LIVING CONTINGENT LIVES ONLINE: HOW MEDIATIONS OF TRAUMA FOSTER MEANING-MAKING AND ARTICULATIONS OF VOICE IN DIGITAL SPACES

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Living Contingent Lives Online: How Mediations of Trauma Foster Meaning-Making and Articulations of Voice in Digital Spaces

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ABSTRACT

With rapidly changing and proliferating digital platforms, individuals are able to mediate their daily lives more rapidly and with more flexibility regarding modality and format. The flexibility and affordances enabled by the spaces created by various digital online platforms provide users of these platforms spaces through which to communicate their authentic, or perceived authentic, mediations of various life experiences. Traumatic events are particularly interesting when mediated online because of the way trauma acts on a person's previously held beliefs about themselves and about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). When trauma interrupts a person's ability to believe certain truths about the world, those individuals seek out spaces through which to explore, articulate, and communicate new meanings.

Digital spaces are particularly salient places through which to negotiate meaning, particular when life feels contingent upon the recovery from, or overcoming of a traumatic event. The digital spaces explored in this dissertation are social media spaces where users can post or share information about themselves or others, and interact with other users. Within these spaces users can mediate and re-mediate their traumatic experiences or instances of trauma they have witnessed and been traumatized by, thus producing and negotiating new meanings.

This dissertation investigates how users behave online when exploring difficult to contend with subject matter. Working from a broad range of interdisciplinary theories, this research attempts to use a feminist post-structuralist lens among others to explore the possibility for changes in discourse inherent in the mediations and articulations made online by those who seek to discover new and changing ways of knowing, because they are forced to do so through traumatic experience. Using three case studies to empirically explore the intersections of media and trauma, this research yields a dynamic theoretical framework to account for how digital users engage with media during times of suffering that may also have applications for broader research of digital media.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION **1**

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA 5

DISSERTATION STRUCTURE 14

CHAPTER 2 – METHODS AND METHODOLOGY **16**

STUDY DESIGN 17

METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION 22

Kevin Ogar and CrossFit 24

Neda and the 2009 Iranian Election Protests 25

Jennifer and Angelo Merendino and "The Battle We Didn't Choose" 25

CHALLENGES TO DATA COLLECTION 27

Challenges to Soliciting Narratives and Researcher/Subject Interaction 29

Research Cautions and Positioning the Researcher 31

CHAPTER 3 – WORKING TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF TRAUMA AND DIGITAL MEDIA: A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE AND THEORY BUILDING **33**

FROM CULTURAL STUDIES TO FEMINIST DISABILITY STUDIES: RELEVANT LITERATURE AND GUIDING THEORIES 36

BRIDGING THE FIELDS: CREATING A FRAMEWORK FROM WHICH TO BUILD A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF NEW MEDIA AND TRAUMA 44

PARTICIPATION, PLATFORMS, AND MATERIAL BODIES: EXPLORING ONLINE EMBODIED PARTICIPATION AS RESISTIVE ACTION OR CULTURAL COOPTATION IN THE FACE OF TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT 55

FINDING AN OUTLET AFTER TRAUMA: VOICE, TACTICAL MEDIA, AND THE POSSIBILITIES AND REFUSALS OF NEW MEDIA SPACES 70

MEMES, RE-MEDIATION AND PLAY AS TACTICAL MEDIA IN THE DIGITAL THIRD SPACE: USING THE AFFORDANCES OF THE TECHNOLOGY TO CULTIVATE MEANING AND SENSE-MAKING AFTER TRAUMA 87

CONCLUSION 96

CHAPTER 4 – THE CASE OF NEDA AGHA SOLTAN: TRAUMATIC VIEWING, MEANING MAKING, AND MOURNING IN THE DIGITAL REALM 98

NEDA: WHY SHE CAPTURED THE DIGITAL WORLD 100

THE CASE OF NEDA 103

Religion, Gender, and Representation 105

IRAN, IMAGERY, AND DIGITAL MEDIA: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR WHAT HAPPENED TO NEDA 110

GRIEVING ONLINE: THE VICARIOUS TRAUMA OF WITNESS 116

CONCLUSIONS 126

CHAPTER 5 – KEVIN OGAR, CROSSFIT, AND ENGAGING WITH TRAUMA ONLINE 128

THE CASE OF KEVIN OGAR: HOW ONE ATHLETE BECAME A SYMBOL OF HOPE 130

#OGARSTRONG: MEDIATION, RE-MEDIATION AND THE MAKING OF A HERO 133

Kevin Ogar: Road to Recovery 138

CONCLUSIONS 148

CHAPTER 6 – THE BATTLE WE DIDN'T CHOOSE: ANGELO MERENDINO AND MEDIATIONS OF GRIEF, DISEASE, AND THE TRAUMA OF BEARING WITNESS **151**

