in Paris, and they were like “you’re Marghost\textsuperscript{32} who blogs on Livejournal.” And I’ve been like, “Yeah, that’s right.” And it’s weird. I feel like that’s the whole nature of the beast. That you’re writing, especially when you’re blogging and you know who reads the blog, like you have people who comment regularly, and you kind of assume that they’re the only ones reading it and then you find out later that they’re not the only ones reading it. There are these other people reading it. And that’s okay, for the most part. Usually, it’s fine, and you kind of forget, after a while, that that’s the case.

Margo’s encounter with the anonymous reader was not a negative one, but it served to remind her of the public nature of her writing. She observes how easy it is to forget those readers who are not actively participating in the site through making comments and to take for granted that the space is safe. Claire provides another example of such a realization, one that proved to be more personally invasive.

I was always pretty open in my blog. … I would talk about specific things and have a lot of my contact information on my blog. I made it very clear who I was. I would talk about generally where I live and what classes I was taking and stuff like that. Anyway, so I was at the Student Union one day and I was sitting in the coffee shop just reading some stuff and drinking some coffee and I heard this voice say “Claire?” And my blood ran cold because I knew who it was before I even turned around. And I thought, “Do I bolt or do I stay? What do I do?” It was really awful because I knew he lived two hours away. It was really scary. So I decided to just play it cool. … We had a very brief conversation and I said “Well, you know, I gotta go. I have a hair appointment.” I just made something up. “Great seeing ya.” And I went home and I said to myself “Yeah, I’ve gotta do some damage control here.” The fact that he knew where I was was really creepy.

\textsuperscript{32} Margo, like many bloggers, writes with a penname or moniker online.
Claire said that it was not until this encounter that she really internalized the fact that the internet is public and that there is reason to be careful about the information that one makes available online. She created a new, anonymous account and locked her entries to the public. Now, the only people who can read Claire’s blog are those she has personally invited and allowed access.

The choices that bloggers make concerning their relationship with audience go hand-in-hand with the identity that they seek to create online. Claire recounts that after her experience with this man, she received a call from her sister who told her that the guy had written about Claire in his journal. He wrote about his “visit” to Claire, as if it were a mutually planned, even romantic, event. Claire then had the realization that not only could someone invade her space and cross into her material life, but the person could construct false narratives about her online that would then be taken as true by others.

Thompson discusses problems similar to Claire’s, where bloggers must figure out how to deal with negative or false things that are written about them on other people’s blogs. He describes a young woman who is dealing with people posting pictures of her (pictures with her in them) and writing about her on their blogs. She says that she finds that she has to stay engaged online, simply to be able to combat what others are saying and doing related to her life.

[She] knows that she cannot simply walk away from her online life, because the people she knows online won’t stop talking about her, or posting unflattering photos. She needs to stay on Facebook just to monitor what’s being said about her. This is a constant complaint I heard, particularly from people who...have never lived as adults without online awareness. For them, participation isn’t optional. If you don’t dive in, other people will define who you are. So you constantly stream your pictures, your thoughts, your relationship status and what you’re doing—right now!—if only to ensure the virtual version of you is accurate, or at least the one you want to present to the world. (6)
Although Thompson’s conclusions seem extreme, this narrative represents a tension that many bloggers face, that of trying to control both one’s audience and one’s identity.
CHAPTER FIVE: BEYOND FIG LEAVES AND SCARLET LETTERS

Throughout this project I have explored the reasons why women write in diaries and blogs and the ways that they reckon with audience and identity through their writing. I have concluded that women write to work through difficult experiences, to give substance to the tasks of impermanence that fill their days and lives, to forge connections with other women related to issues of mutual interest and concern, and to assert themselves as subjects of their own making in the face of competing social constructions of who they should be. The importance of this subject matter lies in observing the ways that writing is a source of strength to individuals who have been silenced or otherwise isolated through the circumstances of their lives. I’ve chosen to look at the value of writing for women, but the principles that I set forth are applicable to other groups of people, particularly those who have experienced marginalization or loss of some kind.

