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The sentence continues: Breaking silences and becoming authors through The Semicolon Project

Brooke E. Covington
James Madison University

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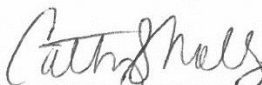
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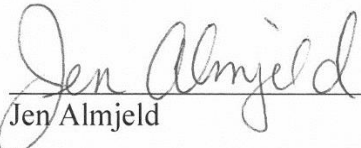
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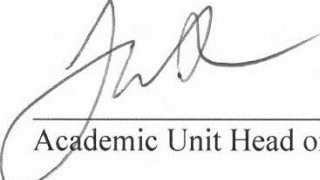
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Steven Scott Lunsford Date

 4/17/15
Cathryn Molloy Date

 4/17/15
Jen Almjeld Date

 4/17/15
Academic Unit Head or Designee Date

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The Sentence Continues: Breaking Silences and Becoming Authors through
The Semicolon Project

Brooke Covington

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication

May 2015

Dedication

To my grandma, Clell—your silent voice of encouragement continues to motivate me. I

wish you were here.

And to my brother.

Acknowledgments

There are a handful of faculty members I would like to thank—not just for their support and guidance through this particular project, but also for the kindness each of these individuals has shown me over the last six years.

Scott Lunsford, you were one of my very first instructors in this department. If it weren't for your course, I would be on a very different path. I cannot thank you enough for the support you have given me in both this project among countless other projects.

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Cathryn Molloy—I did not meet you until my graduate study, but I am so grateful to have studied in your courses. Your kind advice helped me wade through quite a few terrible first drafts—and this project was no different. Thank you.

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Abstract

Through its many digital platforms, The Semicolon Project, a suicide and self-harm prevention initiative, offers its users a creative means of using writing to heal. As its name suggests, the semicolon is an essential mark for this group—grammatically a semicolon represents a place in the sentence that an author could have ended and for the members of this prevention initiative, the semicolon acts in a similar way. By tattooing or drawing a semicolon on the body, the semicolon bearer embody a sense of authorial agency, positioning herself as author and using the semicolon as a representation of her dedication to continue the sentence that is her life. In this small though significant way, the tattoo bearer engages in a form of narrative therapy that enables healing to take place, thus enabling the individual to move away from self-injurious behavior and find more positive means of coping with moments of emotional distress.

Though these negative coping mechanisms plague individuals all over the world, the lack of societal discourse surrounding these issues prevents many from seeking the help needed to overcome these struggles. Even today, many of those battling mental illness or self-injurious behavior remain voiceless—silenced by stigma and fear of societal backlash, rejection, even shame. The Semicolon Project aims to provide one outlet for these voices—a safe space that encourages candid sharing and employs writing as a means of healing.

Using two separate theories, this project analyzes the writing left on The Semicolon Project's Facebook page. The first uses theories of material rhetoric to shed light on the rhetorical significance of the semicolon tattoo, both as a performance and as a material product. The second approach applies narrative therapy to the tattoo bearers'

verbal and visual Facebook posts, analyzing how these images and reflective comments enable tattoo bearers to heal from personal trauma. Analyzing the users' writing practices in this space can help to determine why this initiative is successful and how these successes might be replicated in future organizations.

I. Introduction: Exploring the Liminal Space of the Student-Professional

“Women and slaves—inferior beings in every way—were condemned to silence as their appointed sphere and condition. And most women spoke no memorable alternative—that is, except for Aspasia. But even Aspasia’s voice is muted, for she speaks only through men.” (193 emphasis mine)

Cheryl Glenn,

“Sex, Lies, and Manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric”

Originally, this epigraph appeared in the first lines of a piece I wrote during my sophomore year of undergraduate study. At the time, I was largely unaware of just how much writing this research article would drastically transform my understanding of what it means to be a student writer.

These lines and the sections following it were eventually published in the Colonial Academic Alliance (CAA) Undergraduate Research Journal, thus launching my career and solidifying my position as *both* a student writer and a professional writer. It is a position that followed me throughout my undergraduate career and continues to follow me even today.

Falling in a liminal space between student and professional, I have always pursued opportunities to publish work done in the classroom. As for my first publication with CAA, I wrote this piece, titled “Only Through Men,” to satisfy a Rhetorical Traditions course assignment. As one of our foundational courses, the course focuses on some of the major figures in the rhetorical canon. While studying these figures, I was

initially struck by how few female voices there were in this scholarly conversation, and in my search to find these voices, I met Aspasia. An ancient female rhetorician, Aspasia remains largely unknown due to intense patriarchal oppression in Ancient Greece—truthfully, the very little that is known about her has been left behind in quick references made in the writings of her male contemporaries. To be even referenced at all hints at the magnitude of this woman and her contributions to our field—I quickly became devoted to pulling her voice from the margins, to make her existence known. Though a lofty task, I experienced some success with this project, eventually publishing the piece and also winning a few awards with it. This small taste of success had a profound effect on me, inspiring me to continue to chase my passions and write with purpose outside of (or at the very least in addition to) receiving a certain course grade. Since then, much of my work has focused on pulling voices, like Aspasia's, from the margins, helping others to break silences and stereotypes that have been unjustly placed upon them. My thesis project is no different.

I was led to my topic after a very personal experience that highlighted the sometimes overwhelmingly negative ways in which society responds to mental illness and those who suffer from it. As someone always posed, fingertips to keys, prepared to use writing as a means of enfranchising the disenfranchised, I was impassioned with this task. A few questions led my inquiry—if those struggling with the effects of mental illness are being hushed, silenced, even muted, where might these individuals contribute a voice? What guides these conversations? In what ways do individuals negotiate their identities in society? Where might these individuals claim agency? How can I help?

In true millennial fashion, I turned to the internet, Facebook in particular. And I eventually clicked my way to The Semicolon Project, a suicide and self-harm prevention initiative populated by individuals shamelessly revealing struggles with mental illness. Fascinated, I began to analyze the rhetorical affordances being made in this space—the ways in which these users had created a community, featuring rhetorical practices that involved both writing (tattooing) semicolons on the body and writing reflections on the walls of Facebook to encourage healing and to advocate the de-stigmatization of those affected by mental illness. My thesis project, focused on analyzing the rhetorical practices of The Semicolon Project, began to take shape.

Positioned within the blurred borders of a student-slash-professional, I committed to the thesis with hopes of producing, and *publishing*, this scholarship. Based on the advice of my committee and the dual purpose nearly always present in my work, we developed an unconventional organization for my thesis. Ultimately, it is these dual purposes—to learn *and* to publish—that explain why I have decided to organize my thesis in the way it appears. Following this introduction, you will encounter three chapters—each with a different purpose and marketed toward separate scholarly opportunities to develop my professional self as a writer and a scholar in the field. This introduction will justify these choices and explain how I managed to write to the professional requirements of the publication venues as well as the institutional requirements of The Graduate School.

The most marked distinction of my thesis is that each chapter is written as a separate entity—with its own introduction, analysis, and work cited section. This choice was purposeful. I framed my body of my thesis around three major components—one

conference presentation, and two journal articles. After deciding on the structure of the thesis, I then had to decide the purpose of each section and where these pieces might be targeted for publication.

As the first analytical piece of my thesis, I felt that the conference paper should focus on laying the foundation for my sequential analyses of The Semicolon Project and its practices. As such, the first chapter not only provides a full description of the organization and contextualizes the prevalence of self-harm and instances of suicide today, but this section also rhetorically analyzes posts collected from the organization's Facebook page.

From there, I had to locate a platform for the conference paper. After a quick revision, I submitted my conference proposal to the 2015 Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference (WSRL). The WSRL conference theme—rhetorics and literacies in motion—fit well with my topic since movement is integral to this organization. Through the rhetorical performance of tattooing and posting, individuals are able to move away from the harmful behaviors of their pasts, enabling a shift in identity that welcomes a re-authored self—one that is empowered and not engaging in negative means of coping with mental illness.

Of course, since this is a conference paper, the format is a bit different—the call for proposals asked for a conference presentation abstract and a proposal. I include both in the first chapter, along with the full conference presentation with slides. Though still academic in nature and in content, the style and tone are a bit more conversational, as it is meant to be read aloud to an audience of WSRL conference-goers. I also chose to forego a dense literature review, instead opting for the emphasis of the presentation to be more

so on analyzing examples since I feel this format is better suited for a conference-style presentation. There are also textual cues imbedded in the presentation so that readers can better understand how the conference paper aligns with the conference presentation slides.

Appearing after the conference paper, the first journal-length article, which analyzes the material rhetoric of the semicolon tattoos, is targeted toward *Text and Performance Quarterly*, a peer-reviewed journal that studies the intersections of text and performance in society. I felt this was a particularly well-suited publication for this article since much of my article examines how both the material mark and the performance of getting the semicolon tattoo allow users to embody a sense of authorial agency over themselves, their decisions, and their positions in society.

The manuscript guidelines for *Text and Performance Quarterly* ask that I provide an abstract in addition to keywords, along with a title page containing various personal information—I chose to omit this section for the thesis to protect my personal information. This journal also accepts images, which was a major concern for me. When first deciding on publications, I wanted to ensure that the journals I selected allow for accompanying images since I feel that the significance of these posts cannot be fully conveyed through words. The guidelines also explain that typical manuscripts do not exceed 9,000 words—another concern of mine since this article is fairly long compared to other journal articles in the field.

Aside from the format, the actual researching and writing of this piece proved manageable, though not easy by any means. After completing a full draft, I realized an irony in my own writing style. Although my original purpose was to retrieve the voices of

The Semicolon Project from the margins of societal discourse, I noticed that in my discussions of the tattoos, I had completely robbed the tattoo bearer of any agency, instead referring to the tattoos in passive voice with no subject doing the action. For example, instead of saying: *the tattoo bearer decided to position the tattoo overtop of her scars from self-harm as a way of reclaiming authority over the space*, I would write: *the tattoo is positioned overtop scars from self-injury, allowing the space to become re-authored*. Upon reflection, I believe this happened accidentally. In my focused analysis of the material rhetoric of the tattoos, I wrongfully suppressed the action and agency of the tattoo bearer. Needless to say, revisions were a must.

The second journal-length article, focused on applying theories of narrative therapy to the writing on The Semicolon Project, is targeted at *Enculturation*, a web-based scholarly journal that publishes scholarship in areas of overlap between culture and rhetoric. Articles are usually between 5,000-7,000 words and images are welcomed. The format is open and documents can be uploaded to the conference queue at any time, as this journal is based on rolling submissions.

Unlike the first two sections, writing this article stumped me at first. My initial draft did not have a defined focus, and this lack of focus pervaded the entire piece. After receiving comments from my reviewers, though, I was able to more clearly articulate the purpose of my article--to understand how healing takes place in this initiative so that these practices might be replicated—and the theory that guided it—specifically, narrative therapy. Just like the previous sections, my methodology was grounded in rhetorical analysis practices—so I combed through the posts, collecting evidence that provided

interesting rhetorical insight into how narrative therapy presents itself both in this space and in the tattoo bearers.

Before closing, there are a few other major explanations I need to offer—beginning with my methodology. When first approaching this project, I decided to position each section as a rhetorical analysis grounded in theories of writing and rhetoric. As such, my means of collecting evidence resembles that of a rhetorical analysis. Viewing The Semicolon Project's Facebook wall as a text, I selected specific components of the text that featured prominent rhetorical appeal and I attempted to use rhetorical analysis to shed light on the arguments being made by users writing in this space. While rhetorically analyzing The Semicolon Project's Facebook page, I noticed the two most prevalent forms of writing that occur within The Semicolon Project—writing on the body and writing on the walls of Facebook. Thus, the first journal-length scholarly article focuses on the material rhetoric of the tattoos, and the second journal-length article focuses on the writing as healing that occurs through the writing on the walls of Facebook.

Secondly, I must address the identities of tattoo bearers featured in this project. To be clear, I chose not to strip these writers of their true identities—and this choice is based on two reasons. First, I chose not to blur out identities because the evidence I collected from The Semicolon Project appears on a public page in Facebook. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, I chose not to rob these individuals of their identities because my purpose truly was to help give voice to these silenced individuals. As you will see in the following sections, often these tattoo bearers' posts reveal moments of

clarity and exaltation at having realized that negative coping mechanisms no longer have a control over them—I refuse to steal these moments from the original writers.

Ironically, it seemed that if I changed the identity of these individuals and used it for my own scholarly benefit, I would be no better than the men who wrote about Aspasia, often taking credit for her contributions. Blurring out names would mean that I had effectively silenced these writers in the same way that Aspasia's male contemporaries silenced her. Important to this conversation is also the way in which I cite these posts. I believe it does not do these individuals justice to simply cite them with (Fig. 1), so when I quote these writers, I cite them as I would any other author—by last name. Demeaning these writers to just the screenshots where their writing resides serves to objectify their authorship into nothing more than an image. Citation styles are sadly still lagging behind the writing of the 21st century, so I have made a small revision to my citation style to identify those writing on The Semicolon Project Facebook page as authors.

And finally, I must admit that, because of the scope of this project, I do not examine the connections between self-injurious behavior and mental illness. Footnotes throughout offer research that discusses these connections, but the constraints of this project prevent me from going too much in depth on this topic. I chose to frame this discussion alongside of mental illness because, as you will see in the following sections, many individuals posting to this site reveal struggling with not just self-harm and suicide, but also mental illness. Though it would require surveying to know for certain, my reading of The Semicolon Project's Facebook page suggests that a fair majority of these individuals have battled mental illness and its effects. To be clear, however, I do not

mean to misrepresent anyone associated with The Semicolon Project, and it must be said that not every person posting to this page is suicidal, engages in self-harm, or battles mental illness.

From this work, I strongly believe we can revise our own positions toward those affected by mental illness, and we can bring these discussions to the forefront of our scholarly, political, and personal conversations. As I prepare to venture into a doctoral program, I fully intend to further pursue this research in my dissertation project, deepening my analysis by examining role of the body and the gender in this space; the ways in which this space acts as a discourse community; how mental illness is reflected, challenged, and perceived in this space; and how ethos is established among members—among many other subtopics.

II. The Sentence Continues: Shifting Identities through Semicolon Tattoos

Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference Proposal Abstract

Brooke Covington

James Madison University

“The Sentence Continues: Shifting Identities through Semicolon Tattoos”

covingbe@dukes.jmu.edu

The Semicolon Project, a suicide and self-harm prevention initiative, invites participants to tattoo semicolons on their bodies. After rhetorically examining a few tattoos, I argue that the performance of tattooing this material inscription on the body allows users to shift identities—to move beyond the harmful behaviors of their pasts and welcome a future self that no longer self-harms or contemplates suicide.

Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference Proposal

Proposal for 20 minute paper

“The Sentence Continues: Shifting Identities through Semicolon Tattoos”

In April 2012, The Semicolon Project, an organization that offers a positive outlet for those struggling with the negative coping mechanism, began its crusade to end self-harm and suicide. These issues lie on the fringe of societal discourse but continue to increase in prevalence each year; consequently, there are few viable venues where individuals contemplating suicide or engaging in self-harm might find support and community. In this presentation, I examine the rhetorical practices of The Semicolon Project as a notable exception. Ultimately, I argue that participants use this rich literacy site to re-author their futures and to move away from harmful behaviors and toward a healthier lifestyle. There is, thus, potential, in combining digital writing with writing on

the body to create worthwhile prevention initiatives like The Semicolon Project, and tracing this project's successes can help guide similar organizations in the future.

