

HOW TO BE A CYBORG: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

HOW TO BE A CYBORG: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

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Western Carolina University (April 2023)

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One of the central topics of study in the field of Rhetoric and Composition is the ways that writers relate to writing technologies. While some take technological instrumentalist stances, others posit that writing technologies can't be separated from their writers, creating an embodied, posthumanist notion of a writer-technology hybrid. As social media technologies rapidly advance and social media use becomes more and more ubiquitous, this "cyborgian" lens needs to be applied to emerging writing technologies to uncover ways that everyday writers function within ever-shifting rhetorical ecologies (and to what effect). Contemporary networked writing technologies, such as social media, have extreme ideological underpinnings and put users without critical literacies related to these technologies in harm's way by way of endangering their physical bodies as well as the ecologies of lands in which users live. There is, of course, no shortage of scholarship on these topics within the field of Rhetoric and Composition. However, most everyday social media users do not have access to this scholarship, which disempowers them to make informed choices about their writing habits using these technologies. As such, this thesis takes the form of a collection of creative nonfiction essays about writing technologies and the ways that users relate to them. My goal is to support non-academic writers in their need to

develop their own theories for habits of use when engaging with these technologies. I adopt an embodied writing methodology to bring in personal experiences that others might relate to.

INTRODUCTION

This collection is the result of many, many hours spent online in the most basic of ways, like checking email and scrolling social media, while yearning to be offline. It's also the result of many, many hours spent offline that were still somehow punctuated by the online. In these essays, I try to explore these gray areas, this overlap. The networked writing technologies we use every day are both valuable *and* destructive, in the many ways we use them.

Scholarship on digital rhetoric is largely inaccessible to the average social media user not in academic contexts. This thesis takes the form of a collection of creative nonfiction essays to make it more accessible to my intended audience: everyday users of networked writing technologies, especially social media users. All of these users should be empowered to theorize and make decisions about their own habits of use, regardless of their access to academic texts. These essays are rooted in research within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, particularly Digital Rhetoric. Many were written using an embodied writing methodology to highlight the *specific* ways we become entangled with our technologies.

In these essays, I explore the “quantified self” movement, data mining and tracking technologies, the meaning of the word “digital,” the ecological effects of data centers, our emotional attachments to even the simplest of digital relics, and the ways that our bodies are enmeshed with social media, among other topics. My goal in writing these essays is to make my own experiences with and reflections on technology useful for others, as our digital footprints are something we're all grappling with, in some way or another.

TIED UP IN THE ALGORITHM

Before I'm even a person yet, I'm grasping for my phone. I tap hard, all over the screen, like stabs in the dark, trying to find the snooze button. The alarm wakes me from a dream in which my dog Max is still alive. I fall back asleep, and the phone and I do our dance again a few more times before I finally unplug it from the charger and take it in my hands.

Everything is refreshed as I open apps and slide my finger quickly downwards on the screen, like lighting a match. Three new emails this morning from students: One can't find the library, one needs help figuring out how to use the campus printers, one wants to know what to write for their first paper. Did I not explain it well enough? Don't they go over a campus map during orientation? Seven new emails in my personal account. LOFT's having a sale. I need to get more professional clothes now that I'm teaching, have gained some weight. Pants are 17% off—weird percentage but okay. Two are Substack newsletters that I leave unread. Get to them later. One is from a new writer whose work is popping up everywhere lately. Why am I even trying to be a writer? My work is not popping up anywhere lately. One is a reminder that I need to make a doctor's appointment. One is a reminder that I need to pay the internet bill. I need a pen. I mark the emails unread. I'll read them again when I get out of bed.

I yawn and open Instagram.

A line cook at the restaurant where I had my first job went out on his boat yesterday. He went by Bones, and he locked me in the walk-in once. There are 9 things I *need* to hear today. Shit, what

do I need to hear? What am I doing wrong? “You’re going to be happy and hurting and healing, all at the same time.” Jerry Seinfeld, wow, he looks so young. Am I old enough yet to have ever “looked so young”? When is that going to happen? No one should be in jail for weed. There’s my ex-boyfriend’s neighbor who got stabbed at a bus station. I try to picture his scars. There is my hairstylist, updating her late policy. Need to make an appointment. Need to fix these roots. Or maybe need to make peace with them—embrace what’s natural. And there’s Grace Kelly in her wedding dress. Do I want to get married? I look over at JP in bed next to me, his blonde hair roughed up from his pillow, the morning light on his freckled shoulders, and smile, think about what kind of wedding dress I might like. One with sleeves. There’s that girl from my undergrad creative writing class asking for books for her classroom again. The release date of that new show has been moved from May 25th to May 27th. “Unbelievable. I’ve never had anything like this bread. AMAZING.” We are out of bread. I should start making bread again. Remember that cranberry walnut bread my great grandma used to make. We are out of nuts. 7 questions to ask when trying to determine if your relationship’s in trouble. 7 questions to ask. “My dream is the closet from Princess Diaries 2.” Remember watching Princess Diaries in high school and wanting to try M&Ms on pizza. Still haven’t tried that. What band was that guy in again? The guy from the movie? Rooney? The Strokes? Swarms of bees head to Coachella to pollinate thousands of flower crowns. 17-year-old wheelchair motocross athlete becomes first UK male to land a backflip. Self-care tips for your enneagram type. (Four). Ah, yup—knew it wouldn’t be long before I got hit with a furniture ad. Of course they know we just moved. I really need to order those shelves. The books are growing dust on the floor.

I close Instagram, toss my phone back onto the bedside table. Squeeze my eyes shut real tight, revel in the orange-black of the back of my eyelids. Breathe. Try to steady it. I get out of bed and make a strong cup of English Breakfast tea, splash some oat milk in it, stir while staring at the cabinets. There's a turmeric stain on the bottom right corner. Quiet that low, buzzing hum. I need to order those shelves. Think about Bones trying to kiss me in the walk-in. Look for a pen and post-its in the junk drawer.

I make toast and sit at the table with my phone again, open Instagram to check in with the ghosts of my friends. The first story on my feed is my ex-boyfriend's (if you could call him that), who I decided to keep following after we broke up because I was totally cool with the way things worked out, totally cool with his gorgeous new girlfriend. His auburn hair bounces as he sings and plays guitar, and I remember how he smelled like wheat. Then he is with her, laughing over beers: Lilah, the girl I warmed him up for. Lilah, the girl with the rose tattoo. I tap over to her profile and there she is, with pink cheeks and a toothy smile. I'm so aware of her, more than I should be on a Tuesday morning with a healed heart 10 years after the fact. Her big doe eyes, her long, long hair, how good she looks in red, even despite how much I think I love myself. She's right there; I could reach out to her, and she could burn my fingertips. Everything's right there. I can hear him singing to me about boxed Chardonnay from the carpeted floor of his bedroom. He's right here with me at the kitchen table, breaking my heart all over again.

And there is my cousin Kat and her new baby Beatrix, all the way across the country in Oregon, brand new. There is her nursery adorned with framed Peter Rabbit illustrations, a mushroom mural painted on the wall. A candle is lit. Am I imagining the smell of jasmine? Can I say I've

been in this room? Will I ever step foot in it, see the green of the pines through the windows not in RGB? Now there is Bea reaching out to touch Clementine's wet nose. Clementine, whose sleepy brown eyes I instantly recognize, but who I've never scratched, who has never left that smell on my palms. Can I say that I know that dog? How long can the knot of family hold when the thread grows longer and longer, pulls tighter and tighter, straightens out like so many fiber optic cables running across the ocean floor?

Nia is next. My best friend from high school. Her three toddlers are each wearing their Halloween costumes—Batman, Superman, the Hulk—as they run around the yard kicking a soccer ball. The kids she talked about having one day made real, their facelessness replaced by Nia's button nose and her husband's green eyes. Her daughter looks just like Nia's mom, the woman who did my hair for junior prom. Then it is dinner time, and her son Antoni is fumbling with his chopsticks. I can hear her breathy laugh in the background, her saying "you can do it!" But he is only four; he can't do it, not yet. I've seen her fumble with chopsticks herself on many occasions, laughing as I reach over to help, having grown up with Japanese family members. I am aching to reach over and adjust Antoni's lower chopstick, help him brace it between his thumb and index finger. But now they are getting ready for bed, and there is Nia brushing her teeth, filtered to reduce saturation and add grain and smooth her blossoming wrinkles. She is unfamiliar. I have lost her laugh lines. She fades into an ad for color-safe shampoo.