ANGELO MERENDINO: HIS MEDIATIONS AND RE-MEDIATIONS OF JENNIFER'S TRAUMA, AND HIS OWN TRAUMA 154

RE-MAKING, RE-MEDIATION, AND MEME-ING: HOW THE MERENDINOS' STORY BECAME A COMMUNITY'S STORY 163

CONCLUSIONS 168

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSIONS **169**

TESTING THE THEORY: FINDINGS, LEARNINGS, AND PROVOCATIONS 171

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS RESEARCH TO MEDIA STUDIES: USING TRAUMA AS A WAY TO HIGHLIGHT WHAT INTERNET PLATFORMS CAN ENABLE 175

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH 180

BIBLIOGRAPHY **184**

APPENDIX A – NARRATIVE INTERVIEW REQUEST SAMPLE **193**
- **NARRATIVE QUESTIONS**
- **INFORMED CONSENT**

APPENDIX B – SELECTIONS FROM DATA SETS **203**

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Herman (1997) once wrote that "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (p. 1). Given the current mediatic moment, in which neoliberal ideology merges with individual desires to presence oneself through various cultural formats, the social, digital spaces that exist online offer trauma sufferers a place through which to negotiate the dialectic of trauma: to share one's suffering or deny its gravity. In scholarship, much of feminist research encourages scholars to account for the way knowledge is produced through actively engaging with the world. Often, when people experience trauma they potentially become "epistemically privileged in some crucial respect" because of what they have seen, felt, or experienced (Wylie, 2003, p. 339). When I experienced traumatic and difficult events in my own life, I became privy to this "epistemic privilege" thus causing me to re-think the various schema by which I led my life, and by extension spurred me to explore how traumatic experiences are mediated as a part of my professional scholarship. This investigation was also motivated by my research of and travels to east Africa, where I witnessed the way short form communication enables people to heal after traumatic events. During my Masters work at the University of Denver, I embarked on a project that explored how text messages and other types of short-form communication, often not even using traditional conventions of language, helped women cultivate space for recovery after being ravaged by the cruelties of a war that used rape as its primary weapon. I travelled to the areas where these women, who proudly hung their cellphones around their necks in carefully knit pouches, lived and heard many of them note how much technology had enabled them to rebuild their communities after conflict. The women gave credit to the technology, not for healing them,

but for empowering them to access support, one another, and a wider world of possibility. I realized very quickly that if meaning can be produced in a space that is so desperately embroiled in conflict, then others must be using certain technological forms and digital media to pursue meaning in their own lives, particularly after some kind of traumatic life event.

There are many debates about what the Internet is and does. Specifically, social media and digital communication across new media platforms are contested, complicated spaces of both structural oppression and possibility for agency. While this project does not attempt to define or place boundaries on what the Internet ultimately does on a broad scale, it enters the debate from the location of how digital technology uses and is used by sufferers of trauma. Importantly, the Internet spaces explored herein, social media spaces such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and blogs, are treated as depositories for short-form, immediate testimony and narrative. This project steers away from a definitive analysis of one Internet platform or site, rather it recognizes that the digital age is one where platforms shift, change, and adapt to current media moments, thus this research looks at the features that make sharing across platforms possible. Specifically, I undertake an examination of participation and the process of meaning-making across digital spaces rather than exploring any one particular space, thus providing data as to what is possible in the changing, often fluid spaces of the digital realm, instead of what is made possible through the particular aesthetic and cultural affordances of one website. Whether these spaces oppress or liberate their users in regards to dominant discourses, they are spaces for stories to be shared and meaning to be made. Le Guin (2004), in her book of essays reflecting on writing and storytelling, notes that as dominant narratives become imbedded in society they become internalized yet, she identifies imagination and an ability to envision alternatives to the present reality as the first steps to overcoming oppression. Consequently, it is useful to discover

whether spaces cultivated through digital tools serve to further reify dominant discourses on the traumatized subject and disabled body, or if they provide users a space to contest meaning, or to imagine alternate possibilities. Retuning to Le Guin (2004), she argues in favor of telling stories and making meaning, noting

> the exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary. Having that real though limited power to put established institutions into question, imaginative literature has also the responsibility of power. The storyteller is the truthteller (n.p.).