The Semicolon Project participants tattoo (or draw) semicolons on their bodies and share images of their tattoos along with reflective thoughts over Facebook. For this group, the semicolon is symbolic—grammatically, a semicolon represents a sentence an author could have ended, but chose not to; for participants, the semicolon tattoo represents the life that they almost ended, but now vow not to end.

Rhetorically, then, one might argue that the semicolon functions as a form of material rhetoric, “a mode of interpretation that takes as its objects of study the significations of material things and corporal entities—objects that signify not through language, but through their spatial organization, mobility, mass, utility, orality, and tactility” (Dickson 297). As a form of material rhetoric (Blair: 1999, 2007; Helmers: 2006; Marback: 1998, 2008; White-Farnham: 2013), this symbol empowers these tattoo bearers to re-author their future selves as healthier individuals who refuse to bend to self-injurious behaviors.

Moreover, while others (Hauser: 1999; Dickson: 1999; Deluca: 1999) have examined the body as a rhetorical space, this paper adds to scholarship on material rhetoric by analyzing the body not only as a rhetorical site for argumentation and advocacy, but also as a space to reconstruct the identities of those frequenting The Semicolon Project Facebook page. My presentation analyzes both the verbal and visual elements of posts left on The Semicolon Project's Facebook wall to determine how the rhetorical appeals present in both the tattoos and the reflections persuade others to rewrite their past, present, and future relationships with mental illness. It is through these

rhetorical practices that users are encouraged to move away from the harmful behaviors of their pasts—motivating users to shift identities and reconstruct a future self that is prepared to safely manage the effects of mental illness.

Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference Presentation

“The Sentence Continues: Shifting Identities through Semicolon Tattoos”



Figure 1: Opening Slide: Semicolon.

What is a semicolon?—a mark on a page, a pause, a frustrating deduction on a student’s paper for improper use? A bullet hole atop a sharp, curved blade. According to Kurt Vonnegut, semicolons are “transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing.” Sadly, some of our students might agree. A semicolon can be all of these things to you and me, but for others, the semicolon is more than that.

Arguably, suicide and self-harm are issues that remain on the fringe of societal discourse; consequently, there are few viable venues through which individuals

contemplating suicide or engaging in self-harm might find support and community. The Semicolon Project, a recent, successful self-harm and suicide prevention initiative, is an organization that offers a positive outlet for those struggling with self-harm or thoughts of suicide. Specifically, participants tattoo their bodies with semicolons and share images of their tattoos along with reflective thoughts over social media sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram. For those participants too young, or too unwilling, to get actual tattoos, the semicolon is drawn on the surface of the skin.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), describes that “methods of self-harm can be divided into two broad groups: self-poisoning and self-injury” (15). Motivation for self-harm varies, sometimes individuals perform non-suicidal self-injury in order to “communicate with others” or “to obtain relief from a particular emotional state or overwhelming situation” (16). According to NICE, for those who engage in self-injury, the most common method is cutting, but “less common methods include burning, hanging, stabbing, swallowing or inserting objects...jumping from heights or in front of vehicles” (15). It is important to note that acts of self-harm are not always motivated by a desire to die. However, “following an act of self-harm, the rate of suicide increases to between 50 and 100 times the rate of suicide in the general population (“Self-Harm” 16). So while some who engage in self-injury are more prone to commit suicide, not all of these individuals will make the attempt.

Suicide is a leading cause of death worldwide (Nock et al 98), and according to the CDC, suicide ranks as the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for almost 40,000 deaths per year. Instances of self-harm and attempted suicide are much harder to quantify however since these statistics rely largely on self-report. One study

found that up to 5% of the US population reported a previous episode with self-harm (Nock et al), but figures continue to vary. At any rate, it is clear that this is a problem deserving of attention—and even intervention.

In this presentation, I will analyze the rhetorical affordances present in The Semicolon Project, and how these rhetorical practices help users move away from the negative behaviors or their pasts and toward a more positive, healthy future that is free of self-harm and/or suicidal behavior.

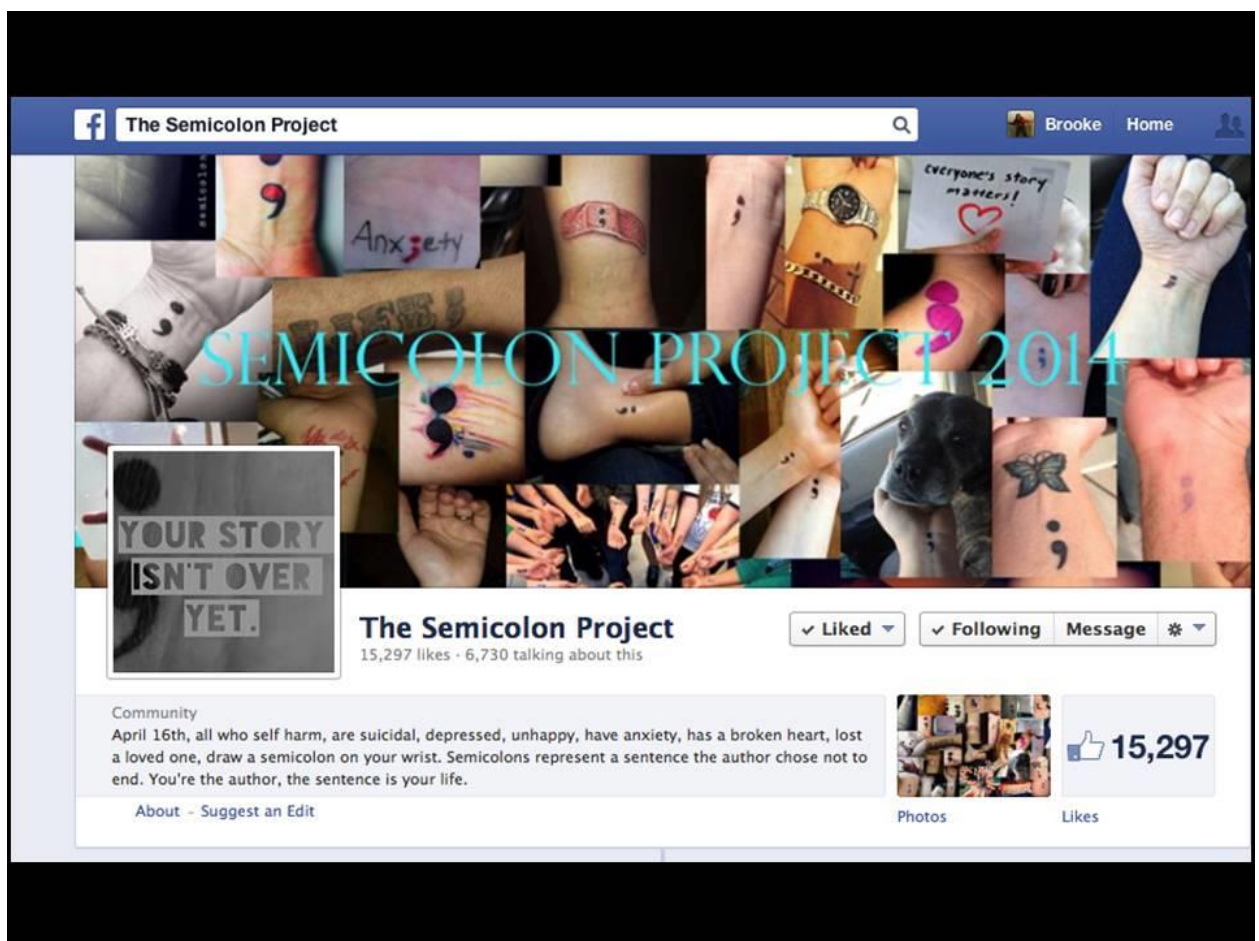


Figure 2: Brooke Covington “Screenshot” The Semicolon Project.

Beginning in April of 2012, The Semicolon Project was supposed to be a yearlong movement dedicated to ending self-harm and suicide. The movement was set to

culminate on April 16, 2013, a day during which supporters would present their semicolon tattoos (either permanent or drawn) to one of The Semicolon Project's online forums, but a call from members to maintain the movement resulted in its continuation. With an organizational website, a Facebook page, and a Tumblr, The Semicolon Project's online presence continues to grow each day—likely because there are so few options for these individuals to find community, support, and friendship.

For this group, the semicolon metaphorically represents a sentence an author could have ended, but chose not to; for participants of The Semicolon Project, the semicolon tattoo represents the life that they almost ended, but now vow not to end. Rhetorically, then, the semicolon functions as a form of material rhetoric, “a mode of interpretation that takes as its objects of study the significations of material things and corporal entities—objects that signify not through language but through their spatial organization, mobility, mass, utility, orality, and tactility” (Dickson 297). As a form of material rhetoric, the tattoo empowers these individuals to re-author their future selves as healthier individuals dedicated to ending self-harm and suicide. In addition to writing semicolons on the body, users also use The Semicolon Project's Facebook wall to reveal their journeys from hopelessness to strength. And these journeys are often described through powerful metaphors of movement such as moving from the darkness to the light, or from yesterday to tomorrow. It is from the use of these metaphors and the material rhetoric of the tattoos that this prevention initiative finds its success since the rhetorical appeals present in both the tattoos and the reflections on Facebook persuade others to

rewrite their past, present, and future relationships with self-harm and suicid



Figure 3. "Your Story Isn't Over Yet." *The Semicolon Project*. *Tumblr.com*.

In her examination of the material practices of the Red Hat Society, Jamie White-Farnham explains that instances of material rhetoric typically aim to give voice to groups that traditionally go unnoticed or unheard. She describes, "The use of material rhetoric in an analytical sense offers interpretations of objects, bodies, and symbols in order to resist conventional attitudes and bring attention to marginalized populations" (475). Similarly, Vicki Tolar Collins explains that examining a text through material rhetoric forces one to ask, "What or who authorized the material shift from earlier forms to published text? In what community was the writer writing? In what historical and political situation? To

what audience? For what rhetorical purpose” (551). Material rhetoric is a well-situated lens to examine The Semicolon Project since the members of this movement are typically forced to the fringe of society. Moreover, materiality is quite important to this group since the semicolon tattoo is a permanent, material mark that inhabits a rhetorical space on the body. The tattoo is meaningful—it is a text inscribed on the body that we can examine rhetorically.

Using Collins’s questions, too, might guide a rhetorical analysis of The Semicolon Project and the material characteristics of the resulting tattoos. What causes the tattooed individuals to shift from earlier bodily texts, such as a wrist tracked with scars, to a new text, covering the old inscription with a more positive one (the tattoo)? For some, this shift is a result of healing—the tattoo becomes a symbol that allows the individual to move away from the negative means of coping and welcome a new identity. Viewed this way, the semicolon tattoo becomes more than just an ink-filled scar—it is a rhetorical, visual symbol with a specific audience and a worthy purpose.

Just as important to this analysis are questions of arrangement, and specifically the spatial arrangement of this material symbol. Cheryl Forbes describes the rhetorical appeal of space, particularly in relation to bodies, by pointing out that to “write” the body is to “inscribe it, mold it, shape it, give it material presence” (60). The semicolon tattoo occupies and embodies space on the body. The tattoo takes up space—space that argues, persuades, even inspires. Forbes describes, “Without space, language as a physical, material artifact would be impossible.” True, too, for The Semicolon Project since the semicolon tattoo cannot exist without the body—the inscription needs a surface. And for tattoo bearers, power over decisions regarding the space these tattoos occupy is

empowering—these spaces can be either direct (with a clear representation of a semicolon) or indirect (with a semicolon hidden within other surrounding tattoos); spatially, it might be prominent (featuring a large semicolon tattoo) or it might be subtle (featuring a smaller or simpler design). In terms of placement, it might appear on a private part of the body, meaning that the tattoo bearer would have to grant access or permission for viewers to see it. Or, it might appear on a public space of the body, inviting a number of viewers to not only examine the tattoo, but also to ask about it—thus increasing exposure to the initiative and perhaps even increasing audiences and membership.

For tattoo bearers, the body serves, and has served, as a medium for inscription. Previously, these individuals may have used the body as a space to carve painful, permanent marks that externally inscribe the pain that was felt internally. The Semicolon Project, on the other hand, encourages these individuals to become authors, to write on the body in a different, more positive way—a way that enables participants to take control of their lives. Though perhaps still painful and permanent, the semicolon mark represents the person's shifting identity in society—one that illustrates the bearer's commitment to healing and a healthier future.

Equally as important to the meaning behind the semicolons are the rhetorical appeals embedded in the tattoos. Just as the delivery, or the style, or the arrangement of a verbal text has rhetorical appeal, so too does the location, the placement, the color, the size, and the shading of a tattoo. Even the surrounding areas of the tattoo can have rhetorical impact. Each of these characteristics helps to enhance the meaning behind and

the message conveyed by the tattoo. With these elements in mind, we can rhetorically analyze some of the semicolon tattoos.

Most of the images posted to the social media sites feature a semicolon tattoo placed on the individual's wrist. This placement is significant because the wrist is one of the typical places that individuals choose to cut when performing self-harm or even when attempting to commit suicide. To better grasp the rhetorical appeal of these tattoos, let's examine some visual and verbal evidence pulled from The Semicolon Project's Facebook page. As an aside, I also want to point out that since The Semicolon Project's Facebook page is a public space, I chose not to change any of the information as it appeared in the original posts. Since one of the major aims of this initiative is to give voice to individuals struggling with self-harm or suicidal thoughts, I felt it was wrong to silence users by stripping the posts of their identity markers.

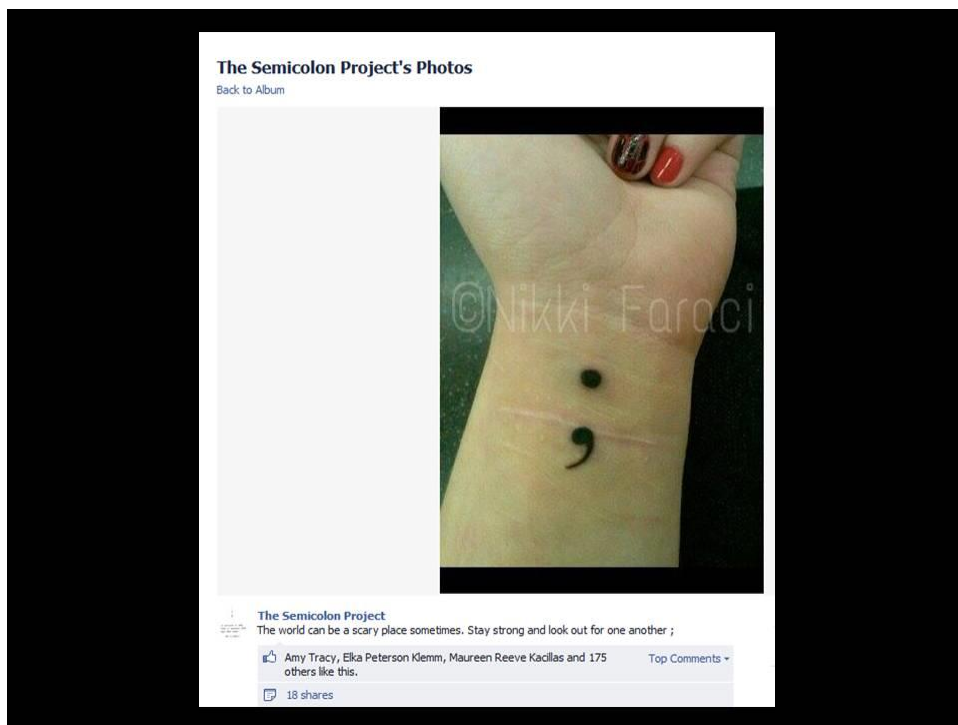


Figure 4. Image 1: Nikki Faraci. "The Semicolon." The Semicolon Project.