I tap over to my profile. I look for patterns, clues to remind me who I am. Right, I like to bake. I post only once every few months, despite an embarrassing daily screen time. Sometimes I'm funny, sometimes I'm not. Right, I'm from Florida; there are the palm trees. There is my mom

with an ice cream cone. Need to call my mom back. There's my guitar, in all her former glory, the one that's had two broken strings for like a year now. Why don't I sing anymore? Lot of pictures of the banjo for how little I know how to play it. How hard is it to carve out ten minutes a day? Lot of selfies with my skin edited smooth. How hard is it to leave things the way they are? There's the proof that I once played in a band, for anyone who asks. I scroll further and further down, picking up pieces of myself that have been lost along the way.

Another hour of my life bought and sold. I look at the clock. 11 am. Shit, I have a lot of work to do. Didn't I wake up at like eight o'clock this morning? I open my laptop, but after a few minutes, my eyes burn and ache in protest, boring holes into the back of my skull. Need to get out. Need to order those shelves. I'll go for a drive, maybe to the post office.

In the car, in the silence, I breathe. I know if I put on music, it'll make me cry because everything's always buzzing in that low hum and making me cry. But the silence is buzzing too. Is there anything bracing? The song from the Jungle Book that the orangutan sings pops into my head. My sister looked like Mowgli when she was little, her short hair, her skinny legs sticking out of Hanes cotton underwear. I look the song up and play it through the car speakers, yelling the words out the window.

I pull into Starbucks, park. Unzip my purse, grab my phone, put it into my pocket, close to my body. I walk inside, the smell of burnt coffee beans overtaking me, and order an English Breakfast tea with a heavy splash of oat milk. I am waiting by the end of the counter for my drink when a girl walks in wearing Sootheez sandals. They must be Sootheez. They must be. I've

gotten hit with that ad a thousand times, could picture those shoes in five different colors. Was she targeted by the same ad? Is she also plagued by that stupid word—“Sootheez”? What is it about us that tells Instagram we need more comfortable shoes? She leans backward slightly as she waits for her coffee, relaxed, her hair in a messy bun on top of her head. I could be relaxed. We’re both wearing hoodies. We’re both standing in this Starbucks. But there’s something fresh about her: clean hair, jeans that fit right. I’m searching for myself in her, and I can’t find it anywhere. But then her drink gets placed on the counter, her name called out, and I see the label sticking out from the side of the cup: English Breakfast. She looks at me and smiles. I smile back, and she leaves. I wonder what other ads we both might see, what other bits of ourselves are tangled together somewhere in the algorithm.

I think about pulling out my laptop and trying to work again, but I am exhausted. Maybe it’s been a long week. Maybe I’ll call Nia. Maybe stop at the post office. Maybe rest a while. My limbs are tired of being broken apart and put back together minute after minute of being plugged into this giant machine, this ocean of stuff streaming past me all the time. My veins themselves have become fiber optic, information superhighways too large and vast for this one small body to host. The buzz is constant—from within and without, since I keep my phone on silent.

I’m afraid we’re evaporating, or turning into 0s and 1s, too small for me to find. Where are we? Are we inside of a server somewhere, thousands of miles away? Am I with you now? Are you here with me?

Everything is wobbling. Everything’s so fragile.

DIGITAL (ADJ.)

There is an appealing easiness in the idea of “real life” vs. “digital life.” There are hours spent at the computer working, and there is time spent with loved ones. There are curated Instagram grids, and there’s the messiness of the lives behind them. There’s the email that says politely, “Per my last email...,” and there are the obscenities that are actually being hurled at the computer as it’s being written. There is “screen time,” meant to be reduced, and there is real life, meant to be enjoyed.

It's nice to think that we could keep the digital from encroaching on the “real,” but really, the dichotomy breaks down with even the gentlest prod. The lines between home and work have never been more blurred, given the rise of remote work and the gig economy. There’s an epidemic of mental health issues among teens who use social media. And it’s become near impossible to avoid looking at screens—whether you’re ordering at McDonald’s or waiting in line at the DMV or simply opening your SmartFridge to look for a snack. We’re braided with our technology, burnt together, unable to be peeled apart.

#

Digital (*adj*): “Of signals, information, or data: Represented by a series of discrete values (commonly the numbers 0 and 1), typically for electronic storage or processing.” (“Digital, 2a”)

Digital (*noun*): “Any of the fingers (including the thumb) of the hand.” “[Usage]: Now rare.”

(“Digital, 2”)

In 1945, Dr. Vannaver Bush described his idea for an invention that would allow humans to store memories and ideas in documents accessed through webbed networks and nonlinear trails. He called it the Memex. The Memex would store all of a person's records, books, and other communications; it would be mechanized so that all this information would be available at a moment's notice, not dissimilar to a modern-day computer (Haas 81). The Memex, however, was never built.

In 1963, Ted Nelson, a pioneer of information technology, coined the term "hypertext" for "non-sequential writing" (Haas 82). Nelson imagined a global, hypertextual network called Xanadu that would "make all published information available to everyone and to enable anyone to freely recombine any and all documents and add their own textual content," not dissimilar to modern-day internet (Farkas and Farkas 13, qtd. in Haas 82). Nelson's Xanadu was also never built, like Coleridge's great fragment of an interrupted poem.

These Western origin stories of the computer and the internet make it easy to think about technology as always being electronic. But in her essay "Wampum as Hypertext," Dr. Angela M. Haas describes how Indigenous people made hypertexts in the form of belts long before the first Western theorists conceived of the idea. These Indigenous hypertexts were made of "wampum," or small beads made from quahog clam shells. These belts were used to record important civil events and affairs, including marriage proposals, alliances, treaties, wars, and other ceremonies. Designs made from wampum serve as a sign technology to record important cultural, political, and social events, essentially creating a hypertext of stored cultural knowledge that's retrievable to those who can interpret the technology used to create it (78).

Widely regarded in Western history as the “grandfather” of the hypertext (Haas 81), Dr. Bush thought that he was the first one to come up with the idea for a way to extend human memory through hypertexts. The reality is that Woodlands Indians have made belts of Wampum for more than a thousand years, creating inherited knowledges through intricate, interconnected, and nonlinear designs long before Dr. Bush’s “discovery” of this technology (Haas 78). Our Western equation of “technology” with “electronic”—a view rooted in Western origin stories—tries to make invisible the work that these technologies do: the holding of our memories, the scheduling of our tasks, the ways that technology connects us withing us noticing it. After all, technology is supposed to make life easier, right? But there is a loss if we only conceive of technology as invisible and intangible. When we imagine Xanadu as the first hypertext and Dr. Bush the Creator, we miss Indigenous knowledge that does more to describe the ways that we really relate to our technologies, the ways we’re bound up within them, the ways that they are indeed very tactile and do much more than simply “make our lives easier.”

Technologies don’t have to be electronic to be digital. In “Wampum as Hypertext,” Haas defines “digital” as “[referring] to our fingers, our digits, as one of the primary ways (along with our ears and eyes) through which we make sense of the world and with which we write into the world” (84). The word “digital” was used to refer to fingers as early as 1656, while it wasn’t associated with 0s and 1s until at least 1940 (“Digital”). Their relation isn’t too hard to imagine, anyway. With their fingers, Indigenous peoples wove wampum belts to create hypertexts, just like with our fingers, we type, creating the code that turns into the computing systems we use every day.

Haas writes:

All writing is digital—*digitalis* in Latin, which typically denotes “of or relating to the fingers or toes” or a “coding of information.” Given this, we should be reminded of writing known to us through history that was executed with the use of fingers and codes—from the Mesopotamian Cuneiform, to the Egyptian and Mayan hieroglyphs, to the Chinese logograms, to the Aztec codices, wampum belts, and Western hypertexts. Wampum, then, codes local knowledges and alliances with wampum shells and sinew (or other stringing devices). Thus the beads and stringing technologies could be represented as 0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0, or strands of wampum code that when strung together communicate information to their “readers.” (84)

0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-0 or 01010101010101010101010. It doesn’t matter—both sets of binary code can store information, whether on belts or in hard drives. “Digital” does not mean “electronic,” and the digital is much more tangible than we like to think.

#

Digital (*noun*): “A device, piece of equipment, etc., which uses digital technology” (“Digital, 4b”)

Digital (*adj.*): “Senses relating to numerical digits and (later) their use in representing data in computing and electronics. In later uses typically contrasted with *analogue*.” (“Digital, 5BI”)

In their book “Metaphors We Live By,” linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson say that we understand our world through conceptual metaphors, and that we can look toward our language for evidence of this. For instance, they show that we understand *ideas* in terms of *people* (particularly, men) by the way we talk about them:

He is the *father* of modern biology.

Those ideas *died off* in the Middle Ages.

Where'd you *dig up* that idea?

Whose *brainchild* is that?

His ideas will *live on* forever.

He *breathed new life* into that idea.