In chapters one through four I have looked at the history of the diary and its significance for women, the evolution of the diary’s function as it has moved online, the relationship between the diary and identity formation for its writer, and finally, the relationships between writers and their audiences, particularly with the diary in its incarnation as the blog. In this concluding chapter I look at the relationships between the text, author, and audience of this type of personal writing within different contexts. I begin with the place of personal and ordinary writing in the college classroom, shift to the blogosphere in general, and then to specific communities online. Through discussing the relationships
between these texts and contexts I seek to emphasize the significance of diaries and blogs not only as a subject of academic research but as a set of practices with personal, social, and political importance. I conclude with a brief discussion of possibilities for further research.

**Personal Writing and the Classroom: Acknowledging the Costs of Growth**

Although my topic is women writing—ordinary women and ordinary writing—I want to begin the conclusion by looking at the role of personal writing in relationship to academic discourse. I am interested in the ways that women have navigated the process of writing both inside and outside the academy because texts by women represent a social struggle that differs from that of men. I began chapter one with Emily Dickinson’s poem “Tell all the truth but tell it Slant” and used it to discuss the ways in which women’s writing in particular uses circumspection and slant to record their feelings about potentially sensitive subjects. For centuries women’s writing was relegated to the private sphere and texts by women continue to reflect the personal nature of this heritage. In her discussion of women and higher education, Adrienne Rich asserts that we will find the “true knowledge of women” through “listening and watching in art and literature, in the social sciences, in all the descriptions we are given of the world, for silences, the absences, the nameless, the unspoken, the encoded” (245). She continues:

And in breaking those silences, naming ourselves, uncovering the hidden, making ourselves present, we begin to define a reality which resonates to us, which affirms our being, which allows the woman teacher and the woman student alike to take ourselves, and each other, seriously: meaning, to begin taking charge of our lives. (245)

In great part this project describes women taking charge of their lives through taking charge of their stories, gaining confidence through finding voice and validity for their
ordinary lives through the act of writing. In passage above Rich describes what I see as the moment of moving beyond fig leaves and scarlet letters. “Moving beyond” occurs when one breaks silence of marginalization or loss.

Something that was important to me in the introductory stages of this project was the role of personal writing within the academy, specifically, within the field of composition studies. I wanted to develop a defense for writing about diaries as an academic project. I believe that personal, “nonacademic” writing gives us important insight into the way that language functions, about the way that people perceive and identify themselves, and about the ways that communities – even academic communities – form and cohere. Ordinary language and writing matters because it is the basis for any endeavor. It reflects the way that our minds and interactions work. Thus, the development of voice, self, and confidence that come through freeing oneself to write in one context (for example, personal writing within an online community) cannot help but positively affect writing for academic purposes. As Cinthia Gannett puts it:

Although it is still common to think of the healing function of writing as unrelated to intellectual growth, it should be obvious by now that writing to heal is a form of intellectual empowerment that allows for the development of a self that is sufficiently integrated to be capable of knowing. (146)

One cannot effectively disentangle the academic from the personal.

I do not want to advocate the integration of diaries and personal blogs into the academic context so much as to emphasize that the development of personal writing as a practice is valid and important to the development of the self. For some people, writing is an essential aspect of mental health and it provides a connection to other people that is otherwise not available. So, the extent to which I would address teachers is simply to recommend that they encourage students to pursue nonacademic uses of writing, to talk
explicitly with students about the ways that writing can help them through personal transitions—particularly students who are women and minorities.

One reason that I hesitate to advocate the use of personal writing in relationship to the classroom is because this practice, which can bring with it great confidence and freedom, is simultaneously one that makes the writer most vulnerable. As Nancy Miller puts it, “When we expose the narratives of our lives to others through the forms of life writing, do we not all become vulnerable subjects?” (159). Classroom assignments that engage a personal form of life writing must be approached with clarity and care on the part of instructors because students are often more emotionally tied to the resulting texts than with other assignments. It is through personal writing that students may find strength in the fact that their experiences are “worth expressing” (Gere 76). Yet, the cost is heightened for those who may receive feedback from teachers and/or peers that suggests that the expression was not worth reading because it was cliché or syntactically weak.