In Image 1, the semicolon is vertically stretched and placed on her skin so that her scar appears in the middle of the tattoo. Notice, too, the tattoo's positioning—it is placed so that the tattooed person can properly view the semicolon in an upright position. While the individual did choose to place the tattoo on a public part of the body that can easily be seen by observers, the tattoo is still primarily meant to be viewed by the owner, not just to attract attention from other viewers. Rendering the tattoo so that it is only properly visible to her own eyes indicates the importance of her own viewpoints, of her own position with her tattoo and her struggles with thoughts of suicide or self-injurious behavior. In terms of placement, it is clear that the semicolon is tied to the scar. It is impossible to look at the scar without noticing the tattoo, and vice versa. Here, it seems the tattooed individual wanted to remind herself to choose the semicolon, or in other words, choose not to self-harm or attempt suicide.

This example is perhaps even more interesting thanks to the watermark. Just as it is impossible to view the tattoo without seeing the scar, it is also impossible to view this image without reading the watermark—without identifying this individual tattoo among a collection of other semicolon tattoos. Though this image was posted to a public online platform, Ms. Faraci aims to preserve and protect her individual identity while still contributing to the collective discourse community. Rhetorical choices such as these are revealing—this person is unashamed of her past, even going as far as to claim copyright ownership of an image that highlights the difficulties she has faced in the past. Doing so means that she names herself as the author of her own story. This photograph can be used for no purpose other than the one she intended; it is her story, and she is open to sharing that story with others—but not at the cost of herself or her identity.



Figure 5. Image 2: Akashaaa. "Semicolon." The Semicolon Project.

Image 2 is laden with pathos—the semicolon appears after the word “HATE,” which has been carved into the individual’s skin. Like the previous example, this image gains rhetorical impact because of the placement of the tattoo alongside the surrounding skin. This semicolon is black, but just as tall as the word “HATE.” The semicolon appears after the word, illustrating that the sentence—a metaphor for the individual’s life—will continue. Choosing to not place the semicolon on top of the word “HATE” could be the bearer’s way of commemorating her troubled past—an open admission that she did perform this act upon herself but that life is moving forward despite her past troubles.

The emotional appeal of this tattoo is not derived strictly from the tattoo, but from the neighboring text as well. In this image, the accompanying text is not tattooed; rather, the individual has sliced every line of each letter into the skin. Powerful images like this

one are argumentative in nature. They force viewers to confront issues that many would prefer to keep on the fringe of societal consciousness; however, once shown an image like this one, it becomes increasingly difficult to passively ignore those suffering from either suicidal or non-suicidal self-injurious behavior. Some viewers, in fact, may be impassioned to join the movement and actively promote changing misguided assumptions surrounding those who self-harm or contemplate suicide.



Figure 6. Image 3: Rae Alvarez. "My story ; isn't over." The Semicolon Project.

The tattoo in Image 3 was posted alongside perhaps one of the most powerful stories posted to The Semicolon Project Facebook wall. In addition to the image, the user provides the following description:

A close friend told me about your project and it quickly became very important to me. I want to thank you for spreading awareness about delicate topics such as these.

It hit so close to home that I got this tattoo tonight and hope that you will share it and use it over and over again to help the cause.

Rae Alvarez

Suffers from: Bipolar & PTSD

Attempt: 01/20/2011

Tattooed: 11/10/2013

Again, thank you for all you've done and all you will do.

Rae

Here, Ms. Alvarez's post features a semicolon tattoo that is not black—the semicolon here is green and pink. Though Alvarez does not hint at the motivations behind her color choice, choosing these particular colors was a rhetorical act—generally colors like light green and pink are associated with spring, the season of rebirth after the dead of winter. Adding these specific colors to the tattoo seems symbolic of Ms. Alvarez's own rebirth and transformation. As an active member of The Semicolon Project, it is clear that she hopes to leave her previous life behind and move into a new identity and a healthy lifestyle, one that is free of harmful, self-injurious behavior. The image seems to suggest that the darkness of the past is gone, and this person is able to move forward and heal.

While it is interesting that this user introduced color, it is also interesting that she chose to include text: "My story ; isn't over." As with any text, the style is a significant rhetorical choice. Here, Ms. Alvarez chose to render the text in a script-style typeface, one that clearly mimics handwriting or calligraphy (and could be Ms. Alvarez's own handwriting). The reception of the tattoo would have changed drastically if the verbal text

had been rendered in a different typeface, such as blackletter, gothic, or mimicry typefaces.

As the three examples illustrate, the material rhetoric offers a generative lens through which to examine The Semicolon Project. A material rhetorical analysis calls for a close examination of the physical and rhetorical elements in each. And while the material mark is essential to the healing process, it is also through writing on the digital platforms that many find support, community, and healing. For it is by writing on the walls of Facebook that users are able to share thoughts and experiences, and this sharing becomes a way for users to rewrite their pasts and futures. While the tattoos are a significantly powerful form of argumentation that promotes transformation, the reflections also allow some users to write themselves into a new self. The rhetoric present in examples of the reflective writing that appears on The Semicolon Project Facebook page make this point clear.



Figure 7. Image 4: "Are you okay?" The Semicolon Project.

Here, The Semicolon Project Facebook administrators write to their many users—something that they do fairly often. Typically these posts offer words of encouragement or inform users of the various services offered to those who need help to move away from negative coping mechanisms, like self-harm or suicide attempts. Through these posts, the administrators work to build a community, a safe space for other users to feel comfortable posting.

This post in particular is strategic, and it serves two purposes. First, as a post coming from the mouthpiece of the organization, it emphasizes the importance of reaching out to help *others*—the argument there seems to be that through helping others, we learn how to help ourselves. Secondly, it opens a discussion; it persuades its users to actually ask themselves, Am I okay? And the two responses we see here provide inspirational words that serve as a reminder to themselves and to others to continue moving towards healing.

Notice, too, that the second comment builds on the organization's foundational metaphor. Life is a story, not a sentence. And this metaphor extends through multiple posts—both those written by The Semicolon Project's administrators and those written by its participants—becoming a maxim for users. The Semicolon Project uses this metaphor in particular to persuade its users to claim ownership, or authorship, of their own lives, their own stories. Doing so empowers these individuals to believe that moving away from unhealthy coping and toward a healthier lifestyle is altogether possible and within reach.

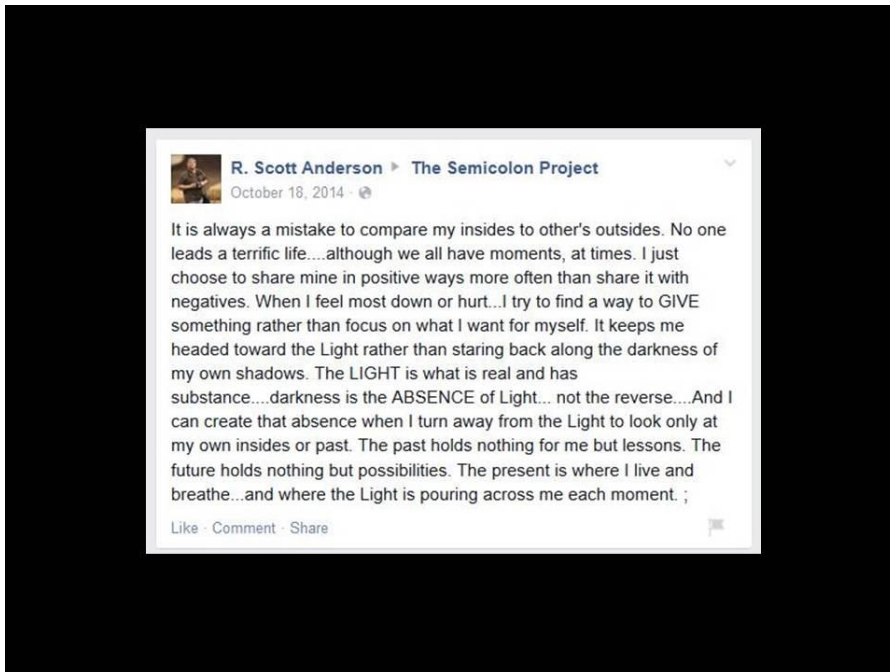


Figure 8. Image 5: R. Scott Anderson. “It is always a mistake.” *The Semicolon Project*.

Like the previous example, this post also operates rhetorically through the use of metaphor—here, though, the metaphor is created through a lightness/darkness binary. The suggestion is that the user’s past relationship with suicide or self-harm is the darkness, while the light symbolizes the user’s future, one that “is real,” “has substance,” and “holds nothing but possibilities.” Binaries are powerful rhetorical devices, mostly because we are confronted with binary oppositions every day. Rich/Poor, Good/Bad, Love/Hate, Success/Failure, and Light/Dark. And our understandings of these constructions shape our views (since, for example, we cannot define goodness if we do not understand evil). Also, these terms are mutually exclusive—you cannot be both on and off, or both up and down. With *The Semicolon Project*, you cannot stay in the light if you do not reject the darkness—these individuals must move beyond the darkness of their pasts to embrace the brightness of their futures.

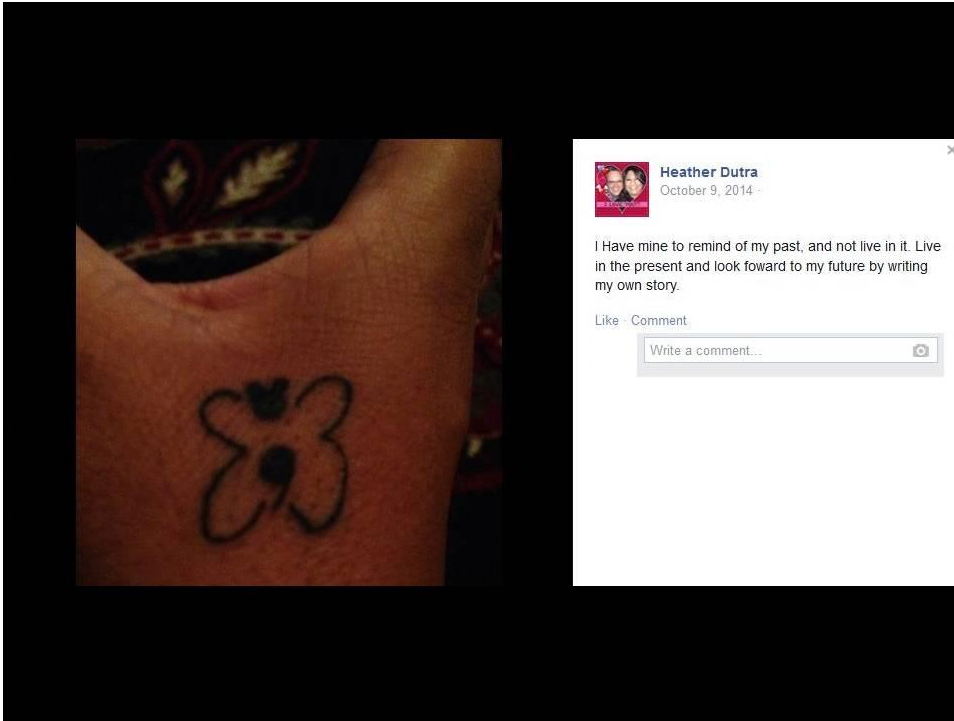


Figure 9. Image 6: Heather Dutra. “I have mine.” *The Semicolon Project*.

This final image combines an image of writing on the body with the digital, rhetorical, writing that occurs in the reflective Facebook posts. Here we see an image of a butterfly, with the body of the insect shaped in the form of a semicolon. As a symbol of transformation, the butterfly is a rhetorical addition to the traditional semicolon tattoo. This user’s reflection also speaks of her dedication to transform, to move toward healing—the butterfly reminds the user of her past and inspires her to “Live in the present and look forward to [her] future by writing [her] own story.” As with most, if not all, of the posts of The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page—the purpose here is to both inspire the author, and others who may be seeking guidance or feelings of empowerment. Here, it is clear that this author is confident that she will write her own story, not let others—or an illness—write it for her. The argument is that others can maintain a similar sense of agency and authorial power if they take up writing on the body and on public forums.

Across the board, all of the posts on The Semicolon Project’s page serve a third, equally important purpose. By simply posting to The Semicolon Project’s page, users continually display their support of this initiative and advocate helping others find more positive ways of avoiding this kind of behavior. Though these individuals may only write a few sentences, a few words, or even just a punctuation mark, they too are writers who must intervene and create a platform for extending their message to others. Through its online and social media platforms, The Semicolon Project is able to do just that—they have a voice with nearly 19,000 followers that continues to grow each day.

Participants of The Semicolon Project are able to combat assumptions that those struggling with suicidal thoughts or self-injury should be kept out of public eye by placing a physical, visible representation on their bodies. Quite literally, these members attempt to heal a wound by inflicting a final, more permanent one. Scars are no stranger to these individuals—but this ink-filled scar helps not only with learning to recover, but also with learning to move toward a healthier future.



Figure 10. Final Slide: Contact Information.

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III. The Sentence Continues: The Material Rhetoric of Semicolon Tattoos as Sites of Advocacy, Commemoration, and Agency

Abstract

The Semicolon Project, a suicide and self-harm prevention initiative, encourages users to more positively negotiate struggles with mental illness by getting a semicolon tattoo—a material mark representative of the tattoo bearer’s position as the author of his or her own life. This paper uses theories of material rhetoric and embodiment to analyze how this material mark and the tattooing performance enables users to gain authorial agency over relationships with mental illness. Through this performance, individuals repositions themselves as authors, allowing them to revise their own personal histories and societal assumptions of those affected by mental illness.

Keywords: tattoos, body, material rhetoric, performance, prevention initiative

“People do not die from suicide, they die from sadness.”

The Semicolon Project

Introduction

In April 2012, The Semicolon Project began its crusade to end self-harm and suicide—actions that lie on the fringe of popular discourse but continue to increase in prevalence each year. Consequently, there are few viable venues through which individuals contemplating suicide or engaging in self-harm might find support and community. The Semicolon Project is one such organization that offers a positive outlet for those struggling with the negative coping mechanisms often associated with mental illness, namely self-harm and/or thoughts of suicide¹. For this group, the semicolon is

¹ A recent boom in scholarly attention on online support communities emphasizes the positive impact these spaces can have on the individuals who frequent them (Davis, 2012; Dolev-Cohen and Barak, 2013; Gross,

symbolic—grammatically, a semicolon represents a sentence an author could have ended, but chose not to; for participants of The Semicolon Project, the semicolon represents the life that they almost ended, but now vow not to end.

Specifically, participants of The Semicolon Project tattoo—or write—semicolons onto their bodies and share images of their tattoos along with reflective thoughts over social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. For those participants too young to get tattoos, the semicolon is drawn on the surface of the skin. This prevention initiative provides a safe (though public) zone of communication—a place where both insiders and outsiders of this counterpublic can contribute a voice, thereby joining the thousands of other voices dedicated to helping others find more positive methods of coping with the effects of mental illness².

In this paper, I will use theories of material rhetoric to analyze the rhetorical affordances present in The Semicolon Project. After reviewing literature on material rhetoric, I will then present visual and verbal evidence pulled from The Semicolon Project's Facebook wall to demonstrate the ways in which the semicolon, as a material

2009; Ko and Kuo, 2009; and Valkenberge, 2006). For example, researchers (specifically Duggan et al, 2012; Ko and Kuo, 2009; Quinn and Oldmeadow, 2013; Siriaraya et al, 2011; and Tichon and Shapiro, 2003) have all shown that social networking sites, forums, and blogs created as a means of providing social support also offer a number of health benefits, such as increased feelings of belongingness, self-disclosure, emotional support, and reduced feelings of social anxiety. Similarly, researchers have also found online communication activities like online chatting have been associated with an increase in positive self-esteem for individuals receiving support when feeling distressed.