The theory of relativity *gave birth* to an enormous number of ideas in physics. (47)

Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphors are essential for conceptual understanding, and that the metaphors we use in our language shapes the way we view the world. This is certainly the case when it comes to “digital” life. Using metaphorical language helps anchor us in the tides of the internet of things, and it has since the birth of the computer. The *Windows* operating system is metaphorically named, suggesting a portal into a different space, another world. The “desktop,” a white-collar metaphor, is similarly named. Words like “cloud computing” and “cyberspace” indicate that our activity online takes place somewhere else, in some ghostly, unreal place that’s invisible, or at least very far away from where we sit as we type (Frith).

The idea that our online activity takes place elsewhere is actually true, in a perverse sort of way. The “cloud” is a real place—well, a real network of places—that’s definitely not at your desk or in line at Starbucks. Most cloud data is stored in server farms and data centers that are “tangled up with lands, waters, energies, and histories that are often unseen, unfelt, or unacknowledged in our everyday lives” (Edwards 60).

In his article “Digital Damage,” Dustin Edwards describes the ecological impact of Facebook’s data center in Los Lunas, New Mexico, where Pueblo people have lived along the Rio Grande for centuries. Residents of Los Lunas are tangled up with Facebook now—whether they use the platform or not—thanks to their governor, another victim of the techno-optimism that leads to rapid adoption of new technologies without enough deliberation. Facebook’s gleaming presence was just what the New Mexican economy needed, leading to a strong incentive package to encourage the company to choose the state as one of its new “homes.” The state offered Facebook thirty billion dollars in industrial revenue bonds and agreed not to collect property taxes for *thirty years* on the land Facebook would soon occupy. Most importantly, Facebook received a ten-million-dollar incentive package to purchase water rights from the city of Los Lunas, which guaranteed the company the use of 4.8 million gallons of water every day to cool its facility. “In digital economies,” Edwards writes,

... it is not hyperbolic to say we write with water. From drafting on cloud-based platforms, conducting research on search engines, and archiving projects on file-hosting services, to queuing up writing music on streaming sites, searching for multi-media assets on cloud-based programs, and circulating projects on social media, whole processes of composing are accomplished through infrastructures that have an insatiable thirst for water. In other words, water is material that makes writing possible. (67)

Many Indigenous cultures, including the Pueblo, regard water as sacred. Facebook uses 4.8 million gallons of Los Lunas’ water a day. Los Lunas residents and businesses use a combined 2.2 million gallons of water a day. All of this water is extracted from aquifers along the Rio Grande, which has been headed toward permanent drought for years (Edwards 67). Facebook

boasts that all of their data centers run on “100% renewable energy,” which, on paper, includes water. But for many people water is a scarce resource, not “renewable” at all, not plentiful enough to justify the homecoming pictures from 2008 that I myself am still storing in a Facebook data server somewhere.

Lakoff and Johnson say that “we *seek out* personal metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes, and goals” (233). If our metaphors shape our understanding and make our lives coherent, then we can no longer look to phrases like “the cloud” to describe our technologies and the ways we’re materially entangled with them. Terms like “the cloud” reinforce the idea that technology works invisibly, softly, innocently, up in the air somewhere, not down here on earth—which couldn’t be further from the truth. Cultural change happens by introducing new metaphorical concepts and rejecting old ones. By creating new metaphors, we can create new realities (Lakoff and Johnson 145).

#

There are thousands of these data centers. There is a sweetness in the idea that your home’s Wi-Fi and its local electromagnetic waves take care of you all on its own—we name our Wi-Fi after our pets, after our children, like beloved things. (Mine is named “Bella’s House,” after my cat who’s been with me since I was 16). But your Wi-Fi is a calm port on a stormy sea. Most data transfers don’t happen in a cloud—they happen underwater.

The term “information superhighway” was used to describe the internet in its infancy. It turned out to be a prescient term, as the world now has information superhighway veins of its own. They’re made of fiber optic cables that run along the bottom of the ocean, connecting and

bleeding us all. As of 2019, almost 750,000 miles of cable lined the ocean floor, making our “digital” life a “reality” (Satariano).

Though we access the internet through wireless technologies, there is no escaping the tangibility and materiality of the wires used to transfer information from land to land. These fiber optic cables are constructed in sprawling factories from tiny glass fibers wrapped in copper, plastic, tar, and steel to protect them from the immense pressure of their new, deep-sea homes. It takes a full year of planning to chart an underwater cable route and, when the cable is finally ready to be installed, months of life at sea to drop them into the water properly. Ships that make this voyage bring enough supplies to last at least two months, including:

... roughly 200 loaves of bread, 100 gallons of milk, 500 cartons of a dozen eggs, 800 pounds of beef, 1,200 pounds of chicken and 1,800 pounds of rice. There are also 300 rolls of paper towels, 500 rolls of toilet paper, 700 bars of soap and almost 600 pounds of laundry detergent. (Satariano)

Nothing makes the “digital” feel more “material” to me than the image of all this food piled up on a ship, all these chickens and cows, all the underwater creatures encountering foreign lines, all the crewmembers getting seasick and throwing up over the side of the deck like so many people have on so many voyages before them.

#

Digital (*adj.*): “*Anatomy*. Shaped like a finger or a hollow impression made by a finger.”

(“Digital, 7”)

Digital cavity (*compound noun*): “*Obsolete*. A cavity shaped like a thimble or finger” (“Digital, C1”)

When I open Google Docs and Google Calendar—which I do daily—whose water am I using? Whose communities am I ravaging by letting 15-year-old photos languish on their lands? Whose fingers have touched the wires that my data will travel through, operated the machinery that laid the cable on the ocean floor? What harm are all my old drafts of emails and outdated flight confirmations causing?

And yet how can my fiancé and I coordinate a grocery list during bustling weeks without a shared iPhone note? Can I deny the simple joy of snapping a photo of the sunset? I can’t even log into my email without using multi-factor authentication on my phone. My phone—this little computer in my pocket—is my scrapbook, my guide, my link, my passkey.

I like to look back at my old Instagram posts sometimes. I like to remember what my sister was like when she was that young, how I used to bake biscuits, that trip to New York when I had ramen with a fish cake in it for the first time. Posting photos there is like a form of journaling—I’ve even seen users caption their photos things like “posting for the memories.” But I can’t get over the fact that all my old selfies and pictures of my cat and places I’ve lived—my little walks down memory lane—are causing harm in places that I’m not even aware of. This realization leads me to the question: Why don’t I store everything locally, on my own little hard drive? Why don’t I simply download my data, delete it from their servers, and run?

Many people do continually carve out time to download their data and declutter their computers and phone. It's something of an ongoing process for me—as soon as I delete two things, five more seem to appear. I've tried so hard to stop using Google Calendar (see: my office full of half-filled paper planners). And I have a hard time staying motivated to keep a little photo journal stored locally on my phone. There's something about *posting* a photo—trying to come up with just the right caption, watching the likes roll in, commenting with friends in other states and my uncle and old teachers about the mountains or the ramen noodles in the picture. Showing my world, or at least a version of it. Participating in the Great Hypertext of the 21st century.

This is a problem, because I use my fingers to make sense of—and create—the world. I use them to tap, scroll, post, and swipe, turning my phone into a knife, my memories into droughts, from sacred things into 0s and 1s with pay-per-view access, with bloodied bodies that I can't look away from. How much of the world's digital cavity is caused by my fingers? What is it being filled with?

HOW TO DELETE YOURSELF

1. Start with the people-finders.

I have been found. We have all been found, living at our addresses with our possible relatives, associating with our possible associates. I start at TruePeopleSearch.com, typing in my name and hometown: “Katharine Emma Louise Hamilton” and “Tarpon Springs, Florida.” There I am: age 31, birthday of January 29th, 1992, current address in Waynesville, North Carolina.

There is my cell phone number (last reported December of 2022). Below that, my childhood home phone number (last reported November of 2005)—the number my Opa used to call to tell me he was on his way to pick me up to go out for pancakes before school. We’d go to the Tarpon Diner, my Opa and my cousin Joshua and me, and he’d tell us what it really meant to love somebody. The diner is gone now, replaced by a shitty pizza place. My mom refuses to cancel the home phone line.

There is another home phone number listed—one I’ve never seen before. I click it and up comes the listing for “Katherine Hamilton,” with an *e* instead of an *a*. Katherine lives in Pinellas Park, Florida, near the beach where my mom and dad met. It looks like she was born there, and then moved to Florissant, Missouri for 20 years before moving back. I wonder what led Katherine to Missouri.

My former addresses are also listed on TruePeopleSearch.com. Like Katherine Hamilton, I was born in Florida, and then moved away for a spell. There’s my Boston address—the apartment

near the Blanchard's liquor store and the vegan pizza place where I used to work, the one where I met that guy Rex that started stalking me. I lived with my friend Julie. We had plastic, olive green bowls and plates and two mason jars for cups, which we mostly drank wine out of. I remember ordering takeout once when I lived there, and the delivery guy said he'd lived in that very same apartment just a few years before.