Teachers, in particular, are in the position of doing a lot of harm to students emotionally because the process of learning and growing requires vulnerability. As William Perry explains in his discussion of the “costs of growth,” not much is said about the losses involved for students in the process of education. These losses might include the sense that one’s use of language is “backwards” or that one’s belief in the stability of “truth” is unfounded. Perry asserts that these losses need to be shared (he uses the term *grieved*) in order for people move forward developmentally.

But if it is not allowed [for me] to grieve or to hurt, I have to deny the truth to have my chin up. If my loss has never “lived,” socially, then I must keep it alive myself, protect it like a responsibility, even. Then I do not know why it is that I get stuck. It comes to me as a sort of theorem, that when you have taken one step in development, you cannot take another until you have grieved the losses of the first. (271)
Perry’s observations are valuable to a discussion of writing in at least two ways. First, he addresses the significance of expressing loss. Writing allows for one to reflect on experiences in a way that is accessible to others. Within the context of a classroom or a club or a blog community, one may write and be read, thereby releasing the need for acknowledgement. As Margaret Atwood writes: “At the very least I want a witness.”

Second, Perry addresses the concept of “getting stuck” in the process, which easily translates to difficulties that people have with writer’s block. Perry’s observations offer a perspective on why it might be that some students have difficulty expressing themselves in writing; it may be that they have experienced losses that have never been voiced, losses more generally or losses related to the learning or writing process that have ultimately silenced them in certain ways. This form of loss occurs within the academic context through the process of acquiring the “father tongue,” academic discourse, and also within the personal sphere when one encounters disapproval or censure for the existence or the substance of one’s writing. Is it not possible that the inability to write, for some, emerges from losses not grieved, not seen or heard either by oneself or another? I would not go so far as to say that one cannot move forward or write without having grieved that which has come to pass, but what this does acknowledge is the value of sharing one’s hurts and losses with those who will see them for what they are.

I do not understand [grieving], but I know that we do not allow it enough in our culture and we do not have the legitimizing rituals for the experience; therefore our people cannot grow well. They have to leave parts of themselves behind. Although I do not know how to teach people how to grieve, I have found that the teacher or counselor can make it clear that the pain is legitimate. (Perry 272)
I am advocating a compassionate perspective, one that does not compromise instruction for the sake of acceptance, but that integrates the two, one that acknowledges the costs of growth.

*The Place of the Personal in the Political Blogosphere*

My discussion of the blogosphere has at many points characterized it as a positive and democratic space in which people are free to express themselves and participate in community to whatever extent they desire. In chapter four, I explored some of the limits to this perception when I discussed readers who use the anonymity that the online interface provides to harm others either through making malicious comments or by invading the privacy of others through stalking them both on and offline. In this section I would like to address another limit within the blogosphere that concerns women in particular by looking at what Clancy Ratliff describes as the “Where are the women?” case. I introduce this discussion here as a way to summarize both the development of opportunities for women’s personal writing through writing online (how far we have come) and the challenges that these new developments reproduce.

In her research Ratliff argues that there is a disparity between the ways that the blogs of men and women are perceived and received in the blogosphere. She examines a recurring conversation among bloggers that addresses the “underrepresentation of women and women’s interests among the most popular political weblogs” (ii). Ratliff explains that the conversation is typically initiated when one of the many male, “pundit” bloggers who does not encounter many female voices online asks “Where are the women political bloggers?” (2). The response by women in the blogosphere is, as she describes, “immediate and emphatic” and brings to light the rift between different people’s beliefs
concerning what is political and what is not. The problem typified by this “where are the women” discussion is an indication of larger gender politics that are reflected in the blogosphere. The assumption belied in the pundit blogger’s question is that the discussions that women are having both on public forums and on their personal blogs are not political. Ratliff identifies a perceived dichotomy widely held within the blogosphere between the “man as pundit and woman as life blogger,” a distinction that often leads to the dismissal of “women’s issues” that may be discussed within more personal narratives about child care or women’s health (5).