² I want to be clear here. I realize that self-harm and thoughts of suicide do not always indicate mental illness, and I do not wish to misrepresent any person posting to this initiative. However, I have noticed that a number of users admit to having been diagnosed with mental illness. Though this is perhaps not inclusive of every person posting to this initiative, it seems to be the case for a large majority. Also researchers have found that self-injurious behavior is often associated with a host of mental illnesses such as borderline personality disorder, psychopathy, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety and depressive disorders (Vaughn et al). Unfortunately, the scope of this project will prevent me from addressing the connections between mental illness and self-injury, but interesting discussions can be found in Wilkinson, 2013; Vaughn et al, 2015; and Dhingra et al, 2015).

mark, enables users to advocate the initiative's mission, commemorate past histories or lost loved ones, and regain a sense of agency by re-authoring identities.

The Semicolon Project

Originally, The Semicolon Project was created to be a yearlong initiative, with the movement set to culminate on April 16, 2013, a day during which supporters would present their semicolon tattoos (either permanent or drawn) to one of The Semicolon Project's online forums. Fortunately, a cry from members to maintain the movement resulted in its continuation past April of 2013. With an organizational website as well as a number of social media platforms, The Semicolon Project's online presence continues to grow each day³. In addition to the growing number of users willing to offer a mutual support system, the website offers constant online, or talkline, counseling services for anyone battling issues concerning mental health. Dedicated to increasing knowledge and understanding for those struggling to overcome these unhealthy coping mechanisms, The Semicolon Project hosts many campaigns to raise awareness, particularly concerning the topics that encourage suicidal thoughts or self-injurious behavior such as bullying or familial discord. The aim of these campaigns, and The Semicolon Project generally, is to help de-stigmatize and empower individuals struggling with self-injurious behavior.

³ In fact, there are two Facebook pages owned by The Semicolon Project—one, designated as The Official Semicolon Project, is listed as a non-profit organization, and the second (the one from which I will conduct my analysis) is considered a community and simply called The Semicolon Project. The Official site seems to post more often and more actively promotes The Semicolon Project as an organization; however, very few members are posting (or even liking) this page. Most of the activity involving outside users occurs on the community page, The Semicolon Project. Of course, giving one page designation as “The *Official* Semicolon Project” could perhaps damage the ethos of the community's site. Fortunately, user practices have protected the community page, encouraging more likes and more posts from audiences. By virtue of the fact that the community The Semicolon Project has nearly 20,000 likes, while the official site has a little more than half of that, the numbers somewhat speak for themselves and help establish an ethos for The Semicolon Project that would be difficult to question.

For The Semicolon Project, the semicolon operates both symbolically—as a representation of participants’ past, present, and future relationships with self-harm and/or suicide; and rhetorically—as a form of argument and advocacy against self-harm and suicide. The purposes of this advocacy movement become even more urgent when placed alongside the current statistics of self-harm and suicide.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), describes that “methods of self-harm can be divided into two broad groups: self-poisoning and self-injury” (15). Motivation for self-harm varies, sometimes individuals perform non-suicidal self-injury in order to “communicate with others” or “to obtain relief from a particular emotional state or overwhelming situation” (16). According to NICE, for those who engage in self-injury, the most common method is cutting, but “less common methods include burning, hanging, stabbing, swallowing or inserting objects...jumping from heights or in front of vehicles” (15). It is important to note that acts of self-harm are not always motivated by a desire to die. However, “following an act of self-harm, the rate of suicide increases to between 50 and 100 times the rate of suicide in the general population (“Self-Harm” 16). So while some who engage in self-injury are more prone to commit suicide, not all of these individuals will make the attempt.

Suicide is a leading cause of death worldwide (Nock et al 98), and according to the CDC, suicide ranks as the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for almost 40,000 deaths per year. Instances of self-harm and attempted suicide are much harder to quantify however since these statistics rely largely on self-report. One study found that up to 5% of the US population reported a previous episode with self-harm

(Nock et al), but figures continue to vary. At any rate, it is clear that this is a problem deserving of attention—and even intervention.

As a form of writing used to combat the negative effects of mental illness, the rhetorical appeals of this initiative have captured my attention—specifically through the material renderings of the semicolon tattoos. Theories of material rhetoric can offer nuanced understandings of the individual characteristics of these tattoos and their specific argumentative, commemorative, and inspirational functions. Using evidence found on The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page, my purpose is to demonstrate the rhetorical impact of the semicolon tattoos as a form of material rhetoric that seeks to de-stigmatize mental illness and disrupt the invisibility felt by the largely marginalized mentally ill community. For it is through collectively writing on the body that participants are empowered to transform their individual circumstances and change the social stigma attached to mental illness.

Material Rhetoric: A Review of the Literature

Theories of material rhetoric provide a lens through which texts can be understood, particularly those that are not texts in the traditional sense but rather texts that are more visual or tactile, like objects or bodies. From an understanding of material rhetoric, we can better understand the materiality of language as well as how material objects argue.

In this section, I will describe relevant theories of material rhetoric, focusing most on those that highlight or analyze material objects’ ability to resist, transform, and respond to social and historical constructs. Many scholars have employed theories of material rhetoric to examine not only material objects but also the material circumstances

surrounding events, organizations, and institutions. My research on The Semicolon Project advances the study of material rhetoric by blending these two approaches. I will not only address how the material mark acts as a text on the body that resists the marginalization of mental illness populations, but I will also examine how the rhetorical choices of The Semicolon Project, as an organization, function as a means of promoting social change, specifically by squelching the predominant misconceptions of those affected by mental illness.

In my reading of The Semicolon Project, I have found that the semicolon itself serves three rhetorical functions for its bearers: advocacy, commemoration, and the assertion of agency. And though scholars studying the materiality of rhetoric have covered larger territories than these three (Fleckenstein, Green, Coogan, Forbes, Haas, Wells, Biesecker, Brandt, McGee, to name a few), I will focus this review of the literature on scholarship relevant to the various ways in which material objects advocate, commemorate, and (re)create identities.

Materiality & Advocacy

It may go without saying that objects and bodies have the ability to advocate—symbols in particular. And a number of scholars have such as Dickson, White-Farnham, and Collins have attested to this ability. For example, Barbara Dickson's analysis of Demi Moore's 1991 *Vanity Fair* cover photo, featuring her both nude and pregnant, rejects the cultural norms placed upon the pregnant body, and instead advocates viewing pregnancy as not just healthy but sexy. Similarly focused on female advocacy campaigns (and assertions of identity), Jamie White-Farnham, in her examination of the Red Hat Society, posits that both the production and the donning of a red hat advocates changing

the perceptions of elderly women as “shrinking violets” (484), arguing instead that the hats become “rhetorical opportunities to determine and share publicly how aging women can and may be seen: as visible, energetic, and healthy in number” (485).

Materiality & Commemoration

Just as corporeal realities have the ability to advocate, objects also have the ability to commemorate. Examples include not just tattoos, but also car window decals, ribbons on front doors, and even jewelry. In fact, both Carole Blair and Marguerite Helmers, have done intense study on the ways in which objects can shape memories of people, places, and events. Blair’s work often focuses on the study of public memorials (the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the Civil Rights Memorial, Kent State University’s May 4th Memorial, the Witch Trials Tercentenary, the Astronauts Memorial) and how memorial structures have the capacity to shape predominant notions of place, society, and history. Citing specific examples, Blair points out that the physical renderings of commemorative sites extend a specific telling of history. Blair exemplifies this notion in her examination of the Witch Trials Tercentenary, which features twenty stone benches—each one representing those condemned and bearing the names, dates of deaths, methods of execution as well as inscriptions that detail the defenses of the accused. However, each of these defenses has been cut off by the cement wall on either side of the bench. Of course, townspeople argue that the interrupted defenses are meant to be ironic and “a material manifestation of the court’s inability or unwillingness to listen” (44); however, a number of witchcraft practitioners currently living in Salem argue that these silenced defenses are not ironic at all but rather representative of the predominant stigmatization of witchcraft still reinforced today. Through this memorial specifically, a

narrative of the Salem Witch Trials is extended, contested, and reshaped depending on the viewer and his or her relation to the Trials.

Like Blair, Helmers is also interested in public responses to commemorative sites like memorials—and how these sites become places for contradictory rememberings of events. In “Objects, Memory, and Narrative: New Notes Towards Materialist Rhetoric” Helmers analyzes the devotional objects (a soldier’s boots, dog tags, Christmas tree ornaments, baby shoes, even beer) left by veterans’ loved ones on the wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. When placed at a commemorate site such as this, Helmers argues, these everyday objects become “invested with pathos, an emotional appeal from the giver to the dead, and from the object to the witness” (Helmers 122). In leaving these objects against the backdrop of the Wall, givers not only commemorate lost loved ones, but also narrate a history of both the deceased and of the war—one that may reveal sadness, anger, guilt, loss, and redemption. Ultimately, these objects—as forms of public art—shape the experience of those viewing the memorial and may alter the witnesses’ general perception of the Vietnam War and its consequences.

Materiality & Agency

Though similarly interested in the material rhetoric present in the physical structure, Richard Marback also studies how public art (specifically the Monument to Joe Louis) has functioned as an embodied form of rhetorical agency for those living in urban spaces, Detroit in particular. And according to Marback, the closed fist, chiefly perceived as a symbol of Black Power, is now a material artifact that engages with “struggles over representational power, challenging all Americans to confront the rhetorical and spatial dynamics of racialization that have constructed people as difference and isolated them

from each other. And it is in interpretations of the Black-Power fist that the meanings of poverty and privilege, isolation and difference, nonviolence and violence, black and white are made” (84, 1998). Ten years later, Marback returned to his original project with *The Fist* after the artwork was vandalized by two white men who hoped to “unclench *The Fist*”—to destroy the embodied identity and symbolism that this material object placed over those living in Detroit (“Unclenching”). The vandals, hoping to paint *The Fist* white so that it could no longer be viewed as a symbol of Black Power, demonstrated that it is through these struggles of re-presentation that material artifacts can embody histories, memories, hopes, and fears.

And while the material rhetoric of a public work of art can embody an identity for the local community, on a much smaller scale, the physical body, as a form of material rhetoric, also posits its own argument about an individual’s personal identity. For example, Gerard Hauser demonstrates the rhetorical ability of incongruous bodies. Citing examples like President Roosevelt’s polio-ridden body or the body of a hunger striker, Hauser claims the physical body can be an object of embodied rhetorical discourse—one that can trigger a variety of reactions ranging from political action to public protest to the reconstruction of personal identity. These examples, he explains, “suggest that our bodies are important and powerful sources of assertion and contention...they provoke us to deepen reflection for insights we may gain into identity, power, and the characters of argument itself by considering our bodies as sources and sites of argument” (Hauser 8). Our bodies are indeed powerful sites of argumentation that can be adorned or altered in ways that provoke gradual societal change.

One specific way we can alter our bodies in an argumentative way is through the use of tattooing. In her examination of the punitive tattooing practices in Ancient Greece, Jennell Johnson argues that the stigmatized, marked body was used to “advertise the social inferiority or moral failing of its bearer” thereby labeling the individual with *kakoethos*, or bad character (462). Marking the body (both physically with the tattoo and symbolically with *kakoethos*) rhetorically disabled these individuals by stripping their language of “the power to signify” (462). Throughout Johnson’s study, she makes clear that the marked body has both the power to create a sense of agency in a person’s life and the power to take it away. The tattooing practices in The Semicolon Project attest to Johnson’s perceptive understanding of the argumentative qualities of tattoos more generally.

Since the rhetoric of The Semicolon Project is open to a myriad of interpretations concerning those affected by mental illness, the subsequent sections of this article introduce specific evidence gathered from The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page. Using material rhetoric as a framework, this evidence will be analyzed so that we can better understand the rhetorical functions and consequences of both the semicolon as a material mark and the organization as a collective identity. These sections are framed around the major themes that emerged after studying posts left on The Semicolon Project’s Facebook wall: advocacy, commemorative, and agency.

Material Rhetoric and the Semicolon Tattoo: Advocacy

In conjunction with the mission of the organization, the semicolon tattoos serve multiple rhetorical functions, and material rhetoric provides a way to read these tattoos in the same way we would read a public memorial or a red hat. In its broadest sense, the

purpose of the semicolon is to resist misguided images of mental illness. It is through this purpose that we can analyze one of the semicolon's major functions: as a form of advocacy both against the stigma of mental illness and as a public display of each tattooed person's dedication to the organization and support for The Semicolon Project's mission to diminish the prevalence of self-harm and suicide among those affected by mental illness.

For The Semicolon Project, using a semicolon as an organizing symbol is a smart form of branding in that it is easily recognizable but also unique. It is also enough of a commonplace symbol that many individuals most likely do not fear regretting the tattoo and the size of the tattoo is truly up to the discretion of the bearer—it can be as pronounced or as inconspicuous as the tattooed individual likes. And while it is a familiar symbol, it is still one that attracts attention. The tattoo invites interpretation; it entices others to ask about the nature or the meaning behind the tattoo—and sharing the metaphor behind the tattoo is what gives this material mark its rhetorical power. Material rhetoric, specifically in relation to marginalized populations, has the ability to make “particular behaviors and populations become *visible* so that a program of action can intervene to improve the happiness, longevity, and material welfare of the population” (Green 31, emphasis mine). And visibility is essential to understanding the rhetorical underpinnings of The Semicolon Project and its symbol.

Prior to the tattoo, invisibility was likely vital for some individuals who self-harmed or thought about committing suicide. The cuts, the bruises, at times even the suicide plan were meant to be kept hidden. As with any stigmatized affiliation, these individuals once relied keeping any conflicts with mental illness outside of public eye.

Johnson points out that stigmatized populations' reliance on invisibility is historical, and especially for the mental illness community. According to Johnson, the Ancient Grecians marked the mentally ill with punitive tattoos that appeared on public parts of the body such as the hands and face. These marks were "a rhetorical act that literally made visible those person in the community whose invisibility was deemed a threat" (462). Now, hundreds of years later, The Semicolon Project ironically employs tattoos to publicly mark the bearer's ties to mental illness for an entirely different purpose—that is, for the organization's benefit. Dan Brouwer, in his examination of HIV/AIDS-positive tattoos, defines this form of tattooing as self-stigmatization, or "the conscious and willful marking of oneself as 'tainted'" (115). Rather than using the tattoo as a "mark of bad character" (463), the semicolon tattoo is a hopeful mark—one that encourages agency in its bearers and refutes stereotypical notions of the mentally ill as dangerous, unethical, or violent.

Clearly, for many participants the semicolon tattoo disrupts that invisibility—in fact, the tattoo often invites people to look, to view the scars surrounding the symbol, to question its meaning. For many, claiming ownership of this material mark is symbolic of breaking the silence. No longer will these individuals hide their problems rather many seek out what Green terms a "program of action" (31) that will encourage others to view mental illness and its effects differently.