Beneath my addresses, there is the heading "Possible Relatives." Everyone listed there *are* my relatives, apart from my ex-stepmother who told my dad he had to choose between her and me. I was in middle school, and never found out what she thought I did wrong. I click on my Uncle Tommy's name, who I haven't seen since I was six, and see his address in Vallejo, California. I copy and paste it into Google Maps, click Street View, and there it is: A bright orange building on a sunny street with a light green Kia Soul parked out front. The window trim is painted periwinkle blue, and the doors are painted pink. There is a print of one of Shepard Fairey's "We the People" protest posters hanging in the window, and what looks like a Japanese Maple out front. I click around the street, the little arrow on my screen touching the sidewalk where he must have taken a thousand steps since September of 2010 (last reported), and my eyes well up with tears. His neighborhood looks so nice. His house is so orange. He was not outside when the Google Maps car drove by. I don't get to see his red hair, the red hair that my dad didn't get, just one more thing besides the many miles that set them apart from each other.

Finally, there are my "Current Neighbors." I only recognize the name of one: Jim, the World War II veteran who lives to my right and grew up just a street away from us. Last summer he taught me how to string beans. Later that day, his wife, Betty, baked a maple walnut cake, and

they handed me a slice over the chain-link fence. On top of the plastic wrap was a little school picture of a blond girl with braids. “That’s my granddaughter!” Jim said. “Doesn’t she look just like you?”

You can manually delete your information from sites like TruePeopleSearch.com, but there are a slew of them. You could also hire a service to do it for you, most of which charge a recurring annual fee, as people-finder sites are always finding people.

2. Get rid of social media.

Start with the accounts you still use: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Reddit. I predict that Facebook will be the hardest because I’ve been there the longest and it holds so many of my moments.

I decide to download my data first. To do so, select Settings, then Privacy, then Your Facebook Information, then Download Profile Information. Facebook will ask you for the date range of the data that you want to download, as well as the type: Do you want to save just your photos, or your photos and your messages?

That’s a great question. I click over to my messages to see if there’s anything there worth saving, any remnants of past lives that deserve to be immortalized in a local HTML file. At the top are the usual suspects: My mom sending me recipes and quotes from scripture, Facebook Marketplace messages for used desks and bookshelves, a birthday message from my cousin. I scroll faster, further back in time, and the names I see send little shockwaves into my nervous

system. There is my years-long conversation with my friend Kehnon, who died in a car accident two years ago. It's rife with links to obscure music and coordination of plans: *There's a show at the Bends tonight—lets go* and *Hopping in the shower, be ready soon* and *where you at?* There is an apology from a friend who I had a falling out with, and I honestly don't even remember what happened anymore. There is a message from my high school boyfriend's mom, writing to tell me that they put their orange tabby down due to jaw cancer. His name was Eddie. I used to feed him popcorn.

I don't know if I want to keep these messages. I click over to my photos instead, planning to delete the ones I don't want before downloading them from Facebook. Part of me thinks it's redundant to download these photos, which must already be saved locally somewhere, but then I think about my many de-commissioned smartphones over the years and my three broken external hard drives, and I'm not so sure.

I click over to "Albums." Most are at least eight years old. Most are warm memories; some are very cold. All are very edited. None are very reflective of my life now. Each album is like a relic to an ancient past, one that's unfamiliar to me now but that I still feel behind my eyes.

Most albums include pictures of my friend Daniela, who I used to live and work with in Boston. I still feel Daniela when I curl my hair, when I drink a latte at a café in a ceramic mug, when I take a photo using a film camera. I can hear her in that photo talking about how much she hates sun-dried tomatoes. I can feel the glue on my fingers from that craft night, smell the heat from

the oven warming our tiny apartment. I can hear her self-conscious laugh in that picture of her in Chinatown wearing her giant parka in March: “It’s my first winter here! I’m from Florida!”

There’s an album devoted to the cross-country road trip my friend Stephanie and I took after high school, back when it was cool to upload hundreds of photos to Facebook in one go. In many of them I’m wearing a belt that I just donated to Goodwill last week, thinking *there’s no way this will ever fit me again*, and yet I have always hated my body, can hear the thoughts in that girl’s head about sucking in for the photo. I see her as a little sunflower, struggling to turn toward the light, grasping at who she is—feelings that I’m still familiar with—and I just want to reach out to her and braid her hair. And then there is that cricket-infested motel, and Stephanie tangled up in the blankets in the La Quinta Inn, and me cross-legged on top of her sister’s Toyota Camry on the Fourth of July, and pictures of I-10 and the UFO museum in Roswell, and the package of frozen sausage biscuits we attempted to thaw on the dash as we drove through the desert.

There are yellow, blurry photos of my friends drinking jug wine in Providence the summer I fell in love with my fiancée. So many grainy images of him playing a classical guitar, taking photos of those trees with the little white flowers, eating hummus, dancing on Valentine’s Day. I can feel his hands on me, smell the earth of the basement where we had our first kiss. These moments are still hot in my belly, and it makes me excited to go home and eat dinner with him.

There are also photos of the dude I used to date who I still think of occasionally in moments when I feel ugly. I see his sour face in a tagged photo and my muscles tense up; I remember the

cold metal beneath my thighs in my too-short skirt while I listened to him list off the reasons I wasn't good enough.

I had forgotten all this. It all comes back as I click through these photos and re-read 10-year-old comments beneath them. There is one thread written entirely in Icelandic, which Daniela and I were desperate to learn at the time. Here is the evidence of the life I've led, here on this website, almost more so than in my own memory. It's kept alive now in a data center somewhere while it all atrophies in my own mind, subsisting only on my frequent visits to facebook.com.

I select "All time." I select "All data." Facebook will let me know when my life is ready to download before deactivation.

3. Find and delete your digital accounts.

How many accounts have I created since I've been online? Off the top of my head, there's Amazon, eBay, Etsy, BestBuy, probably all of the major airlines, Adobe, AMC Theatres, a ton of major clothing brands, Sephora, MySubaru, REI...

I google "how to find all your accounts on the internet." One blog offers a helpful piece of advice: Start by navigating over to your saved passwords in Google. I do so. I have 221 saved passwords. I scroll through them to determine where I still have accounts.

I still have an account with the ACT test, which I took in high school 14 years ago. I have an account with ancestry.com—I remember when I went down that genealogy rabbit hole and found

all those old pictures of my grandparents. I still have an account with Boston University, even though I only went there for a semester before dropping out. I still have an account with HotSchedules, the scheduling app for the restaurant where I used to wait tables. I still have an account with St. Petersburg College, where I eventually took my first steps toward going back to school to earn my A.A.

Google stores this information in a data center somewhere, one of the many that they own and operate across the globe. These data centers use unfathomable amounts of water to keep them cool. The company has set a goal to operate its data centers on 100% “carbon-free” energy by 2030, but about half of its U.S. data centers are in areas with water shortages. These data centers pull water from ecologies that people live in, often where it’s needed most, like in the Colorado River basin. And Google’s electricity demand often outranks the needs of the people, as governors often provide generous incentives to tech companies to encourage them to build data centers in their states.

Last week, I ordered takeout from a new Thai restaurant that just opened up in my neighborhood. I called them to place my order, and they asked me to place it online instead. I found their website and clicked “Order Online,” but to place an order, I had to make an account. So, I typed in my email, carved out a quick password, and hit “submit.” Google, as it usually does when I create a new account, asked me if I wanted it to save my password. Reflexively, without thinking, I clicked “yes.” I now have an account with my local Thai restaurant, the password to which is being stored on a server in another state somewhere, using someone else’s water instead of me using a post-it note.

So now I just need to find the time to figure out how to delete all of these old accounts and transfer my 221 passwords from Google's Password Manager to a notebook somewhere that I will inevitably lose, relapsing into using some other digital password manager. I'll get to this. Probably next week. After things calm down a bit.

4. Remove yourself from digital communities.

I'll start with Reddit, because I still use it. I navigate over to the website and spend an hour and a half scrolling, upvoting, commenting. Then I go make lunch.

5. Delete your email account.

Google makes it pretty easy to delete your Gmail account. All you need to do is click over to "Data & privacy" under Settings, scroll almost all the way down, and then you'll see it: "Delete your Google account." The next page begins with "Please read this carefully. It's not the usual yada yada." Google then goes on to describe everything that will also be deleted when I pull the trigger:

- 40,941 email conversations
- 1,248 photos
- 1,189 Chrome bookmarks
- 829 contacts
- Access to services which are linked to my Gmail account
- All of the files in my Google Drive

Google reminds me to consider whether I use this email address as a recovery email for my bank account. I hadn't thought about that. I also needed an email address to order Thai food the other night. It strikes me that it is wildly impractical to delete my email, which has become a core connection to the world around me. How will I be reminded when bands I like are coming to town? How will I refill my birth control prescription? How will I apply for jobs?