While it is impossible, incorrect, and probably irrelevant to make a formal claim about gender differences and writing, there are general, observable differences between the content and function women and men’s writing online. These differences reflect those observed in traditional diary scholarship as well. To make a generalization, women tend to write more about personal topics in their blogs/comments than men do. Even those women who actively write about mainstream political and social or technological issues (conversations that more often characterize the content of blogs by men), tend to integrate posts about their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings, things that are more intimate or revealing, than do men. Many men see the mixture of public and private topics on women’s blogs as off-putting. They may think that a woman is smart and has a lot to contribute to a particular conversation, but don’t like that at any given point she might also be posting about her kids, her body, shopping, or her emotional state. As Gannett observes, “women have been socialized to see their diary keeping [here, blogging] as less important, as belonging only to the private sphere and to the realm of emotion rather than that of intellect” (149). Still speaking in general terms, the nature of
the average woman’s blog is fragmented and inconsistent compared to the topic-focused male blogger, which results in the tendency to not take women’s blogs as seriously as men’s.

For the most part the divisions in the blogosphere are clear and they hold with minimal crossover. Most women don’t link to men’s blogs and vice versa. The difficulty lies with those women who seek to be active within the conversations that the guys tend to control and who find themselves being dismissed and silenced, ignored, rather than taken seriously. A recent post by Laura Blankenship (“Geeky Mom”) revisits this conversation as the blogger talks about her experience as a woman participating in a male-dominated blog community:

Last week I hijacked Jim’s [a friend’s] blog . . . by making a fairly innocent comment about how his top commenters were (or at least seemed to be on the surface) all men. I was not trying to claim Jim was sexist or anything (as I think Jim knows), but it's a pattern I happened to notice and, quite frankly, that I notice quite often on many male-authored blogs. . . . I'm not accusing anyone of anything, really. I'm just trying to figure out why this pattern persists, and why it seems to persist in the technical world I tend to inhabit. . . . I know lots of women in the technical world, but it does seem to me that they participate less in these informal conversations than the men I know (and I included myself; I'm a lame commenter). What are the implications of that, if any?

I know this blog is random and all over the place, which doesn't lend itself to being read regularly by people who are interested in specific topics. I personally like the randomness of it, even while I recognize that it means I don't get linked to by others as often. And I know that randomness is typical of many women bloggers. Although not true of all women, of course, women tend to mush the different parts of their lives together more than men and that tendency is reflected in their blogs. Except Jim's blog is random, too, but it's random in a different way than mine. I'm not sure I've ever seen him post about his kids or his family or personal life, really. His topics may shift, but they never drift to the personal. Maybe men shy away from the personal, both in their reading and posting habits. Maybe women are drawn to the personal and so are not drawn to male-authored blogs. (2/16/09)

As her name suggests Geeky Mom blogs as both a mom and a professional (and professor) in a technology-related field. She is one of these people (like many
“professional” women) who fall into the space between the male and female divide of the blogosphere and regularly encounters practices that make her feel like the Other. She notices that men tend not to write about personal topics and women do. She characterizes her writing as random, but in a personal way. Her observation suggests that randomness that includes topics from one’s personal life is less acceptable and messy than that which does not. Gannett describes it this way:

> [W]hile women have kept journals of the same general type that men have kept—including public journals of commerce and politics, travel journals, commonplace books, scientific and naturalists’ journals, spiritual journals, an journals of personal memorabilia—they have used, combined, and adapted these genres somewhat differently as a consequence of their different discursive and social positions and needs. (126)

Gannett suggests that because women have traditionally been regulated to the private sphere, their use of language reflects the communities and forms of communication that they created and through which they found identity and validation.