This form of writing on the body is meant to persuade others to engage in such action—both in the owner of the tattoo and those who view it. In his examination of the social activist movement ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), communication theorist Kevin Michael DeLuca explains, "events revolve around images of the body—

vulnerable bodies, dangerous bodies, taboo bodies, ludicrous bodies, transfigured bodies. These political bodies of rhetoric constitute a nascent body rhetoric that deploys bodies as a pivotal resource for the crucial practice of public argumentation” (10). Rhetorically, the tattooed or scarred body has consistently been recognized as a powerful site of visual argumentation, but one that is simultaneously placed in both the private and the public realm—meaning that while the physical body can be scrutinized by the public eye, certain parts of the body remain private, reserved only for those granted permission to view. As a rhetorical space that allows visibility in some areas while concealing others, the body can be adorned or altered in order to shock, awe, repulse, or argue. In *The Semicolon Project*, the adornment is the semicolon tattoo; and the argument is twofold—first, to advocate for healthier means of coping with mental illness, and second, to promote ending the stigma and silence that typically manifests toward those affected by mental illness.

Ironically, it is from its own publicity that this small inscription on the body unlocks a much larger, more complicated story—the semicolon reveals a private, personal part of the individual while also displaying his or her communal ties to *The Semicolon Project*. Assessing the rhetorical situation of the tattoo forces the viewer to step into the personal realm of the tattooed individual in order to understand what goes unexpressed. And this is essential to the movement—not just the subject (the tattoo), but for that subject be the object of an outside gaze (audiences viewing the tattoo, including the tattoo bearer herself). As consumer culture theorists Maurice Patterson and Jonathan Schroeder point out, “Tattoos do refigure the body, shifting identity into liminal zones between subject (of the tattoo, of identity) and object (of the gaze, of social stigma)”

(255). In many cases, the semicolon tattoo has meaning only if there is an object, an external gaze. But as Marback points out, "...just looking is not enough. [The viewer] need[s] to verify a meaning that resides not in the object itself but outside it somewhere in the ethereal realms of interpretation, representation, and signification" ("Unclenching" 50). And "just looking" is not enough for observers of the semicolon tattoo either. Rather, the symbol must be interpreted in order for the viewer to gain a true understanding of its significance and its argument, and this depth of interpretation usually requires the aid of a tattooed individual. Truthfully, the tattoo does serve the person it is placed on, but in order for The Semicolon Project to reach a wider audience outside of its material constraints, the tattoo bearers must engage with and retell their stories to others, particularly individuals outside of those struggling with self-harm or thoughts of suicide. Allowing outside audiences to view the tattoo is a rhetorical opportunity to recruit new members and to rewrite the common misconceptions of what mental illness looks like. It is for this reason that many of the semicolon tattoos are placed on a public part of the body, and often over visible self-inflicted scars.

From this discussion, it is clear that the tattoo operates rhetorically as a form of advocacy in a number of ways. First, the actual symbol of the tattoo is a visible representation of the mission of The Semicolon Project—to raise awareness, create an identity, and serve as a form of writing as healing. In this way, the literal creation of the tattoo as well as the creation of the tattoo's meaning operates as material rhetoric. The tattoo can be viewed as a text with a purpose; it is an opportunity for Semicolon-ers to say something about themselves, about their experiences, and about their position in life.

Equally as important to the purpose are the rhetorical appeals that are embedded in the tattoos. Just as the delivery, or the style, or the arrangement of a text has rhetorical appeal, so too does the location, the placement, the color, the size, and the shading of a tattoo. Even the surrounding areas of the tattoo can have rhetorical impact. Each of these characteristics has the potential to enhance the response to and the message conveyed by the tattoo. With these elements in mind, a rhetorical analysis can be performed.

Most of the images posted to the social media sites feature a semicolon tattoo placed on the individual's wrist. This site is significant because the wrist is one of the most common places that individuals choose to cut when performing self-harm or even when attempting to commit suicide. The following sections introduce and analyze evidence collected from The Semicolon Project's Facebook page. A complete analysis of these tattoos calls for a close examination of the physical, and rhetorical, elements in each.



Figure 11. Image 1: Rae Alvarez. "My story ; isn't over." The Semicolon Project.

As perhaps one of the most powerful stories told recently on The Semicolon Project Facebook page, this tattoo was posted by Rae. She provides the following description along with the photo:

A close friend told me about your project and it quickly became very important to me.

I want to thank you for spreading awareness about delicate topics such as these.

It hit so close to home that I got this tattoo tonight and hope that you will share it and use it over and over again to help the cause.

Rae Alvarez

Suffers from: Bipolar & PTSD

Attempt: 01/20/2011

Tattooed: 11/10/2013

Again, thank you for all you've done and all you will do.

Rae

Before analyzing the image, it is important to deconstruct the accompanying reflection.

First, Alvarez thanks the organization “for spreading awareness.” Continue reading and

we quickly understand the purpose of Alvarez’s sharing—she asks The Semicolon

Project to “share [the image of her tattoo] and use it over and over again to help the

cause.” Undoubtedly, Alvarez aims to advocate the mission of this organization through

her semicolon tattoo—both in her post on Facebook and in her actual tattoo.

In terms of the material characteristics of this tattoo, this semicolon is quite

individualized. Unlike most of the tattoos posted to The Semicolon Project’s media sites,

this one is not black; rather, Alvarez’s semicolon is green and pink. Even if not Alvarez’s

intention, choosing these particular colors has rhetorical significance—generally colors like light green and pink are associated with spring, the season of rebirth after the dead of winter. Adding these specific colors to the tattoo seems symbolic of Alvarez’s own rebirth. As a member of The Semicolon Project, we know she hopes to leave her previous life (and negative behaviors behind) and welcome a new identity, one that is free of the negative effects of mental illness. From this tattoo and her reflection, it appears that Alvarez has gained a sense of agency over her condition and her future (a more complete discussion of the authorial power derived from these tattoos will come in the following sections).

In addition to using color to enhance the traditional semicolon tattoo, this image also adds surrounding text: “My story ; isn’t over.” As with any text, the word choice and the style is a rich site for examination. Through this tattoo, Alvarez is publicly claiming her ties to The Semicolon Project and all it represents—both on the walls of Facebook as well as on her actual body. Her addition to the traditional semicolon tattoo, “My story ; isn’t over.” is based on The Semicolon Project’s foundational axiom, namely that these individuals are the authors of their own lives. Rather than ending their sentences (their lives), the semicolon empowers the tattoo bearers to reclaim authorship of their own futures and continue their stories.

If her written post was not persuasive enough, choosing to borrow the organization’s axiom is an even more clear and persuasive promotion of the organization and all it represents. Notice, too, the selection of pronoun usage. The Semicolon Project typically writes *your* story isn’t over. Alvarez changes it, advocating a position within the collective group that is specific to her: “*My* story ; isn’t over.” When somebody reads

this, the pronoun shifts—it no longer belongs to Alvarez. The “My story,” then, belongs to the viewer of the tattoo—so each time someone views Alvarez’s tattoo, the viewer reads to himself or herself “My story isn’t over”—perhaps triggering a range of thoughts, memories, fears, and hopes. Therein lies the power of the semicolon tattoo—it has the ability to impact others, to make others think, to question, to reflect.



Figure 12. Image 2: Kimberly Casey. “ ; I am a survivor.” *The Semicolon Project*.

Image 2, like the first, combines the semicolon with added text. Here, we see a traditional black semicolon, with a sharp curve—much like a sling blade. And underneath, the words “I am a survivor” appear. While Alvarez’s tattoo had advocacy significance through its citing of the organization’s foundational metaphor (My story ; isn’t over.”), this tattoo also advocates an interesting view of mental illness, and suicide in particular, that is quite different from the general public’s assumptions. Casey promotes the idea that suicidal thoughts are illustrative of a disease—something to be endured and survived, *not* a rational choice. In this example, we see a clear argument that advocates rejecting the impression that committing suicide is a choice.

To change these notions, publicity is essential. Susan Wells writes, “Speakers and writers come to the public with a weight of personal and social experience; to speak in public is to render those experiences intelligible to any listener whatever, and therefore to compromise their private density” (328). Though semicolon tattoo bearers may only write a few sentences, a few words, or even just a punctuation mark, they too are writers who must intervene in society and create a platform to advocate their message to others and promote social change. Here, we see a tattoo bearer advocating a very specific argument—that mental illness is a disease and that suicide is choice. Posting this on The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page enables Casey to “render [her] experiences intelligible” (Wells 328).

The position also helps Casey make her message clear. The semicolon tattoo and text are placed so that outside viewers will be able to read the tattoo in its upright position. Choosing to position the tattoo in this way illustrates Casey’s hope to share the tattoo with viewers and further advocate her personal view of mental illness as well as the mission of The Semicolon Project.

In addition to the placement, the typography also plays a role in the tattoo’s reception. Both Alvarez and Casey chose to render the text in a script-style typeface, one that clearly mimics handwriting or calligraphy (and could be the bearer’s own handwriting). The reception of these tattoos would have changed drastically if the verbal text had been rendered in a different typeface, such as blackletter, gothic, or mimicry typefaces. Choosing a script-style typeface is an additional way of establishing the closeness and intimacy of these tattoos since this font style most closely resembles handwriting.

These examples also demonstrate the importance of viewing these tattoos with a proper understanding of the rhetorical situation. Sharing these personal stories—be that in person or online—allows the tattooed individual to publicly situate themselves as advocates of The Semicolon Project’s cause. Doing so not only may facilitate the recruitment of new members but also perhaps even change some viewers’ assumptions concerning mental illness and its effects.

Ultimately, bodies that argue have vast potential to be persuasive. DeLuca argues that bodies have the ability to “become not merely flags to attract attention for the argument but the site and substance of the argument itself” (10). The Semicolon Project employs the tattooed, and sometimes scarred, body in this way—it is a rhetorical site, meant to demonstrate a heartfelt dedication to not just prevent self-harm and suicide, but also to argue against the misguided preconception of those with mental illness as unstable, uncontrollable, and dangerous.

Material Rhetoric and the Semicolon Tattoo: Commemoration

The second rhetorical function of these tattoos is to commemorate. Members of The Semicolon Project are not the first to commemorate a tragic portion of life with a tattoo. For example, in “The Mourning After: Languages of Loss and Grief in Post-Katrina New Orleans,” history professor Marline Otte describes that many Hurricane Katrina survivors got tattoos as a means of healing and commemorating this tragic event in their lives. She explains, “coping with...disaster [is] indeed a full-body experience, and memory and cultural recall of it had to be performed to be meaningful” (828). Tattoos as memorial sites are powerful performances in and of itself—as Blair describes, memorials “do not fall into silence like oral speech, nor are they (in most cases) ‘put

away' like the writings that we read and then store in bookshelves" (17). The same can be said of a tattoo—it speaks even when the tattoo bearer remains silent. And, at least for permanent tattoos, these material marks cannot be put away, but remain a very real part of the individual and his/her identity.

Perhaps most interesting is that the semicolon tattoo is not only used to commemorate loved ones lost to suicide—rather, for many the tattoos functions as a reminder of the dark times, the moments in life that have been plagued by the negative effects of mental illness. Choosing to abandon this painful (though potent) part of the individual's life is a symbolic death in some ways. And just as lessons can be gained from physical death, lessons can also be learned from symbolic death. Having this reminder helps to prevent relapses back to negative coping mechanisms like self-harm. Analyzing some examples will help to illustrate the commemorative purposes of the tattoo.

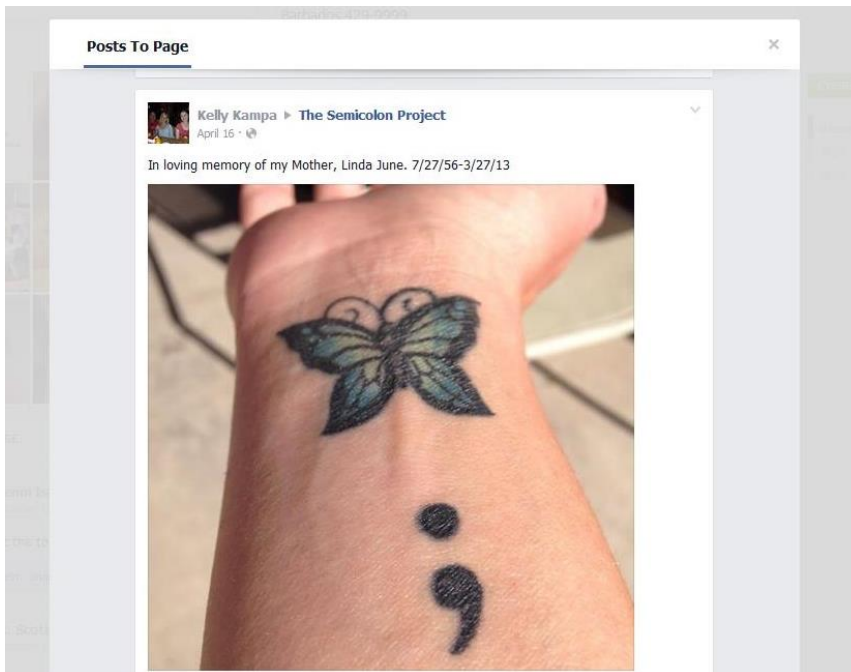


Figure 13. Image 3: Kelly Kampa. "In Loving Memory." *The Semicolon Project*.

Image 3 introduces both verbal and visual text. Beginning with the verbal, it is clear that Kampa has gotten this tattoo to commemorate her mother, Linda June. In addition and within close proximity to the traditional black semicolon, this tattooed individual also has a butterfly tattoo. Butterflies are a recognizable symbol of transformation—an image illustrating that as we grow, we change. The color choice of this tattoo hearkens back to the example examined in the previous section. Using bright colors associated with life and spring symbolizes rebirth and growth. Butterflies are also consistently placed in a similar symbolic category as angels—with many believing that butterflies are symbolic of guardian angels or lost loved ones.

Unlike the previous example, this tattoo is placed so that the bearer can view the tattoo (and the butterfly) it is upright position. In this instance, however, the positioning makes sense, particularly since the primary purpose of this tattoo seems to be to commemorate her mother, with a secondary purpose of advocating The Semicolon Project. The tattoo serves therapeutic and celebratory purposes as a symbol of bereavement and remembrance. And, of course, as with all of the semicolon tattoos—while its specific purpose may be to commemorate a lost loved one or a past self, the semicolon tattoo also serves to advocate the mission of The Semicolon Project simply by existing and encouraging discourse. This quality of the tattoo is what makes this material mark so powerful in terms of branding and promoting the initiative.

As an organization, offering this material form of membership, even to those who do not struggle with mental illness themselves, is smart. There are many individuals wanting to display their semicolons in support of this initiative, even if they do not struggle with mental illness or its effects. Several of the posts on The Semicolon Project's

Facebook page are, in fact, written by loved ones hoping to show their support of a family members or friends who are struggling with mental illness. Operating this way enables The Semicolon Project to reach wider audiences, even those outside of its target population. Reaching these individuals not only guarantees an increase in membership but also may help to redefine the general outlook on those affected by mental illness.



Figure 14. Image 4: Heather Dutra. "Semicolon Butterfly. The Semicolon Project.

Image 4 features another semicolon tattoo with a butterfly; however, unlike the previous example, this post is not meant to commemorate a loved one lost to suicide, but rather a past segment of her life that Dutra refuses to live within. Compared to the example above, this butterfly is less pronounced—and its very abstractness likely requires many viewers to take a closer look in order to distinguish the figure. A closer look also reveals that the body of the butterfly is actually a very traditional-looking semicolon. As explained in the previous example, the butterfly is a rhetorical addition to the traditional semicolon tattoo that symbolizes transformation. This user's reflection also speaks of her dedication to transform, to move toward healing—the butterfly reminds

Dutra of her past and inspires her to “Live in the present and look forward to [her] future by writing [her] own story.”