And yet, who's hurting for water so that I can store all the newsletters and promo codes I've ever received? How important are these 40,941 emails?

I click through page after page, opening emails at random to see what's being stored. What emerges is a messy, moving mosaic of my 20s. There are tons of emails that I've sent to myself with no subject line, containing attachments like photos from travels, my college admission essay ("BUessaydraft3final_thisone_goodone.doc"), and demos of old songs. I listen to a few; most make me cringe, but I remember recording them with the people that I used to spend every waking minute with. One email contains a photo that my friend took ("panorama.jpg") of me sitting cross-legged, looking out at the Grand Canyon. There are all my old pen pal letters with my friend Daniela—some very long, and some containing just a Craigslist link to an apartment or a quote ("People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past." –Milan Kundera). There are 5 emails in relatively quick succession containing drafts of a breakup letter, written by my cousin for her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, sent to me for review. There is an angry email from a friend that I blew off one

time. There are job applications, flight confirmations, rejection letters and acceptance letters, birthday emails, Important Notices about late student loan payments, emails from old bosses about shift changes, a chain email from my ex-boyfriend's mom telling me I'll be cursed for 9 years if I don't forward it immediately. There's an email from my grandmother who just passed away signed "LOL, Grandma."

The sound of a robin chirping just outside my open window pulls me out of Google Chrome, like an alarm clock waking me from a dream. I am at my desk, 31 years old, on the other side of all of this. I'm a patchwork quilt of these emails and attachments and Craigslist postings and YouTube links and all the people who have sent them. It's not that the emails are important; it's just that they've built my life. It's not that I need to keep them; it's just that they contain the code to who I am.

I imagine what it would feel like to press Delete, to scrub the internet clean of any remnants of myself, to exist only in my house or in the car or in the garden, watering the cilantro. I imagine the emails persisting after my death, my code languishing and rotting along with me, like ruins left behind. I imagine the energy that's spent on maintaining my extended memory.

I imagine not being able to be found, located, pinpointed like just a piece of data. I imagine the freedom of a life without notifications: A life without circling back, without likes, without one-day-only flash sales. I imagine leaving the house without a tether, a renewed ability to get lost and then find yourself and then get lost again.

And then I think about when Daniela moved to Arizona and we fell out of touch for a while and I had to email her to get her new phone number, and panic sets in. I imagine not being able to be found, floating disconnected like just another body, insisting that I'm here and real even without evidence. I'm here, and I'm real, even without evidence. I'm here, and I'm real, even without evidence.



Emma Hamilton <emma.hamiltonk@gmail.com>

(no subject)

emma hamilton <emma.hamiltonk@gmail.com>

Sun, Aug 18, 2013 at
1:51 PM

To: Emma Hamilton <emma.hamiltonk@gmail.com>

Franz Kafka

A Little Fable

"Alas," said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

ON WRITING & BEING WRITTEN

Writing usually happens for one of two reasons: to communicate or to learn. Writing to communicate means that the author usually considers audience in some way, like writing emails or texts or nonfiction books. Writing to learn is the process of using writing as a tool to uncover and think through your own thoughts and ideas, like journaling and other forms of reflective writing. These reasons aren't exclusive; poets, for instance, often write to make sense of the world while also communicating their unique perspectives to others. Regardless of the reasons, writing is thinking made visible.

Except we don't only write on paper, and we don't only write with words. We write on computers using 0s and 1s, on skin with tiny needles, on wood with hot poker, on each other with blood and held hands. I think of the word "write" in terms of its synonym, "compose." When I open my phone's front-facing camera, I'm getting ready to write a selfie—to compose myself using the medium of my iPhone.

When composing on Instagram, we're both writing to communicate and to learn. We're DMing friends from home, sharing info with customers and clients, talking with members of our digital discourse communities. But we're also posting selfies to feel ourselves, sharing snippets of works-in-progress to garner feedback, testing the waters of who we are and how we talk with others behind screens. So although writing is usually associated with words, I don't discount the act of writing a selfie—arching your eyebrows just so, widening your eyes and pursing your lips just a bit so it looks like they always appear that way, choosing the right background, whether or

not to blur it a little. The filter you add—how it changes the colors and how it changes your features, slimming your nose and washing away your blemishes. These are commas, capital letters, quiet semicolons, exclamation points telling your followers to look here, see what I’ve constructed using the grammar I’ve been given.

#

In 2016, Instagram (which had recently been purchased by Meta) began showing users less content from people they follow and more algorithmically selected content based on interests perceived from data mining (Dvoskin). In 2020, to support this shift, Instagram announced its Reels feature as a “new way to create and discover short, entertaining videos” (“Introducing”). This feature was meant to help Instagram compete with then-nascent rival TikTok by keeping users engaged with the app as much as possible, since the majority of Instagram’s parent company Meta’s revenue comes from advertisements placed on its social media platforms.

I can understand this—I’ve lost countless hours scrolling through Reels that are perfectly selected to keep me engaged with the app for, well, countless hours.

It's no secret that Instagram is engineered to be habit forming. When Meta acquired the company in 2012, it re-engineered the app to include features that encouraged users to spend more time there, including email alerts about friends’ activity when users hadn’t logged into the app in a while (Dvoskin). The critically acclaimed documentary *The Social Dilemma*, released in 2020 and directed by Jeff Orlowski, brought the behavioral addiction associated with social media into public conversation, and since then, content on the app abounds with advice to take mental health breaks from social media regularly.

That may just be the sort of content that the algorithm feeds me, however—according to my iPhone’s screen time reports, I spend around 1-2 hours a day using Instagram. Most of this time is spent mindlessly scrolling my feed; I hardly use the app to keep in touch with family and friends and only post once every few months, if that.

Although using the app this way is my choice, it’s also by design. In an interview, one of Instagram’s first 13 employees, Bailey Richardson, discussed how Meta’s redesign of the app bastardized its original community-building purposes, instead harnessing the app’s potential to earn profit within the attention economy.

It’s working on me.

The writing we do on social media takes place within larger ecologies and economic systems, like surveillance capitalism and the attention economy. The attention economy functions by recognizing that human attention is a commodity and then by extracting that attention from material bodies for profit. The digital, internetworked writing we do on Instagram happens within the context of this attention exploitation, entangling our writing with our bodies with the technologies we use.

For example, many influencers post to Instagram around lunchtime and late in the evening, when people are more likely to be on their phones. I’ve also heard that the algorithm likes videos better than static images, lots of comments and engagement, and live sessions (Hill). That means that

writers on social media have to improve their video editing skills, ask questions in captions to encourage comments, and get over fears of going live if they want their content to circulate more widely. These are rhetorical choices—that is, choices made by writers that affect the ways they communicate and the effects of their communication on audiences.

What emerges is a picture of a collaboration between writers and algorithms: decisions made to *appease* the algorithm, to coax it into a willing writing partner, even while its goals are very different. No writing happens in a vacuum—and that’s especially true of writing done on Instagram. Every time I post a picture, a story, a reel, I share my agency as a writer with algorithms designed to use me, algorithms that cause harm.

#

As we use the internet and social media, companies track our online behaviors to determine, store, and sell our personal information, like demographics, habits, sex, age, income, interests, purchasing history, etc. Dr. Estee N. Beck calls this the creation of “invisible digital identities” (126). Most of the time, the onus is placed on individuals to self-manage their online privacy, sometimes being forced to exchange it as a commodity for access to online content (Hull, qtd. in Reilly, 1).

I’ve traded my email to myriad websites for coupon codes, the ability to read articles, etc. without any knowledge about how it’s used and who it’s sold to. It usually feels like I’m getting the better end of the deal—after all, I can just hit “unsubscribe” down the line. And honestly, it never *really* feels like I have much of a choice. I’ve all but given up hope that there’s any real possibility of “opting out” of this kind of relationship. After having my email account for more

than ten years, it's probably been traded and shared and sold so many times that I could hardly even call it mine anymore.

I refuse to think about my perspective on this as some sort of character flaw, a failure on my part to protect myself in a rapidly changing digital economy. In a study, researchers found that it would take the average American 76 days to read all the privacy policies and terms and conditions they encounter in a year (Madrigal)—extra days that I certainly don't have lying around to read through legalese I can't understand. We don't really possess the power to completely combat this surveillance, short of opting out of online life entirely.

Harvard professor Dr. Shoshanna Zuboff calls this online tracking and data mining *surveillance capitalism*, arguing that this economic model disempowers users and “grossly [disfigures] the earlier dream of digital technology as an empowering and emancipatory force” (11). It's difficult to view digital technologies and companies that partake in surveillance capitalism as empowering or emancipatory, given the risks that surveillance capitalism poses to material bodies.