Trauma causes an inherent questioning of *the way things are* or perhaps *the way things have always been.* When the constructs that have always governed individual's lives are dismantled by trauma, there is a space for the construction of alternative meanings. That said, there is also space to inhabit the previously constructed, existing, dominant narratives about trauma that serve to cement status quo mentalities about individual identity politics, trauma, normalcy, and ableness.

In the emerging digital economy, researchers and scholars encounter many forms of intellectual and emotional labor being done in social media spaces. This labor is done not just in service of a neoliberal system that has coopted users into participation in a dynamic and shifting landscape of media production and consumption, but also in favor of a complex identity politics that includes a self-reflexive exploration as to how individuals fit into the participatory digital sphere. During times of extreme duress, or trauma, individuals are forced to strive to recognize how their new, fragmented, shifting identity fits into a complex matrix of identities that often doesn't make room for traumatic experiences to be expressed in a diverse array of ways. Digital media, in particular social media networks, allow users to explore their changing identities by

participating in the ritual of communication. Trauma, disability, loss, and other life events or experiences that may be markers of invisible suffering come to light in digital media through the sharing of trauma testimonies and narratives. Despite these narratives entering into conversation with various neoliberal and commodified ideologies, this dissertation sets out to discover how much of this trauma testimony is subversive, transgressive, disruptive or alternatively how much of trauma testimony reinforces oppression and the making invisible of traumatized or disabled bodies.

Trauma shifts the way individuals conceive of their worlds. Trauma makes it so the constructed world no longer makes sense to the person who suffers, nor do the social and cultural norms and boundaries of that world help a sufferer to account for their experience with trauma. The world as it existed before is shattered for the suffering individual, causing the world-making schema that person may have used their entire life to change. Digital media provide a unique opportunity for individuals to explore, through acts of mediation and re-mediation, their existing sense-making and world-making schema as well as create new ones. This, ultimately, is a project of identity politics, as users engage digital media to reorient themselves and their shifting physical, mental, and emotional landscapes to the world around them. This move can be a tactical, subversive move in the way that it creates small shifts in the way the world conceives of trauma and the traumatized subject as well as how the traumatized subject conceives of the world. After all, there are, as with any identity category, pre-conceived representations of trauma that users either reinforce or transgress against with their online testimony. The following chapters examine the way trauma sufferers negotiate the boundaries of their identity and its representation during contingent times of trauma, and explores the media dynamics and affordances of technologies that make this type of expression possible.

Possibility for change as a result of the Internet is not a new subject. The Internet has, since its conception, been lauded as a space of possibility. What that means however has been articulated differently by different people. The data presented will highlight how the Internet, particularly in social spaces that allow for public imagination and memory to take hold, allows for meanings to slowly shift, take hold, or be cemented. By using a post-structural feminist framework, possibility can be explored as the potential for a shift in discourse. Traumatized subjects enter various online spaces because they have suffered and they feel a need to articulate their suffering to the communities around them. The acts of sharing, of being seen, of being made legible, and of expressing voice are explored throughout the case studies that follow. Ultimately this research is less about trauma than it is about media. Trauma, in this study, serves as a catalyst through which to explore how digital media operate for users during contingent life moments. Fundamentally then, this is an exploration of how media studies can account for the way mediation and re-mediation work online to foster identity exploration, production, and how digital media enable users to express ideas about their bodies in spaces that don't require physical mediation. Trauma studies is central as it is the lens through which tactical possibility in media are explored; thus, it is important to provide an academic and historical context as to how trauma has been mediated in legacy media in order to contextualize the current trauma testimonies and instances of online expression. The following section, *Understanding Trauma,* provides a quick reference guide to the way trauma is understood here and provides key terminology and framing around how trauma is currently socially constituted and understood.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