Geeky Mom talks about her kids, daily routines, tv shows, and more personal topics (in an open/personal way) as well as highly academic and technological issues. As she points out in the “Gender and Blogging” post, it’s not that men aren’t writing “random” or fragmented blogs as well. Men are simply not typically writing about personal topics as a part of that randomness. She points out that women “tend to mush the different parts of their lives together more than men and that tendency is reflected in their blogs.” And she recognizes that although a more streamlined, topically-focused approach to blogging would get her more traffic and links from technologically-oriented readers, she likes the integrated nature of her site. This brings to mind Valerie’s decision

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33 I recognize that this description begs the question of what is considered “personal.” One could easily argue that the topics that I am dismissing as not personal actually reveal a great deal about the values, thoughts, and feelings of their writers. One could apply the same lens of looking at/for silences that I attribute to reading women’s writing to that of men.
to work with three different blogs. For Valerie, the most important distinction is between her “personal” blog and her “professional” blog. She felt that she wanted a space where she could write about her research and continue conversations that she had with colleagues, and presumably, a space that she would be comfortable being read by students. Her difficulty came with deciding where to post things that were academic but that she was not sure were academic enough to represent her publicly. Gannett observes that:

Women have tended to write texts close to life, to use those texts in immediate and practical ways in their lives, and to use them, paradoxically, to challenge the dichotomy of pubic sphere and private, the setting their discourse and ideas were subject to. And from the point at which women began to write in their own tongues and voices, however muted, the journal/diary was a principal form for the representation of their physical and discursive experience. (97-8)

The all-in-one approach of women’s blogs does reflect the way that many professional women function. Professional moms work outside the home, but typically continue to carry the majority of the responsibility for the work within the home, multi-tasking as opposed to compartmentalizing. Women don’t often have the luxury of compartmentalization. The genre of the woman’s diary/blog is difficult to classify because it often contains a mixture of genres (serves a number of functions). Thus, the female diary/blog becomes a genre in itself, characterized by the jumble of personal narratives and home and family-related material. Male/pundit blogs are often easier to classify because they “stay on topic” or have a seemingly clear focus from which there is little deviation or distraction. This may not actually be the case, but because there is typically less of a shift into “personal” topics, the blogs come across as more monolithic.

Women have been silenced in various contexts over time, through language and through the lack of access to education and literacy, and have found in diaries a place to
begin to give voice to their experiences. Historical narratives demonstrate the ways that women were dismissed intellectually and socially (like Hawthorne’s reference to “scribbling women”34) such that it is no wonder that women resorted to using male pseudonyms or publishing anonymously. The women who actually made any break into the public sphere were taking on the voice of the master, only being accepted, marginally, if they could speak like the men and about things that were of relevance to men, in public discourse. Where was the social space for women to write about their issues and needs, the oppressiveness that they faced daily, their take on the things that the men were doing and writing about, the things that were going on with their bodies, and so on? Women found that space in their diaries, in their clubs, in the private sphere of women’s community, if at all.

Women wrote letters, diaries, poetry, commonplace books, and cookbooks. As Gannett observes,

all of these alternative kinds of writing, then, precisely because they were less scrutinized or entirely ignored by men, gave women of the past the opportunity to write without have to be “Writers” on men’s terms, which they clearly were not allowed to be. They allowed women not only to write, but to start to write about themselves, and to write, if only in a muted way, the truth of their experience. (95)

The vestiges of this history continue to characterize women’s writing today in many ways. Bloggers like Geeky Mom and Valerie, who are involved in academia (as, perhaps, representative of women in the academy or professional world generally), find that their way of presenting themselves, the integrated self that is mother and professor, shopper and analyst, physical being and intellectual being, is perceived as fragmented and less serious in the context of different types of blogs such as the “political” blog. They are

34 This reference reflects common characterizations of “mommy bloggers” today.
made to feel this way about themselves, second-guessing their approach to life in contrast to the persona/identity that they feel they must construct and project in order to “cut it” professionally. This is where I feel an attachment to the images of the fig leaf and scarlet letter. These coverings and emblems represent a distance from the self and others, a badge, a barrier, or a shield. They are acquired in different ways and reflect a number of things, shame, rebellion/resistance, acquiescence, distance, strength, vulnerability—a number of dichotomies, really, that then fall apart. But these things are often necessary for the survival of women in the public sphere.