Social media users have been and continue to face harm by the collection of their data through the act of “weblining,” or the algorithmic categorization of users as a basis for determining access to and prices for goods and services (including insurance and bank loans); surveillance in the workplace; and identity theft as a result of data breaches, which can create serious financial harm that corporations are rarely held accountable for, leaving users responsible for material damages (Schneier, qtd. in Reilly 3).

These are just a *few* examples of the material effects of surveillance capitalism. But despite the risks for harms like this, the majority of Instagram users report using the app at least once a day—myself included (Schaeffer).

Given the pervasive usage of this platform as well as the risks it poses, everyday social media users need to consider that writing in digital spaces always has embodied consequences, just as real human bodies are responsible for writing the code that creates the digital spaces often seen as mere instruments for communication and entertainment. When writing on Instagram, we're writing not only for human audiences, but also audiences of algorithms capable of making ethical decisions (Gallagher 1).

#

Aside from our *invisible* digital identities on Instagram, curating our *visible* digital identities can also cause harm. In 2019, a Japanese man admitted to stalking and assaulting a pop star by zooming in on a selfie she posted to social media to determine which train station was reflected in her eye. The man then used Google Street View to identify the station, cross-referencing it with other images of her apartment posted by the singer to determine where she lived (“Stalker”). The singer’s representation of her body online literally put her in harm’s way. While digital stalking is nothing new, it’s important to consider this risk as social media users participate in influencer culture on Instagram, in which people “[use] the body itself as a text” (Porter, “Recovering” 212)—making this “text” available to others as well.

Digital algorithms determine so much of our lives behind the scenes, dictate so much of our embodied experiences. For one, Dr. Zuboff says that surveillance capitalism depends on algorithms to “express its will” (11). If data collected about me says that I’m thinking of buying a certain book, Instagram’s algorithms can read that data to algorithmically push advertisements for related books to my feed, resulting in revenue for Instagram and a potential change in what I choose to read. In this situation, surveillance capitalism, digital algorithms, this social media company, and I all participate in a “dance of agency”; I don’t make my decision alone, but rather “create something new” alongside Instagram and other unknown companies in a shared decision-making process (Gries 69). As Marshall McLuhan says, we shape our tools, and they shape us (Culkin).

Unfortunately, the digital is often situated as separate from the physical in public discourse. Consider the phrases “in real life (IRL)” and “cloud computing,” conceptual metaphors which reinforce the separation of these two public spheres that are actually entangled with one another. This kind of language is a problem, according to rhetoric scholar Jordan Frith, because it obscures the reality that the digital and the physical are *not* separate—in fact, the digital has very “real” embodied impacts, and vice versa. It’s essential to consider the ways that the body is enmeshed with our digital tools, and the ways that our technologies “write” the body in return.

#

I try to avoid posting to Instagram any time I have important work to get done because I can’t help but check it frequently to see how many likes I’ve gotten, a habit rooted in the evolutionary drive for social approval that technology companies harness to encourage behavioral addiction (Alter, qtd. in Newport 17). The “like” feature also works by intermittent positive reinforcement,

which is the increased release of dopamine in the brain when a reward is delivered unpredictably (Newport 17). Michael Zeiler famously studied intermittent positive reinforcement in his experiment in which pigeons became addiction to pecking a button which would release a food pellet at unpredictable periods. The idea of intermittent positive reinforcement can describe the power of the “like” feature on social media. Waiting for the likes to roll in—and checking the app for them frequently—creates “bright dings of pseudo-pleasure” (Rosenstein, qtd. in Lewis).

After writing on Instagram, the app in turn “writes” dopamine into my body, “writes” my attention, “writes” motion into my outstretched hand, unlocking my iPhone to open the app again. How is this app composing me throughout the day, even when I’m not actively scrolling?

I also try not to bring my phone with me if I take a break from working, as I’ll likely open Instagram and engage with its Reels feature. If you’re unfamiliar with this, Reels are user-generated short videos algorithmically curated for individual users. They can be engaged with on the app in two places.

The first is the Reels button, located in the central position in the bottom toolbar of the app. When you tap the Reels button, the app immediately delivers an algorithmically selected Reel, regardless of whether you follow the creator of the video. Reels are interspersed with video advertisements that look just like user-generated Reels with the exception of the word “Sponsored” beneath the username.

Instagram users can also engage with Reels—as well as algorithmically selected images—by tapping the Search button on the bottom toolbar. The “search” functionality obviously implies that the user’s intention is to find a specific piece of content, but instead of employing the algorithm to populate images and Reels that you may have recently viewed to aid this purpose, the screen fills with images and Reels beneath the header “Posts you may like.”

The design choice to place the “search” function as centrally located as the main toolbar makes it seem like Instagram has its users’ desires in mind, but it then pulls a bait-and-switch, capturing the user’s attention in their process of searching for specific content. Through the design choices to feature the Reels button so prominently and to show “Posts you may like” on the search page, Instagram shows that their primary concern is entertaining users and keeping them engaged, despite ample evidence that excessive social media use can have adverse effects on mental health (“Ledger of Harms”).

When posting to Instagram Stories, I swipe through a plethora of available filters. Some add warmth, grain, film stamps, and/or light leaks to the image, evoking a retro feel. Some make my nose smaller, my eyelashes longer, and/or my lips bigger. It is jarring to witness the app rewriting my face as I swipe between the options, altering my bodily representation in this digital space to appeal to my emotional insecurities. I often land on the lip enhancing filter, studying it; I have thin lips, something that I have long been insecure about, and the filter often sends me searching for a local aesthetic medical center that offers lip injections, potentially even encouraging me to rewrite my own flesh.

I don't think I am alone in feeling drawn to make aesthetic choices about my body that are informed by social media. A 2018 medical study on Body Dysmorphic Disorder found that “55 percent of surgeons report seeing patients who request surgery to improve their appearance in selfies” (Rajanala et al., 443).

#

I wrestle with figuring out how to use Instagram without causing harm to myself and others. Cal Newport, a computer science scholar and popular technology writer, proposes the concept of “digital minimalism,” which he calls a “philosophy of technology use, rooted in your deep values, that provides clear answers to the questions of what tools you should use and how you should use them and, equally important, enables you to confidently ignore everything else” (xv).

According to Newport, the answers lie in reflecting on what you gain from your technology use and what it costs you, and then, armed with that that knowledge, using it more intentionally instead of mindlessly. This is certainly a step in the right direction, and a philosophy that would surely ripple outward positively. But my problem is that even if *I* got off social media completely, I can't confidently ignore “everything else”—not after learning about the power structures behind our tech, the ways that algorithms prop up social and economic systems, the material damage done to bodies every day as *we* become products.

These are age-old concerns and questions. Recall these definitions of “technology”: “The application of [the mechanical arts and applied sciences] for practical purposes, especially in industry”; and “The product of such application[s]” (“Technology, 4a-b”).

When you google “technology,” the images that come up include robot hands touching human hands, zoomed-in photos of computer chips, laptops, tablets, icy blue globes wrapped in networked systems. Like any good Millennial, I myself picture the green code from the Matrix.

But a pen is a technology. Millions of years ago, a rock was a technology. And then fire, clothing, clay, wheels. Sailboats, irrigation, gunpowder, the compass, the clock, the printing press, the steam engine. Railways and photographs, the telephone, electric lights. Planes, trains, and automobiles. Nuclear power.

It wasn't until 1937 that the first electronic computer was designed—fewer than 100 years ago. It wasn't until 2007 that the iPhone was released—just 16 short years ago. An infinitesimal blink of an eye.

It's nothing new to question the best ways to use our technologies, to ask what they do for us but also what they do *to* us and what they take away. It's nothing new to try to find better ways to get around, to communicate, to live our short lives to the best of our abilities. Philosophers throughout the globe and across time have talked about the value of a “simple life,” from Marcus Aurelius to Henry David Thoreau.

But if Charles Simonyi and Richard Brodie—the developers of the first version of Microsoft Word—were dedicated to the “simple life,” I likely wouldn't be typing this right now. And *they* were hired by Bill Gates, who, until 2018, was the richest man in the world. They were programming for Microsoft, guided by a specific ideology about technology and the ways users

interact with it called “What You See Is What You Get” (WYSIWYG), which describes editing software with interfaces that allow users to write and edit directly in the layout of a document as it'd appear in print.

In his narrative “A Cyberwriter’s Tale,” Jim Porter describes the ideology behind the eraserless pencils he used in Catholic school:

. . . I was taught handwriting by Ursuline nuns (Catholic), who insisted on careful attention to penmanship. The quality of handwriting mattered. . . . We did a lot of writing—not to express ideas but to form beautiful letters. . . . Good penmanship was a sign of virtue, character, discipline, and proper training; it distinguished us (Catholics) from them (Protestants). Sloppy penmanship revealed an undisciplined education.