As with most, if not all, of the posts of The Semicolon Project’s page—the purpose of the examples we have examined thus far is to inspire the author (bearer) and any others who may seek guidance or feelings of empowerment. The argument of this particular tattoo, however, is that others dealing with similar battles should release their damaging memories and relationships with negative coping mechanisms, opting instead to work towards finding and maintaining a similar sense of agency and authorial power. Ultimately, the post as whole reveals that this author is confident that she has laid that part of her life to rest; Dutra will write her own story, not let others—or an illness—write it for her.

Through the performance of getting a commemorative tattoo, individuals not only mark themselves with a permanent reminder of the past and the lessons to be gained from it, but the tattoo bearers are also empowered to find a sense of agency that will help them regain control in times of perceived, and sometimes actual (as with the Katrina tattoos), chaos.

Material Rhetoric and the Semicolon Tattoo: Agency

The semicolon also functions as a material means of asserting authorial agency within the life of someone struggling with mental illness. As a form of material rhetoric, the semicolon tattoo operates as a physical symbol that breaks the silence for those individuals who self-harm or contemplate suicide, allowing them to claim a collective identity within the organization and an individual identity dedicated to healing. The foundational metaphor itself (that you are the author of the story that is your life, and

your story should continue) positions these tattoo bearers as authors of their own lives. From the performance of getting the tattoo, a number of users begin to re-author their positions in life. And the symbol acts as a force of empowerment and encouragement. Getting the semicolon tattoo is a way of writing on the body in order to rewrite past and current positions and ideologies toward mental illness, health, and happiness.

Thus far, all of the examples examined have illustrated that no two semicolon tattoos are exactly the same. In fact, a number of the tattoos posted to The Semicolon Project features distinct additions—many of which set the tattoo’s bearer apart from the collective group. As such, these individuals are able to claim an individualized identity within this community. Often, these additions serve as talk-pieces—ways of encouraging commenting and sharing across digital platforms (thereby serving to not only separate the owner from the group, but also as a way of cultivating even more attention toward The Semicolon Project since interesting tattoos typically garner heightened interest and intrigue from an outside gaze).

Control over the actual rendering of the tattoo (choices in color, size, additions, texts, etc.) are a huge part of how the performance of getting the semicolon tattoo promotes a sense of agency in its bearer. Communication theorist Sonja Modesti points out that “tattoo parlors provide their customers with a sense of agency through the material, embodied, and performed themes of choice and control in a tattoo studio” (198). Power over these stylistic choices means that the act of getting a tattoo invites “the recipient to literally embody his or her ‘story’” (209). And for participants operating under the metaphor of The Semicolon Project, writing the story is up to the discretion of the tattoo bearer/author.

A number of theorists have taken notice of the sense of agency that can be derived from tattooing the body in memory of a tragic event. Describing the agency of Katrina tattoos for one specific victim, Otte explains “In collaboration with another woman, her tattoo artist, she created a new reality, a new self; in order to represent a wound, she created one. Getting a very bold and fantastic tattoo was instrumental in reassembling her life and regaining control of it” (833). In the same way, those bearing the semicolon tattoo are able to create a new reality for themselves and their positions both towards life and mental illness. They, too, “represent a wound” by creating one—and doing so has effects similar to that of those who tattooed representations on the body to commemorate the devastation left behind by Hurricane Katrina.

And while the symbol itself is significant, the performance of tattooing is just as important as the physical remnants of the act. As Modesti points out, “the physical body actually undergoes change, which by nature helps to further embody the notions of agency present in that tattoo studio” (202). Indeed, the performance of tattooing allows the tattooed person to embody the meaning behind the tattoo—the idea that the tattoo bearer is the author of his or her own story and has the power to compose a life that is fulfilling and healthy. The semicolon, then, is no longer just ink etched into skin, but a meaning engraved in the soul.



Figure 15. Image 5: Nikki Faraci. "The Semicolon." The Semicolon Project.

Image 5 illustrates the authorial power that can be derived from these tattoos. In this example, it appears that this individual has cut her wrist at some point. The semicolon is vertically stretched and placed on her skin so that the scar appears in the middle of the tattoo. In terms of positioning, it is clear that the semicolon is tied to the scar. It is impossible to look at the scar without noticing the tattoo, and vice versa.

Previously, this individual has written on her wrist with a blade, now she has returned to this space to rewrite this scar—it is no longer a self-inflicted scar associated with pain, sadness, and defeat; rather, it is now a positive, self-inflicted symbol of hope, endurance, and empowerment—a vow to never again write on herself in a negative way. Placing it over the scars serves not only to rewrite the narrative attached to the original scar, but it is also a reminder to choose the semicolon, or in other words, choose not to self-harm or attempt suicide.

This example is perhaps even more interesting because of the watermark. Just as it is impossible to view the tattoo without seeing the scar, it is also impossible to view this image without seeing the watermark. Though this image was posted to a public online platform, Faraci chose to add a watermark, perhaps in an attempt to preserve and protect her individual identity while still contributing to the collective discourse community. Rhetorical choices such as these are revealing—by adding a watermark, she suggests that she is unashamed of her past, even going as far as to claim copyright ownership of this form of expression. Doing so means that this photograph can be shared, but not at the sacrifice of its owner’s identity. It is her story, and she is open to sharing that story with others—but not at the cost of herself or her identity. Promoting this sense of ownership and authorial credibility is persuasive to others trolling The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page—particularly for those unwilling to post to the page in fear of societal backlash or familial rejection.

Final Reflections

While The Semicolon Project can, in no way, replace medically-grounded treatment of mental illness, it does have power for a number of its users. As an organization, The Semicolon Project functions much like a support group, providing a community for others to meet in order to share feelings and experiences with others. This community operates as a rhetorical opportunity for individuals to pledge allegiance to a cause and begin building a new identity through the support of others. According to Wells, “Public discursive forms share an orientation to action, including communicative action. They require a reconfiguration of the writer, and of agency, beyond the future of the isolated modernist scribe” (336). In this way, the tattoo operates by reconfiguring the

“writer”—the tattooed person embraces a newfound sense of agency, a life free from self-harm that is no longer silent. The transformation of the external body through the tattoo correlates to the internal transformation of the individual. From the tattooing—from this form of writing on the body as healing, individuals are able to take control of their lives; they become agents (authors) of their own destiny, capable of leading (rewriting) themselves to a healthier life.

Of course, just as the tattoo bearer may find a greater sense of agency through the performance of getting the tattoo, these individuals also run the risk of opening themselves to reductive definitions of what the general public might perceive the tattoo to represent: self-harm, suicide, mental illness—potentially even being dubbed dangerous or crazy. Similar means of tattooing have had such effects. For example, Brouwer, in his examination of HIV/AIDs-positive tattoos, points out that “making one’s HIV status visible through the medium of a tattoo can invite oppressive surveillance, invite verbal or physical harassment, or lead that person to be defined primarily on the basis of that foregrounded identity marker” and that through this tattoo, “the wearers runs the risk of being condensed or reduced to ‘person with AIDS’ (116). As the popularity of this initiative grows, and more and more individuals tattoo themselves with semicolons, the general public may begin to notice these tattoos as markers—and tattoo bearers may also run the risk of being reduced to “mentally ill,” “suicidal,” or “cutter”—regardless of whether or not the bearer identifies with these populations. Even in the face of these risks of reducibility, the tattoo still acts as a significant symbol of freedom, a means of claiming unashamed ownership of the past and authorial power over the future.

Consumer culture theorists Maurice Patterson and Jonathan Schroeder explain paradoxical position of the body, and the skin in particular: “Skin reflects the dynamic relationship between the inside and outside, self and society, between personal identity projects and marketplace cultures. It represents the meeting place of structure and agency; a primary site for the inscription of ideology and a text upon which individuals write their own stories (254). This is particularly true for The Semicolon Project—the body serves, and has served, as a medium for inscription. Previously, these tattoo bearers may have used their bodies to inscribe externally the pain that was felt internally by carving painful, permanent marks onto the body. Marks that attempt to express the feelings that cannot be put into words. The Semicolon Project encourages writing on the body in a different, more positive way—a way that enables participants to take control of their lives. Though still painful and permanent, the semicolon mark represents the person’s newfound place in society, a new identity, or as Patterson and Schroeder claim, even a new ideology toward life and happiness.

Of course important to this discussion, and perhaps a future topic of study, is the fact that the majority of the posts on The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page (and all of the posts examined here) were written by women. While some men do post to The Semicolon Project concerning their own struggles with mental illness, many of the posts written by men are in commemoration of a loved one lost to suicide. Most likely, this lack of a male presence is as a result of gendered stereotypes that limit when, how, and how often men discuss emotions, particularly in terms of complications associated with mental illness. Just as tattoos on men are sometimes regarded differently than tattoos on

women, there are also very real differences between a male scarred body and a female scarred body—with different assumptions and reactions toward such visible marks.

There is significance, I feel, in studying the practices of initiatives like The Semicolon Project. From these studies, we can better understand not only how to eradicate the marginalization of stigmatized populations but also how we can help those within marginalized populations to find a voice and speak out against the mistaken assumptions many harbor towards these individuals.

The Semicolon Project is able to combat assumptions that mental illness should be kept out of public eye by offering a public, accessible digital platform that anyone can contribute to and circulate across a range of online platforms. Materially, The Semicolon Project finds success by also encouraging users to place a physical, visible representation on their bodies—one that symbolizes group identity while also advocating a message of perseverance, understanding, and healing. Quite literally, the semicolon tattoo bearers attempt to heal a wound by inflicting a final, more permanent one. Scars are no stranger to these individuals—but this ink-filled scar helps not only with learning to recover, but also with learning to move toward a healthier future.

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IV. The Sentence Continues: Writing from the Edge of a Blade to the Edge of Recovery

Introduction

“...F U Bipolar F U anxiety you will never beat me!! I am the author of MY story.. NOT you” (Carroll).

This is just one of many posts featured on The Semicolon Project’s Facebook wall that utilizes writing as a means of overcoming often quite physical battles with self-harm and suicidal behavior. The Semicolon Project, an organization dedicated to preventing negative coping mechanisms like self-harm and suicide, encourages users to tattoo (or draw) a semicolon on the body and post images of the semicolon along with reflections to the Project’s Facebook page. The above example, which will be furthered analyzed in later sections, appears alongside a photograph of the writer’s semicolon tattoo—it appears, quite fittingly, on her middle finger. Through these small though significant moments of writing, the tattoo bearers attempt to heal from experiences of the extreme emotional and physical distress—doing so positions these individuals as authors empowered with the ability to re-author or revise past, current, and future relationships with self-harm, suicide, and in some cases even mental illness⁴ (as we see in the aforementioned example).

⁴ Though I realize that engaging in self-injurious behavior does not indicate mental illness in every case, it seems that a fair majority of those posting to The Semicolon Project have revealed struggles with mental illness. To be clear, I do not wish to misrepresent anyone posting to this initiative. Some individuals who frequent this space did so for advocatory reasons and do not self-harm or contemplate suicide at all. For the purposes of this study, however, I will focus on those individuals who seem to use this space to heal—and often these individuals write to The Semicolon Project in an attempt to find more positive forms of coping with the effects of mental illness (other than self-injury). In fact, researchers have found that self-injurious behavior is often associated with a host of mental illnesses such as borderline personality disorder, psychopathy, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety and depressive disorders (Vaughn et al). Unfortunately, the scope of this project will prevent me from fully addressing the connections between

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the writing that takes place on The Semicolon Project's Facebook page to better grasp how these individuals use writing (on the body and in online spaces) to heal⁵. My hope is that, from these understandings, we can better navigate and facilitate writing as a means of healing—whether it be in our professional lives, our personal lives, or even in the lives of others.

After briefly tracing the history and practices of The Semicolon Project, I will review relevant literature to shed light on the ways in which narrative writing can act as a means of healing. From this understanding, I will then introduce psychologists Michael White and David Epston's framework of narrative therapy and apply this framework to evidence collected from The Semicolon Project's Facebook page. Doing so will help shed light on the ways in which these individuals engage in narrative therapy practices as a means of avoiding negative coping mechanisms like self-injurious behavior—this form of writing also attempts to resist negative stereotypes about those with mental illness by allowing such individuals to (re)write their own labels and definitions. Studies such as this one reveal that public writers have the power to not only rewrite internal perceptions of self, but also to transform external assumptions that shape predominant notions of those affected by mental illness as dangerous, uncontrollable, and violent.

mental illness and self-injury, but interesting and enlightening discussions can be found in Wilkinson, 2013; Vaughn et al, 2015; and Dhingra et al, 2015).

⁵ Research has shown that online spaces like The Semicolon Project can help users in positive ways. The scope of this project limits my exploration here, but a number of researchers have studied the impact of online support communities (Davis, 2012; Dolev-Cohen and Barak, 2013; Gross, 2009; Ko and Kuo, 2009; and Valkenberge, 2006); and various researchers (specifically Duggan et al, 2012; Ko and Kuo, 2009; Quinn and Oldmeadow, 2013; Siriaraya et al, 2011; and Tichon and Shapiro, 2003) have shown that social media websites, forums, and blogs created to offer social support also provide a number of health benefits, such as improvements in feelings of wellbeing, belongingness, and emotional health.

The Semicolon Project

Beginning in April of 2013, The Semicolon Project was originally meant to be a yearlong initiative dedicated to helping others find more positive means of coping with emotional distress—specifically, the initiative targets the prevention of self-harm and suicide. After a year of posting inspirational messages and helpful outside counseling services, The Semicolon Project was set to culminate on April 16, 2014, a day in which users would post images of their semicolon tattoos—either permanent or drawn on—as a symbol of their dedication to prevent self-harm and/or suicide in their own lives and the lives of others.

A call from users resulted in the initiative's continuation—and it now stands as an organization with nearly 19,000 followers in less than two years. While perhaps this number does not seem astronomical, it is a huge feat for this group, particularly since those struggling with mental illness are largely stigmatized and marginalized in our society. Attracting individuals who are willing to admit personal struggles with emotional distress, especially if these struggles manifest through self-harm or suicidal behavior, is no easy task. And yet The Semicolon Project has somehow managed to not only attract users who face these issues, but also a number of users who frequent the site in order to advocate the initiative's mission and also to offer outsider support to those users who do engage in self-harm or experience suicidal thoughts.

Rhetorically, the choice of a semicolon is significant—it is a unique though easily recognizable symbol that acts as a vital element to the organization's foundational metaphor. On its Facebook page, The Semicolon Project explains, "Semicolons represent a sentence the author chose not to end. You're the author, the sentence is your life" ("About"). This axiom is powerful, enabling its users to embody a new perspective about

themselves, their lives and their past, present, and future relationships with mental illness and its effects. Tattooing the body involves a physical transformation that correlates to a mental transformation of the tattoo bearer that symbolizes a mental shift away from suicide or self-harm and toward survival, recovery, and eventual happiness. Quite literally, through the performance of tattooing, these individuals begin to embody a new sense of self as author and a new perspective on life, one that places control over emotional outlook and behaviors within the tattoo bearer.

Selecting a semicolon is rhetorically and strategically smart. In traditional written texts, semicolons create a sense of expectancy, an urge in readers to continue reading. The Semicolon Project uses this symbol in the same way, framing tattoo bearers as writers now empowered to continue writing the story of life—a life that is healthy, happy, and capable of facing sorrow with positivity. And while most of us can easily identify a semicolon when we see one, we do not necessarily come in contact with these symbols often in our everyday lives—especially in the form of a tattoo. The novelty of the semicolon contributes to the organization’s success—many are likely enticed to ask those with the tattoo to explain its origins. And opening this dialogue between semicolon bearers and non-bearers is key, for it is when tattoo bearers reveal the message of the organization that more and more individuals are inspired to join The Semicolon Project. As such, the symbol serves not only as a means of embodiment for its user—allowing them, through the performance of tattooing, to literally embody a healthier perspective on life—but it also serves an advocacy function, thereby attracting more and more users to the organization.