With blogs women are making the private public. This is the power of the medium and that which is important about the ordinary, messy, fragmentedness of things like mommy blogs. As Connors (“Her Bad Mother”) asserts in response to a harsh critique of “mommy bloggers,”35 it is the very thing that people criticize that is most powerful. The mommy blog label is like the scarlet letter, something that some feel is bad, but that is really powerful and good. As Connors writes: “bad is the new good.” The discussions of Geeky Mom and Ratliff show that we aren’t really beyond the need for fig leaves and scarlet letters or the impulse to put them on/use them. But the conversation is an indication that the impulse to cover is a problem and that there are those who are seeking through blogging to change the way things are.

Thoughts on Further Research

Having made a case for the place of the blog in the lineage of diaristic writing that has been so important for women in particular, there are several directions that I would propose for further research. In future work I would like to do more interviews with bloggers and to map the ways that specific blogs change over time in the ways that they

35 Her response is in the post titled “Who’s the Dummy, Mummy?” (10 Feb. 2009).
function for their writers. I want to turn this project into a book in which I address specific experiences around which women form communities, such as being a stepmother or surviving breast cancer. I am also interested in the link between literary women and their personal writing and would like to explore the connection between writers like Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, and contemporary authors who blog. An examination of this lineage of personal and professional writing would lead to a discussion of the link between formal and informal writing, which would also allow me to talk more extensively about the connection between personal writing and the classroom. Because I am studying writing traditions as they adapt within emerging technologies, many of the possibilities for research remain to be seen. As technologies for writing continue to evolve, the ongoing project will be to investigate the ways that women find the courage to move beyond the fig leaves and scarlet letters of the past, create communities, and give voice to their lives.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Background Information:
1. Give me some information about yourself: age, marital status, where you’re from.
2. Are you in school and/or employed?
3. Describe your life right now. What occupies and preoccupies you?
4. (optional) How would you describe yourself?

Writing in General:
5. Do you consider yourself a writer? Why or why not?
6. Why do you write? Tell me about that.
7. Has your writing changed over the years? The way you write or the things that you write about?
8. Have you ever kept a bound journal? Talk about that a little bit.

Blogging:
9. So, tell me about your blog. (Why do you write in it? When did you start it? What’s it like? What sorts of things do you write about?)
10. Do you blog anonymously? Why or why not?
11. Do you have multiple blogs?
12. How would you describe your online identity (or identities) and how has it changed over time? What would you say is the difference, if any, between your self online and your self in real life?
13. Who is your audience? (intended and actual) Do you feel you’ve found community online? Describe that.
14. How have people responded to your blog? (positive/negative comments)
15. What sorts of things do you not write about on your blog and what are your reasons for that?
16. Do you tell the truth when you write?

17. What has surprised you about blogging?

18. How does your blogging connect with other things that you are working on?
APPENDIX B

Background Information (as available):
1. Age, marriage and family status, location
2. Education and Employment
3. General Interests
4. Stage in Life
5. Personality

Writing in General:
6. What is the person’s writing style? For example, is she very careful with grammar and spelling? What is her voice like?
7. How has her writing (and voice) changed over the course of the blog?
8. How does she talk about writing and what it means to her?

Blogging:
9. Describe the blog – How long has it been around? What topics does it generally focus on?
10. Does the author blog anonymously? Does she discuss that choice? What sorts of things does the blogger say about issues related to privacy and the blog?
11. How often does she update the site? Does she have multiple blogs?
12. How does the author interact with her audience? Does she address them in entries? Does she allow comment? And, if so, does she respond to comments that are made?
13. Who is her audience? (intended and actual) Does the blogger seem to have created a community through her site?
14. How have people responded to the blog? (number and nature of comments)
15. What sorts of things does the author not write about on the blog?

16. What prompted the author to start the blog? What information is in the first entry?