In the primary grades we used pencils—big blue Eberhard Faber pencils without erasers. We were, in fact, forbidden to have erasers . . . because the teachers wanted to see our errors. They didn’t want to encourage hiding our flaws. After all, you can’t hide your sins from God. (376)

All technologies are situated within larger economic systems and ideologies because all technologies are developed by people *within* economic systems and who *have* ideologies. This includes writing technologies, like eraserless pencils, Microsoft Word, and social media platforms like Instagram.

Even if you don’t consider yourself a “writer,” you are. Even before I considered myself one, I bet that if I tallied up the minutes I’ve spent composing throughout my lifetime, including first

learning how to write the alphabet and then pounding out my five-paragraph essays in school and then typing out email after email and then posting selfies with captions to Instagram and Facebook, it would amount to a staggering number of hours—hours spent perpetuating the values and ethics of those who designed and created the writing technologies I’ve used throughout my life. That I’m using right now, as I type this.

#

I took a break from writing just then to scroll Instagram. I sent a few funny videos to my fiancée, and I’m smiling now anticipating his laughter from the couch later this evening as he watches them. I saved a salad dressing recipe—the algorithm delivers them to me regularly because it knows I’m trying to eat healthier. I scrolled through baby pictures and engagement announcements of people I went to high school with.

If I’m being honest, I’ve probably picked up my phone and scrolled Instagram ten times throughout the process of writing this essay. I am a pigeon, or Pavlov’s dog, pecking around for intermittent positive reinforcement during moments of discomfort. I am a human, seeking connection through broken airwaves. I am curious.

Instagram shows me the whole world: people I’ll never see in real life (some who don’t even exist because they were made by AI), life advice (some good and some bad), poetry I’d never encounter otherwise, cockatoos dancing, whole friendships, recipes for Chinese eggplant, truly terrifying pieces of news, and some really good news, too. And then Instagram does not really show me anything: people who don’t really look like that, cultures that aren’t really like that,

places and people who don't use the app, news that isn't real, friends' smiling faces who are actually rusting away from my everyday life.

While a Reel might inspire me to go for a run, it also leeches my energy, saps, taps, and drains me. While the profile of a girl with great hair and the house I dream of having one day excites me, it hurts to see how far I have to go instead of how far I've come. In an even more visceral way, it hurts to see bloody faces hundreds of thousands of miles away while I have no idea about things going on in my own community.

There is a theory called "Dunbar's number" that says we can only maintain 150 social relationships at a time. It's hotly debated, but it's hard to contest that the greater number of connections you have, the less intimate those connections will be. It's also hard to contest that my mind might not be capable of taking in the vast amounts of information it receives every day from my iPhone while trying to thrive in my material life.

How should I move through spaces formed by technology, held up by ideologies that aren't my own? Technologies that I don't even understand? How do I use social media without it using me? How can I write without being written?

I think the answer is that I can't. These are questions that could be asked of a pencil, of a printing press, of a typewriter, of Microsoft Word. Technology results from human activity, which is messy and weird and awful and silly and heartbreaking all at the same time, everywhere. At my

worst, I'm exhausted and turning toward my phone to fill the space in my head with static. At my best, I'm joining the rallying cries against it.

ON QUANTIFYING MYSELF

I've never found it easy to get into an exercise routine. I've heard about the endorphins, and I'm all too familiar with the desire to fit into my old jeans again, but I've never *really* cared about my body. I also have a history of eating crumby foods in the car.

This not caring hasn't been much of a problem for me so far. Most of my jobs have been waitressing, and nothing keeps you in shape like 12 hours on your feet carrying heavy plates and carefully balanced trays full of beer and martinis. But when I decided to go to grad school, I didn't really think about how I'd be trading 12-hour shifts on my feet for 12-hour days at the library. I didn't know how much of my life would change—how my body would become someplace unfamiliar, somewhere incapable of holding me the way it always has.

Thirty pounds and almost two degrees later, and I miss myself, even while I love the person I'm becoming. A lot of that is probably internalized misogyny telling me that I'm not supposed to look like this. A student in my cohort recently told me that writing her thesis felt harder than having a baby. I don't have kids, so I can't attest, but what she said did make me think about my body the way it was, like there's some grad school version of a pre-baby body that I'm obligated to "snap back" to. Like it's time to start counting calories to undo what's been done. I can't lie; I do yearn to feel lighter, quicker on my feet. Going back to school is hard; there's nothing quick about it. Studying writing and language and culture is hard; there's nothing light about it. I miss hiking without losing my breath in the first few minutes. I'm tired of running to Target to grab

cheap new clothing as my old clothes go untouched. It's a waste of money and a waste of time. I need to find the quickest way out, the quickest way back to myself.

#

My friend Alice is an avid swimmer and a religious wearer of her fitness-tracking smartwatch. She often shares her post-swim stats on Instagram: 3,000 yards, 200 laps, 1 hour and 37 minutes in the pool, 500 active calories, 600 total calories, 146 average heartbeats per minute, 2 minutes and 30 seconds per 100 yards, 2 minutes and 20 seconds per stroke. I went swimming with her once and loved it. I didn't know how many calories I burned, just that I felt exhausted afterward.

Alice has been losing about a pound a week for months now. Her fitness app tells her that she will continue to lose a pound a week as long as she fulfills certain quotas of exercise and calorie intake per day, which she does. Alice has quantified her body with great success.

I'm jealous of Alice. I've started going to the gym, but I don't really know what I'm doing. I walk first to warm up—but should I be jogging? I prefer to lift weights and use the machines—but should I be doing more cardio? I spend a good amount of time on my phone looking up proper form, how long a warm-up should be, whether it's better to lift the heaviest weights you can or to do more reps with lighter weights. An hour there probably results in burning a third of the calories that Alice burns swimming, because she knows exactly how and how long she has to swim in order to burn the maximum number of calories in that hour. My gym habit has hardly begun, and it's already waning because I'm wasting my time without the data I need to optimize my workout. I need better control over the situation, over my body and its data points. I need a smartwatch.

#

The problem with wanting a smartwatch is that I don't want to wear a smartwatch. It wasn't until *Roe v. Wade* was overturned that I became alarmed about how the health data on my phone could be used. Who do I want to allow access to the knowledge that my period's late? I live in a state where abortion is legal (albeit restricted), but I remember the terrifying moment after the overturning when I realized that I had no clue who my data was being sold to, data that had suddenly become very precious.

Most wearables aren't subject to privacy regulations, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). The tech-health industry is just that—an industry, which shares personal health information with third parties, often disclaimed in those miles-long Terms of Service and Privacy Policies that we check the box beneath. And I don't want data about my body to be legally shared within consumerist, corporate systems without my knowledge—especially because, ironically, a lot of that data goes toward targeting me with ads for weight loss products and “solutions.”

This kind of surveillance sounds very Big Brother, but it's already happening. Just a few years ago, Walgreens was caught violating HIPAA by selling pharmacy records to AcurianHealth for the purpose of creating targeted ads. And many of these advertisements were based on information cross-referenced with patients' browser search history, not their health issues (Hutchinson and Novotny 106). I know that using fitness-tracking tech will result in much of my data being shared between companies that profit from surveillance capitalism: not just my personal health information and pharmacy records, but my age, sex, gender, income, sexual

orientation, hobbies and interests, spending habits, items I've bought, items I'm thinking about buying, if I'm planning to traveling soon, if I'm thinking about buying a house, if I'm thinking about having kids—the list goes on (Beck 125). Scholars have called this the creation of “invisible digital identities” (Beck 126). And sure, the argument exists that *I'm* the one signing away my data by checking “I agree” beneath Terms of Service and Privacy Policies—but it would take the average American 76 days to read all of the Privacy Policies they encounter in a year (Madrigal). I don't have an extra 76 days this year to read a thousand different versions of the same document, most of which I'm going to be required to sign anyway in my role as a functioning human in society in the 21st century.

The worst part is that all of this collected data isn't just used to create targeted ads. User data has been used for “weblining” (yes, like “redlining”), which is the denial of certain opportunities, goods, and services to people based on observations about their digital “selves,” or their “invisible digital identities.” This includes insurance and bank loans. User data has also been used for workplace surveillance and identity theft resulting from data breaches, which can lead to serious financial damages that corporations are rarely held accountable for (Schneier, qtd. in Reilly 3).

Essentially, the tech that I want to help *me* take better control of my body wants to take its *own* control of my body—or at least, it's instrumental for the corporate entities who want to. Technology is supposed to have practical purposes; it's supposed to help. But it's also designed and created within capitalist systems. If I ask it to help me reclaim my agency, it's going to take some back in return. And yet, I still want to be able to hike again without losing my breath so

easily. And if I'm going to carve out an hour every day to go to the gym, I still want to make the most of it that I can. I still feel entitled to my own body's data, even though I'm not sure there's a way for me to collect it without sharing it with others who find it valuable.