But it is not just writing a semicolon on the body that allows users to heal, in fact, the reflective thoughts posted to The Semicolon Project's Facebook page may account for much of the healing that takes place. Through the therapeutic power of words, these users are able to overcome the traumatic experiences that have shaped their past and perhaps even current experiences with mental illness. Writing allows them to heal from these experiences. Charles M. Anderson and Marion M. MacCurdy explain:

By writing about traumatic experiences, we discover and rediscover them, move them out of the ephemeral flow and space of talk onto the more permanent surface of the page, where they can be considered, reconsidered, left, and taken up again. Through the dual possibilities of permanence and revision, the chief healing effect of writing is thus to recover and to exert a measure of control over that which we can never control—the past. (7)

In the following sections, we will explore how writing can encourage healing, and look at the writing as healing that occurs through posts on The Semicolon Project's Facebook page. First, though, the discussion must be framed around current notions of writing as healing and how it is applied both in the composition classroom and beyond it.

Writing to Heal

Using writing as a vehicle to encourage healing is an approach still applied to a variety of disciplines, circumstances, and writers. The field of psychology, in particular, has taken notice of the very impactful effects that writing as healing can have on the mind and body. For example, psychologist James Pennebaker has conducted intensive studies on using expressive writing as a catalyst for healing. His research has shown that short-

term focused writing detailing both the facts of an event and the emotions associated with that event can have positive long-term effects on the well-being of writers (Pennebaker).

In addition to Pennebaker's research, there has been a recent boom in scholarship concerning the effects of writing in online support communities, particularly for those offering support to individuals dealing with emotion distress. Authors Colleen Baggs, Lisa McKhann, Charles E. Gessert, and Brian P. Johnson describe one such online support community through the digital journaling of breast cancer survivors. These authors point out that "the online writing groups appear to have provided participants with an avenue that they otherwise would not have had for dealing with their feelings" (47). Similar to the experiences of breast cancer survivors, in "The More I Tell My Story: Writing as Healing in an HIV/AIDS Community," Emily Nye describes her experiences working with an AIDS writing group and how, through the process of writing, these individuals were able to make sense of themselves and their lives. For these writers, writing became empowering—it "helped them to become more aware of their lives and to reckon with their pasts" and it also "allowed writers to accept an authorial stance which is adversarial. The writers found it healing to 'fight back' by sharing their stories" (405). The same rings true for the writing that occurs on the body and on the wall for those writing with The Semicolon Project. In later sections, the evidence examined will highlight the adversarial nature that many Semicolon Project writers adopt in order to fight the urge to relapse into negative coping mechanisms like self-harm or suicide.

Although most of these scholars discuss traditional verbal, textual forms of writing as healing, other scholars (Blair, 2007; Julier, 2000) are concerned with the therapeutic effects of creating material artifacts—be they verbal or simply visual. For

example, in her analysis of the AIDS Quilt, Blair describes that, even though the quilt was meant to inspire political conversations, this memorial was very much a therapeutic space for creators to cope with the loss of loved ones (609). Like Blair, Laura Julier is also concerned with the ways in which writing on material artifacts can help individuals heal. In “Voices from the Line: The Clothesline Project as Healing Text,” Julier discusses the healing that takes place through the shirts showcased in The Clothesline Project, a prevention initiative dedicated to ending violence against women. Attempting to illustrate a shared experience of violence against women, this initiative asks members to create shirts with verbal and/or non-verbal texts that depict experiences of violence, thereby empowering shirt creators to move from victim to survivor. Julier explains, “Those who work with the Clothesline Project speak repeatedly about the ways in which its displays accomplish personal and public healing” (359). In examining evidence from the Clothesline Project, Julier determines that “the rhetoric of the Clothesline Project assumes and asserts the healing comes in part from the *voicing* of what has been silent or silenced, or marginalized in significant ways” (Julier 360).

There is a fair amount of overlap between these two projects and my own. For example, much like the semicolon tattoos in The Semicolon Project, Julier points out that, “Each shirt is a voice, a story. Each act of making a shirt is an act of re-presenting a voice and a body” (378). And while these shirts allows creators to re-present a voice and a body that has experienced gendered violence, the semicolon allows tattoo bearers to re-author a voice and a body that has experienced negative coping mechanism often associated with mental illness. The Clothesline Project and the AIDS Quilt are also community-driven advocacy and awareness campaigns that use both material objects to break silences—the

Clothesline Project advocates ending gendered violence and giving voice to battered women much like the AIDS Quilt advocates de-stigmatization of the disease while both commemorating and enabling the deceased AIDS victims to speak from the grave (symbolically, at least, since the quilt panels are the standard size of a coffin). The Semicolon Project similarly works to break the silence of those fighting the urge to engage in negative coping mechanisms like self-harm and suicide, and advocates disavowing mistaken assumptions concerning mental illness. However, for The Semicolon Project, the scarred body acts as the canvas for the material object, a semicolon tattoo—it is through this performance of writing on the body that tattoo bearers can reclaim the site of trauma and embody an authorial sense of agency over the self.

Performances of Narrative Therapy: Writing on the Wall

In her book *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*, Rita Charon explains, “Although narrative is defined somewhat differently by literary scholars, psychologists, autobiographers, and historians, each of these narrative-users shares fundamental ideas—that narrative knowledge and practice are what human beings use to communicate to one another about events or states of affairs and are, as such, a major source of both identity and community” (11). And understandings of narrative therapy are built around this universal definition of narrative—by telling our stories, we can better understand who we are and how we can move towards healing.

Together, therapists Michael White and David Epston, in *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, outline a theory of narrative therapy, one that is built upon the concept of externalization. According to White and Epston, externalization “is an approach to

therapy that encourages persons to objectify and, at times, to personify the problems that they experience as oppressive” (38). Externalization “makes it possible for people to experience an identity that is separate from the problem; the problem becomes the problem, not the person. [...]the problem ceases to represent the ‘truth’ about the people’s identities, and options for successful problem resolution suddenly become visible and accessible” (White 9). To encourage the externalization process, White asks his clients to retell stories of the externalized problem, for it is through the performance of telling these stories that these individuals can heal. White explains, “With every performance, persons are reauthoring their lives. The evolution of lives is akin to the process of reauthoring, the process of the persons’ entering into stories, taking them over and making them their own” (White and Epston 13).

Essentially, narrative therapy enables individuals to externalize the problem, thereby providing the support and motivation necessary to make a change in their own lives. It is a form of writing that allows for healing and agency—and this form of writing consistently appears in posts on The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page. Counselors Rachel M. Hoffman and Victoria E. Kress applied this framework to individuals engaging in self-harm (defined by Hoffman and Kress as non-suicidal self-injury, or NSSI), and found aspects of this framework to be “effective modes of treating NSSI” (168). For individuals engaging in self-harm, narrative therapy acts as guided source of empowerment since the “very nature of narrative therapy stimulates clients to become aware of their decision-making abilities and of the fact that their subsequent choices determine the course of their own lives” (163). The authors explain, that using narrative therapy to externalize problems can “potentially reduce the client’s feelings of blame,

guilt, and shame” and “will ultimately enhance the client’s sense of personal agency and her or her ability to make successful changes” (Hoffman and Kress 168).

Through writing the semicolon tattoo on the body and writing on the walls of Facebook, users engage in a slightly different form of narrative therapy that allows the tattoo bearer to realize his or her own agency and work towards healing and recovery. By deciding to write the semicolon on the body (much like deciding to air “dirty” laundry on the Clothesline or display an AIDS quilt), these individuals become aware that they alone have the ability to end these behaviors—and are empowered to do so. In choosing to write on the body with ink instead of blood, writing as healing is able to take place.

And writing about their experiences enables users to open a discourse among sufferers and non-sufferers surrounding these largely stigmatized issues. Through narrative therapy, “clients can then separate or externalize the problem from themselves and transcend label(s) that may have been placed on them. Clients can then come to realize that they are not the problem but that the problem is the problem” (Hoffman & Kress 162). This concept is proved by The Semicolon Project—not only does this online platform give these individuals the space to transcend labels that have been put on them (that they are “crazy,” “too emotional” or “just looking for attention”), but this space also helps tattoo bearers to externalize problems. The methods of The Semicolon Project ask the participants to “use metaphors to turn the problem into an object”—for the Semicolon-ers the object is the tattoo, and the metaphor behind this tattoo compares these individuals to authors—writers with the power to re-author the trajectories of their lives.

Although there are a number of approaches to narrative therapy, the strategy I want to focus most closely on involves three writing techniques that previously have been

used specifically with individuals engaging in self-harm. As outlined by Hoffman and Kress, these strategies serve to externalize the problem by “naming the problem, writing a letter to the problem, and drawing the problem” (164). The first of these three techniques, naming the problem, asks individuals to “name the negative influence that is contributing to their self-injury experiences” (Hoffman and Kress 164). While traditionally, this technique of narrative therapy asks clients to define the negative influences contributing to their self-injury experiences, The Semicolon Project often adds to this—encouraging users to also name the *positive* influence that contributes to their avoidance of self-injurious behavior.

The second technique asks clients to write a letter to the problem—a concept that White and Epsen explain, “locates a person as a protagonist or participant in his/her world. This is a world of interpretative acts, a world in which every retelling of a story is a new telling, a world in which persons participate with others in the ‘re-authoring,’ and thus in the shaping of their lives and relationships” (82). And we see this style of therapeutic writing across several posts on The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page. Constantly, users write letters (Facebook posts) to The Semicolon Project that locate the writer as the protagonist capable of overcoming the villain (emotional distress, sometimes actual mental illness) and celebrating their strength, courage, and eventual recovery. In doing so, these individuals write (re-author) themselves into a new life with a new relationship towards mental illness and its effects. But it is not just through the writing on the Wall that users engage in narrative therapy practice—which brings us to the final strategy, drawing the problem.

To further the externalization process, the third narrative therapy strategy, drawing the problem, is crucial. Of course, for participants of The Semicolon Project, the drawing is the semicolon (sometimes with other personal additions)—and it may be drawn with a pen or a needle. But again, while narrative therapy patients may draw the problem, the tattoo bearers are more or less drawing the possible solution. The semicolon represents the path to healing, so even though the semicolon may cause users to recall previous battles with self-harm or suicidal behaviors, the primary purpose of the drawing is to remind users of their promise to find more positive means of coping with mental illness. Hoffman and Kress do point out that therapists asking clients to draw the problem will likely later ask clients to “revise the drawing in a way that indicates how they will visualize themselves confronting the influence” (166). Arguably, the same can be said for some users of The Semicolon Project whose original drawings of the problem may be scars from self-injury. In these specific cases, the drawing of the semicolon is the revision—the means by which these individuals can confront and overcome their problems.

Even though White and Epston and Hoffman and Kress both describe this narrative framework therapy in terms of “naming the problem, writing a letter to the problem, and drawing the problem” (Hoffman and Kress 164). The real distinction in my analysis of The Semicolon Project’s framework of narrative therapy is that it is focused not just on the problem, but also the solution. Of course, externalization is still a major component for this form of narrative therapy, allowing its users to realize that the problem is “an entity that is separate from the person” (White 26), but instead of focusing solely on the problem, the tattoo bearers often engage in a narrative therapy that focuses

on *both* the problem and the solution: naming the problem *and* the solution, writing a letter to the problem *and* the solution, and drawing the problem *and* the solution. This is a major distinction worthy of further study, because as the following section will illustrate, these individuals do seem to heal through this inverse framework.

Now, with an understanding of writing as healing and externalization narrative therapy techniques, we can analyze evidence pulled from The Semicolon Project Facebook page to determine how this initiative empowers users to move beyond trauma and toward recovery.

Narrative Therapy and The Semicolon Project

Here, I will examine this initiative as an instance of writing as healing that employs narrative therapy strategies—my hope is that from this understanding, we can better determine how The Semicolon Project helps its users to heal and how we might mimic these methods in our own writing pursuits (personal or professional).

Each analysis will center on narrative therapy techniques of externalization: naming the problem, writing a letter to the problem, and drawing the problem. These strategies, though usually reserved for psychotherapists employing techniques of narrative therapy, have been extended by composition instructors as well. Allen, while describing his understanding of teaching personal narrative in the classroom, describes, ““Whether about memories of combat, rape, or child abuse, writing that heals is often writing in which the writer names, describes, and takes control of experiences in which the writer’s powers of naming and controlling have been explicitly annihilated” (86). The major difference in terms of my analysis, however, is that the externalization strategies present in The Semicolon Project typically manifest around not just the problem, but also

the solution. As we will see, this approach to writing as healing—one that names, writes to, and draws the problem in order to control it—acts as a catalyst for the healing that is meant to take place within individuals posting on The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page.

As a textual space, the Facebook wall provides a space for individuals to give voice to the problems that have likely been consistently hushed, even muted. It is from this public space that this initiative is able to call on the larger community—to move from cultural silencing to public acknowledgement and open dialogue. In this space, no one is marginalized. Through their unique posts, both those that are verbal and those that are non-verbal, these writers are able to re-write their own personal journeys with the effects of mental illness and the cultural assumptions that have previously defined this stigmatized group.

Much like the Clothesline Project, there are no strict guidelines for posting to The Semicolon Project’s social media sites. Julier describes that, for the Clothesline Project, “All that is specified is this: A woman will have complete control over her speaking, its form, its content, its audience, and its purpose, her speaking out will be protected, her text will join others and will not stand alone” (364). The Semicolon Project affords the same sense of agency for its posters—these writers hold authorial legitimacy over the characteristics of their disclosures, both in the tattoo and the wall posts. And, as an online space, their posts will not stand alone either, rather each individual posting to the Facebook wall contributes a text (a voice) that joins thousands of other texts. This collective writing community then shapes its writers, offering encouragement, support, and empowerment through the clicks of a keyboard—much like the creation of a t-shirt or

a quilt. Each are individual practices shaped by a community that promotes healing and agency. The examples below illustrate the variety of representations and the authority these individuals gain from The Semicolon Project's (rhetorical) practices.



Figure 16. Image 1: Corrie Carroll. "F U Bipolar." The Semicolon Project.

Image 1 is a site for rich rhetorical analysis, both in terms of the visual representation and the verbal representation. Visually, there are a number of interesting aspects about her post. The filter on this image creates a vivid border with a harsh overlap, creating an aged effect. This image seems like it has weathered rough treatment—it appears scratched and worn down, which may correlate with this individual's own personal feelings. Much like this image, her body and her mind have likely experienced harsh treatment, perhaps even because of her own behavior. This user

also choose to render the image in black and white—a dichotomy traditionally used to illustrate oppositional dualism, such as good versus bad or light versus darkness. At a moment in her life when this writer must reject the negative coping strategies and move toward more positive means of living with mental illness, the use of black and white could signal her liminal space—lingering both within the darkness of her past and the brightness of her future.

The placement of the tattoo is also significant. Usually, semicolon tattoo bearers place the tattoo on their wrists—a site commonly attacked during moments of self-injury or attempted suicide. Here, we see this tattoo bearer has chosen to place her tattoo on the inside of her middle finger—a rhetorical part of the body in American society that when lifted is a gesture of targeted insult. She explains the positioning as an argument against her illnesses—a way of disclaiming the illnesses’ power over her and her actions. Which leads to her verbal post, an equally important rhetorical comment on her illness, its effects, and the purpose of the semicolon.

As a form of narrative therapy, this post employs each of the three strategies. It is also a clear example of externalization—in naming the mental illnesses and talking to them as entities separate from herself, Carroll successfully externalizes the problem. As White describes, “If the person is the problem there is very little that can be done outside of taking action that is self-destructive. But if a person’s relationship with the problem becomes more clearly defined, as it does in externalizing conversation, a range of possibilities become available to revise this relationship” (White 26). And as Carroll decrees, her methods of self-destruction will no longer take place, because she has begun to more clearly define her relationships with these disorders and she has now “revise[d]

this relationship,” positioning herself as the author when she writes, “I am the author of MY story.. NOT you” (Carroll).

In terms of the first narrative therapy strategy, naming the problem, we can see that this individual has named her actual mental illnesses: bi-polar disorder and anxiety; and she has also named her solution: “Here is my semicolon” (Carroll). As Hoffman and Kress point out, individuals practicing narrative therapy often “use metaphors to turn the problem into an object” (164). Here, we see Carroll chooses instead to define her *solution* using metaphor—the semicolon, a symbol of her agency as the author of her own sentence (life) that is not yet over. Her letter to the problem, the second narrative therapy strategy, though short, adopts adversarial language and style that attempts to not only persuade and inspire others who read this post, but also the writer herself. Through writing this post, she convinces herself and others that she is not defined by her mental illness and that she is in control of herself and her life.

Writing to physical and/or mental problems using adversarial language does not only occur in The Semicolon Project. For example, Laura Julier, in her rhetorical examination of the shirts appearing on the Clothesline Project, and Emily Nye, through her experiences working with an HIV/AIDS writing group, both explain that individuals hoping to write in order to heal from a traumatic experience typically exhibit “a distinct tone of defiance” (372) as a means of “fighting back” against the negative effects these traumatic events have cultivated in survivors. Participants of The Semicolon Project often adopt a similar tone, one that rejects the illness’s stronghold and re-positions the writer as a figure with agency—in other words, as an author.

Just as both Julier and Nye speak of the adversarial tone a number of writers adopt when using writing to heal after a traumatic event or diagnosis, these scholars also point out that many writers attempt to claim propriety over their own bodies as a means of taking their bodies back from male abusers or from deadly viruses. The semicolon tattoos and posts, like the shirts of the Clothesline Project, enable writers “to re-see and revise their experience; they seem to see that language can be amended to reshape experience” (Julier 373). And as Hoffman and Kress describe, this act of revision is also central to narrative therapy (166). Carroll makes a similar claim for proprietorship when she writes, “I am the author of MY story.. NOT you.” From this text, we know the writer is re-claiming ownership of her own body and her life—mental illness will no longer define her or her experiences, behaviors, and actions. The style of this post, particularly the capitalized words and sequential periods, allows us to hear this writer’s voice. We hear her anger, frustration, and defiance; we hear the dramatic pause before the last two words. She has been empowered by the performance of getting the tattoo and shamelessly believes in her agency as an author.

Of course, the last strategy—drawing the problem—is rendered through the semicolon tattoo, with the tattoo becoming a literal externalization of the problem. Again, though Hoffman and Kress posit that the drawing should be of the problem, these individuals adopt a more positive means of drawing the problem by drawing the solution—that is, the support and community offered through The Semicolon Project. Sometimes, tattoo bearers have already (unhealthily) drawn the problem, but unfortunately it is with the edge of a blade across their skin. Drawing (tattooing) the semicolon as a solution to the problem serves not only as a visual symbol of the

individual's struggles, but also as a reminder to not let those problems manifest through negative coping mechanisms like self-harm or suicide. In fact, in moments of crisis, viewing the semicolon may urge the bearer to release emotional distress on the walls of The Semicolon Project rather than on the surface of their own body. Thus placing the semicolon on top of scars that previously might have triggered a relapse in viewers, the symbol acts as a visual argument against these unhealthy behaviors.

 **Kimberly Kimbo Chapin** ▸ **The Semicolon Project**
August 1 · 🌐

So today is August 1, 2014, and for me it marks exactly one month since being discharged from a psych hospital where I spent 8 days following my last of four suicide attempts in 5 weeks. The hospital and my godson (I thought of him and wanted to watch him grow up and didn't complete the attempt that final time and sought help instead) saved my life this summer. Today also marks my first day back to work after taking two months off to take care of myself. I have been able to learn more about myself, my disorders, how I can cope with stressful situations and help others with similar situations. Although it's been a rough summer, I have also realized who my true friends are, and the ones who have stuck by my side, my new friends that I have made and my family that has been there for me through everything. I want to thank you all for your outpouring love and support. I really wouldn't have been able to do this without such an amazing support system backing me up. You guys all know who you are. So I thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

My tattoo: I got it the weekend after I was discharged from the hospital at the cape. It means I'm not ready to give up. Yes I've made mistakes. But I'm learning to love myself and forgive myself. It's still hard and I will have depression, anxiety and OCD for the rest of my life, but I'm learning to cope with it and my triggers in more positive ways. The semi colon I have learned is a new suicide awareness program that has helped me a lot. They have twitter, Instagram and Facebook. It's a group of young adults who have gone through the same thing. The semi colon means you didn't end it, you are continuing.

For anyone who is feeling depressed or wants to talk to me about any of this, please message or text me. I have been there and I know it's not easy. I really want to try and help spread the word that mental illness is not a bad thing. And I no longer care who judges me for it or not. This is who I am. I battle depression, anxiety and OCD with other disorders every day. And if I can come back from the terrible few months I had, so can anyone else.

The Semicolon Project
The Semicolon Tattoo Project

Love,
Kimberly

Today I was strong enough to post this on my Facebook wall. The outpouring love and support I got from my family and friends who had no idea was so unbelievably empowering.



Figure 17. Image 2: Kimberly Kimbo Chapin. “my story isn’t over yet ; .” The Semicolon Project.

Unlike Image 1, Image 2 is more clearly within the genre of a letter in terms of its length and its style. The author even signs her name at the end of the post. This letter resembles a diary entry and takes us on a journey, beginning with the writer's past experiences and ending with her hopes for the future—both for herself and the others individuals she hopes to help by leading them to The Semicolon Project. White describes that these frameworks are not uncommon in narrative therapy “since all stories have a beginning (or a history), a middle (or a present), and an ending (or a future), then the interpretation of current events is as much future-shaped as it is past-determined” (10). There is evidence of this structure in Chapin's post—she begins with her history, the middle is her present, and in her final sentences she reveals her hopes for the future. As for her past experiences with mental illness, the writer describes experiences that have resulted in five suicide attempts. We understand the writer's argument that this not an easily travelled road to recovery, and that her own journey has been filled with difficulties. She ends the first paragraph by thanking those who have helped her along the way—to those reading this post, this final line serves as a reminder of their own support systems, a healthier alternative means of coping with mental illness.

There is then a rhetorical turn in the second paragraph—from the past to the present. Her first two words “My tattoo:” signify a change in focus and the colon encourages viewers to continue reading. It is in the second paragraph that the writer names her problem—the first of the narrative therapy techniques. She writes, “I will have depression, anxiety, and OCD for the rest of my life.” Similarly, though perhaps not quite as adversarial as the first post, this writer also positions her experiences as a “battle” that she is “not ready to give up” and that she “can come back from” (Chapin). Rhetorically,

using adversarial language often shifts the labels assigned to the writer. No longer is this writer the victim, but now she frames herself as the survivor, as the fighter. She will fight back against these unhealthy behaviors.

Then, for the final technique of drawing the problem, this writer includes an image of her semicolon tattoo—one that incorporates both visual and verbal elements: “my story isn’t over yet.” Notice the size of the semicolon—it is larger than many other semicolons posted to The Semicolon Project’s Facebook page—perhaps signaling the tattoo’s significance to its owner. The verbal text is also important. The writer chose to copy The Semicolon Project’s axiom, but noticed that she revised it. The Semicolon Project typically writes “*Your* story isn’t over yet”—here, we see this writer has rewritten the tagline so that it represents herself—“*my* story isn’t over yet.” And the only punctuation mark that appears is the large semicolon, so we know her sentence continues. Choosing to write “My story isn’t over yet” is also powerful in terms of its readability—any one reading this phrase becomes positioned as the owner of the story. It is my story. For readers frequenting The Semicolon Project, reading this image and its letter could be a source of inspiration and a reminder that “my story isn’t over yet.”

The last paragraph of this letter details her hopes for the future, but also has an advocacy function—she writes to encourage others to seek help, citing The Semicolon Project above her name. At the end of her letter, the users reveals that posting this for the world to see was “empowering”—and it is clear her sense of agency as the author of her own life has increased, meaning that healing and recovery can take place.

Ultimately, using needle and ink to cope with an emotional event is not a new concept. In fact, “tattooing can expand the sense of self-identity and

embodiment... Writing on the body is one way of expressing to oneself and to others many aspects of the presentation, performance, politics, principles, and practices of self” (Namir 221). The performance of tattooing is also symbolic—the pain experienced during the process is meant to be the last time these individuals will purposefully inflict upon themselves, and the healing of the tattoo is representative of their own internal healing. There is a transformation process—the tattooed person leaves embodying a new perspective on life and a new identity that attempts to leave the sadness and pain of the past behind. From drafting a post to share on the very public wall of The Semicolon Project, these individuals realize that they are able to write themselves into recovery. And so, the sentence continues.

Conclusion

“Remembering details, specific images, and writing them down helps us to heal” (MacCurdy 167). As writers, we champion the transformative power that writing is capable of inspiring. For indeed, “...writing *is* an act of speaking out, and certain acts of speaking out can transform the world” (Julier 364). The Semicolon Project hopes to transform the world by changing misguided assumptions concerning those affected by mental illness. Through the writing that occurs both on the body and on the wall, this initiative opens a significant conversation and argues that stigma sends many individuals struggling with mental illness into a downward spiral in which negative coping mechanisms like self-injury and suicide seem like the only viable option. To prevent this downward spiral, we must prevent the silencing experienced by those with mental illness—we must pull these individuals from the margins and encourage meaningful

conversation and recovery. Truthfully, this initiative makes clear that these problems are the problems of everyone.

Taking notice of successful instances of writing as healing among everyday writers has the potential to teach us how we can better support and facilitate this type of writing. Lynn Worsham defines composition as “the effort to compose a life, a sense of identity, place and purpose—in other words, the effort to wrest meaning from senselessness” (172). And these feelings of senselessness, according to Worsham, occur as a result of our society’s transformation into a post-traumatic age plagued with terrorism, war, racism, and health epidemics—issues we all attempt to comprehend, negotiate, and confront in our everyday lives. In the face of the twenty-first century, we can all use a little healing—and The Semicolon Project shows us that, through writing, we can.

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V. Conclusion: An Experiment

Based on the work I have done on The Semicolon Project over the course of the past two years, I have developed a heuristic that I suspect can be applied to a number of prevention initiatives (prevention initiative defined here as organizations dedicated to preventing unhealthy behaviors) as a means of generating successful uptake, meaningful communication, and healthy results users.

Admittedly, this is an extremely rough sketch of my proposed framework since I need to conduct further research across a range of prevention initiatives to determine the viability of this heuristic. And while my research up to this point has focused on a bird's eye view of The Semicolon Project, my hope is that my future research will allow me to get an insider's view by surveying the individuals who frequent these sites. Doing so will not only improve my understanding of the organizations' practices, but also why and how these practices are impactful (and, of course, why some practices are not impactful). In the following section, you will find a brief description of my proposed heuristic.

The Five P's of Prevention

Ultimately, the purpose of my research is not only to draw attention to The Semicolon Project and its mission, but also to demonstrate the potential of using theories of material rhetoric and narrative therapy to create worthwhile prevention initiatives like The Semicolon Project. Tracing this project's successes can help guide similar organizations in the future—through my examination of The Semicolon Project, I have developed a heuristic based on five characteristics that I believe are essential to consider when launching a prevention initiative. Granted, the Five P's of Prevention may not apply well to all prevention initiatives; however, this could prove to be a valuable inventional tool for these types of prevention initiatives.

The Five P's of Prevention are: Public, Platform, Performance, Proof, and Permanence.

Note that this heuristic is not linear; rather these elements are recursive—all are essential and must remain present.

Public

The first P is Public. As rhetorician Susan Wells points out, “All speakers and writers who aspire to intervene in society face the task of constructing a responsive public” (329). And this is true for prevention initiatives—in order to raise awareness, promote advocacy, and help others, there must be an audience. And this audience cannot just consist of those individuals looking for help; there must also be an “outsider” audience—one featuring individuals who do not need any help from the initiative, but still want to offer real, meaningful support and promotion. Without a responsive public based on a wide variety of people, the voice of the initiative, even if it is a symphony of voices, will not be heard. Like-mindedness is wonderful, but only if there are other individuals present with whom those like-minded individuals can interact.

Platform

The second P is Platform. The Platform and the Public go hand-in-hand—it is impossible to have one without the other. In order to nurture a responsive public, there must be a platform so that individuals can gain access to the group. For The Semicolon Project, there are many platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and even an organizational website. Note that the platform cannot be invisible to other users. All social media sites allow for interaction, and this is vital to the success of a prevention initiative. Those visiting the platform want to interact with the platform. The Semicolon Project, as a voice, will contribute to the conversations that occur on the social media

pages—the Semicolon Project’s voice offers encouragement, support, and advice to its public. In doing so, The Semicolon Project creates the third P, Performance.

Performance

Performance is also a vital element to a successful prevention initiative; it involves actually doing something for the organization. Simply “Liking” the page is not enough—in order to solidify a place within the community, an individual must continually read and post to the page, as well as participate in an awareness raising or advocacy events. This type of participation is encouraged constantly by the voice of The Semicolon Project. The message is that the platform is a safe space for others to share struggles, emotions, fears, and anxieties. The purpose is to share and heal together, as a community. And being an active member of the online community is not the only way to create a communal identity, most important to The Semicolon Project, for example, is the performance of drawing or tattooing a semicolon on the body, which is another way of embodying the meaning behind the initiative. This Performance being the fourth P, Proof.

Proof

Proof of dedication and support must be encouraged. For some members of The Semicolon Project, the proof is material evidence in the form of a tattoo or drawing. And the semicolon is not reserved just for those who are currently struggling with self-harm or thoughts of suicide, but also for those in support of the initiative, regardless of whether they cut themselves or think about committing suicide. The semicolon is universal—a symbol of support, awareness, and advocacy that can be worn by all. Other initiatives must also encourage proof—individuals must act. Jaime White-Farnham describes that symbolic action has the power to create new identities and even alter ideologies (475). The act does not have to be painful, and the proof does not have to be permanent—the

importance is that individuals interrupt their daily lives in order to display support for the prevention initiative.

Permanence

The final P is Permanence—the ultimate goal of any organization. The initiative must have staying power. This step is far more complicated, much harder to quantify, and impossible to guarantee. A combination of Public, Platform, Performance, and Proof might trigger Permanence—but only if all pieces are present. Another vital element to permanency is that there must be a sincere desire to help those targeted by the initiative—otherwise the entire initiative is phony.

Final Thoughts

This framework, the Five P's of Prevention, works for The Semicolon Project, but the only way to determine if the heuristic is effective is further application. My hope is to expand this exploration to other prevention initiatives.

Application of this heuristic may prove difficult, but ultimately, this is study that is worthwhile for the benefit of society but also personally enriching and uplifting.

Knowledge gained from these future studies has the potential to positively impact thousands of online users each day.

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