The “quantified self” movement seeks to empower people to gain “self-knowledge through numbers.” In addition to allowing her smartwatch to monitor her heart rate while swimming, Alice also writes her times and lap numbers down in a fitness journal using good ol' pen and paper. I'm sure if she analyzed the data herself, she'd find trends, ways to optimize her workouts instead of asking her tech to do it for her. It might be less efficient, but that's probably worth the opportunity cost. Maybe gathering data about ourselves doesn't have to be so scary—or maybe we're better off resisting datafication of the body as a whole. Not to sound like a technophobe, but we've got kind of a David and Goliath situation on our hands here.

#

Sometimes I see people shooting hoops in the gym by themselves, and it makes me sad that they don't have anyone to pass the ball to. Somehow, it's even worse than the sight of everyone on the treadmills and the ellipticals and the stair machines with their headphones in and their smartphones propped up in front of them because those things aren't really *meant* to be collaborative in the first place. I am sometimes one of these people on the elliptical machine or the stationary bike, and despite these mysterious endorphins, it does feel sad to watch *Letterkenny* on a three-by-five-inch screen where I can't properly enjoy the nuances of the Skids' dance moves. And yet, it feels nice to have a minute alone, a moment to myself to move my body and check out of the world around me—there's a feeling of relief in no one being around

that you *have* to pass the ball to. Also...the promise of 30 minutes to watch TV while in grad school is definitely enough to get me into the gym.

Working out at the gym is supposed to be a good thing, but it feels all wrong done this way, like a solo chore with a weird, displaced reward. TV is supposed to be watched at home on the couch, in sweatpants and snuggled up with my cat. And for me, exercising always just *happened*—as a kid, I played soccer, and when I grew up, I became a waitress who was always in the weeds, running around getting sides of ranch and extra bread. I miss playing soccer. I miss the smell of the grass, the feeling of shin guards strapped to my calves. I miss passing the ball, aiming for the other midfielder, and the low hum of the cicadas coming out at dusk mixing with yells and whistles. Orange Gatorade. Going over plays with the coach and the other girls. Talking about our boyfriends and plans for the weekend.

My friend Meghan and I have tried desperately to establish a workout routine together. The last time we went to the gym, we spent the whole time talking about the pros and cons of having kids. Our warm-up walk accidentally took double the time it was supposed to. We kept pausing our weightlifting sessions to chat some more about school and the new drink at Starbucks and the conference coming up and the lit mag we co-edit and our works-in-progress and the new vintage shop we've been meaning to hit and...

Anyway, we can't really work out together if we want to get any actual working out done. We have to put in our headphones, or else say fuck it and go get coffees.

#

I'm tired of numbers. I want a break. There's just so much to keep track of—likes, followers, friends, posts, steps, calories, time, heart rate, weight lifted, hours of sleep, minutes awake, times woken up, time you went to bed, pages read, books read, money spent. I am not the first one to feel this burnout. Books like Dave Eggers' *The Every* and that Black Mirror episode *Nosedive* are about the quantification of self—why we do it, what we have to gain from it, what we lose along the way. Whether we're the sum of our parts or something more.

In comics and graphic novels, the white space between panels is called “the gutter.” The panels do most of the storytelling, but the gutter does a lot of heavy lifting, too. It's in the gutter that readers connect the moments in the panels, create meaning, tell themselves the story of Clark Kent becoming Superman in between panels showing a guy in a suit and tie and a superhero. This is called “closure”—the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole (McCloud 63).

There's an altering magic in the gutter, on the sidelines, in the in-between—a process of becoming that takes facts and transforms them into a story. Without points to plot, there can be no line, but there's also no life in a table full of data. It's the space between the numbers, the conversations between the reps and on the bench, the grass stains and the whistles and the sweat that end up mattering more than the number on the scale.

#

In her groundbreaking essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway says that we are all cyborgs (7). She is not, however, talking about sci-fi imagery of holographic cell phones popping up from chips embedded in our wrists. She's not even talking about smartwatches and fitness-

tracking devices, which didn't exist when she first published this essay in 1985. All Haraway is saying is that the line between human and machine is a lot thinner than we think.

I use the word "machine" very loosely here—it doesn't even have to be electronic. For instance, when I write an appointment down in my planner, am I not outsourcing my memory to another device? When I drive in a nail, is the hammer not making me strong enough to nail two boards together? Here's another example: A couple of years ago when I asked a professor when a good time to meet would be, she asked me to email her that same question because she couldn't remember it without her Outlook calendar. No shade here—I would also be reduced to nothing without my planner and Google Calendar.

When I rely on a wearable to track my data, I'm asking it for help to get in shape. I'm asking it for the quickest way back to the body I once lived in. But that person no longer exists—there is only the body I have now, the one that shepherded me like a lost sheep through grad school. Through all the stacks of tattered, marked-up Xerox copies read with late-night handfuls of peanut M&Ms. Through all the Thursday night frozen yogurt sessions with Meghan after class. Through every sip of life- and calorie-giving Starbucks drinks to get through every three-hour lecture. Through every hour in front of an open Word doc, willing the words to come. How could I not love her?

I don't know. Maybe I'm asking the wrong questions, and maybe I'm asking for the wrong kind of help. Maybe I need to ask people in my community if there's a soccer league I can join, even if I can't run a mile right now and never really learned what offsides meant. I tell Meghan about

my health information, my income, my hobbies and interests, my spending habits, the items I've bought, the items I'm thinking about buying, if I'm traveling soon, if I'm thinking about buying a house, if I'm thinking about having kids—the list goes on. But unlike a smartwatch, Meghan talks back, and unlike other entities that collect this information, Meghan won't sell our conversations. Maybe I need to ask myself who—or what—I want to partner up with on this journey to create some other version of the body that I'm in now. Choosing not to use a smartwatch might slow my progress, but I'm learning that my goal might not actually *be* optimization, and I might not actually *want* to harvest myself for data points every day.

But I will probably feel differently tomorrow morning when my favorite jeans still don't fit. I wouldn't be surprised if I bought a smartwatch this week, I'm *that* tired of going to Target. I wouldn't be surprised if I joined a soccer team tomorrow, I miss the cicadas *that* much.

THINGS YOUR PHONE TRACKS

Things your phone tracks:

- Where you are
- Where you're going
- Where you've been
- Where you thought about eating lunch yesterday
- Where you ended up going on a date with your friend's roommate, the blonde one who lives in Providence named JP
- Your Google search for "what is kimchi" after you asked him to order for you and he chose the kimchi hotdog
- The Facebook profiles of every single one of JP's ex-girlfriends
- Every picture in the photo album from JP's brother's study abroad trip in China
- Your three-hour phone call with your best friend from home
- How to get to the brunch place in Providence with that great smoked salmon omelet
- Your Google search for "how to cure food poisoning fast"
- Where you bought that satin slip dress you wore on your second date
- Your steps around downtown Providence
- Your late-night Taco Bell GrubHub order
- Your mileage between Boston and Providence
- Your Amazon order for the French roast coffee he likes
- Your Google search for "best way to dig your car out of the snow"
- How to get to the dry cleaner's

- Your search history for an apartment in Providence
- Your Google search for “where to get free moving boxes in boston”
- Your three-hour phone call with your best friend from home
- Your newfound interest in learning the banjo, since he’s super into bluegrass music
- Your Thai food delivery and your download of *Summer Heights High*
- Your search history on Craigslist for a waitressing job
- Your Amazon order for bike parts
- Your Google search for “how to separate laundry the right way”
- Your search history on Craigslist for photography gigs
- Where you’re thinking about booking a weekend getaway
- Your late-night Taco Bell GrubHub order
- Your Google search for “server tips envelope cash budgeting”
- Your Amazon order for envelopes
- Your Google search for “English graduate programs”
- Your Google search for “cities with good local music scenes”
- Your 3-hour phone call with your best friend from home
- Your Google search for “grad school personal essay writing tips”
- Transactions for your grad school application fees
- Your Google search for “carter family wildwood banjo chords”
- Your Google search for “rocky top banjo chords”
- Your grad school rejection emails
- Your steps from the walk to the coffee shop with JP to vent about the rejection emails
- Your late-night Taco Bell GrubHub order

- Your grad school acceptance emails
- Your dry-cleaning invoice for the satin slip dress
- Your Google search for “asheville vs pittsburgh”
- Your Google search for “asheville vs albany”
- Your google search for “grad school funding questions reddit”
- Your three-hour phone call with your best friend from home
- Your google search for “where to get free moving boxes in providence”
- Your search history for a rental house in Asheville
- Your Google search for “30th bday gift ideas”
- Your Amazon order for guitar strings
- Your google search for “paul and silas banjo chords”
- Your google search for “how to move with a cat”
- Your Venmo for first, last, and security
- Your steps from the walk around your new neighborhood
- Directions to Angelo’s Pizza
- Your first selfie in the new place
- Your Google search for “how to make kimchi”

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