To discover what trauma means in the context of the case studies that follow, this section will outline two key terms that come up in literature: trauma and suffering, and identify how they are

being used here. Whether these terms are deployed in popular culture, in digital spaces, or in purely academic spaces, there seems to be a common sense consensus that trauma leads to suffering. Walsh (2007) notes that "the word trauma comes from the Latin word for wound. With traumatic experiences the body, mind, spirit, and the relationships with others can be wounded" (p. 207). These wounds function based on social and cultural understandings of what it is to be wounded and to feel pain. Trauma can also come from a *fear* of pain, which as Young (1997) notes, is caused by "bodily state and memory" (p. 247). According to the DSM-5 categorizations of trauma for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), triggers for PTSD include one or more of the following: direct experiences with a traumatic event, witnessing of a traumatic event in person, knowledge that a closer family member or friend experienced a traumatic event, or the experience of first-hand repeated exposure to aversive details of traumatic events (not through media) (2014). Trauma, based on this discussion, can be somewhat broad in the way it is experienced and felt. While the categories laid out by the DSM-5 do not explicitly include the experiences of trauma as encountered through media, these categories can be deployed to account for experiences of trauma that are based on mediated experiences, most centrally those mediations that happen online, particularly in the seemingly intimate spaces of social media. Beyond the categories laid out here, there is much to be discovered through an understanding of how trauma sufferers and their vicarious and empathetic sufferers engage with digital communities. Trauma is a fluid concept because the experience of trauma very much depends "on whether those wounded can seek comfort, reassurance, and safety with others" (Walsh, 2007, p. 208). Trauma theory, then, wants to bear witness to traumas as they are situated in a historical context of testimonies of events, experiences, and complex, contested representations (Meek, 2011, p. 1).

Related to trauma is the term suffering, which is used in trauma studies literature to indicate two dimensions of distress. Young (1997) identifies suffering as first "a disvalued state to which certain organisms are susceptible because of their biological makeup: suffering is association with somatic pain and the moments of consciousness that accompany or anticipate this pain" (p. 245). The second definition of suffering Young (1997) provides is more central to this research: "states that are variously described as psychological, existential, or spiritual and that are identified by such words as 'despairing' and 'desolated'" (p. 245). These states of suffering are based on constructed social or moral dimensions and codes that determine who is eligible to suffer in what way, and are understood based on sufferer's social location as they exist within a community. While the concepts of suffering and trauma are distinct, inherent in trauma is this idea of suffering, specifically suffering that is understood through social structures and frameworks.

Trauma exists not just at the individual level but at the community and collective level and can be felt secondarily through witnessing in the media. Trauma, as a somewhat broad and precarious subject matter, comes in many forms and there are many levels at which trauma can be experienced. There can be multiple types of mediations of trauma from multiple levels of trauma sufferers. Individuals suffer trauma when they are faced with "extreme events such as criminal victimization, disease, accidents and natural disasters" or other experiences that can lead to "anxiety, confusion, helplessness, and depression" (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, p. 113). From this definition of individual trauma comes an understanding of the effects of trauma. While trauma is often contained or physically or emotionally located in a single body, the resonances and mediations of that trauma can be felt and experienced beyond just the immediate trauma sufferer's body and in many different ways, by multiple parties, particularly in the digital realm.

In contrast, cultural trauma is understood on a more collective level. “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). In individual and cultural trauma, there is a common thread – some kind of extreme event that leads to a change in the understandings of everyday consciousness and interaction, here referred to as changes in world-making schema. This change is closely related to the previously addressed concept that enables and contributes to the trauma: suffering. Suffering “engenders a crisis of meaning” that results from the destruction of an individual’s previously held meaning structures (Egnew, 2009, p. 171). This can take place for one individual or a collectivity in a community exposed to trauma. In between the categories of individual and collective trauma are a range of types of suffering that are important to this analysis. As will be examined further, many traumas that may happen to one person may lead to stress reactions, empathetic engagement with trauma, vicarious trauma, or witnessing in others, from that person’s immediate family, social group, or oftentimes the traumas only physically experienced by some can extend their trauma to the level of the nation state (Kaplan, 2005; Schuster et al., 2001).

Trauma must also be understood as being culturally, socially and historically constituted. Understandings of trauma are constructed in and through representation, which is directly linked to meaning. An individual’s trauma cannot exist outside of the way that individual exists socially. Meek (2011) notes that traumatized subjects are not living embodiments of historical truths and their testimony is not a historical testament or literal trace of some reality, instead, he argues, traumatized subjects are revealed through “intertextual constructions…Historical trauma is not grounded in memory traces but in the interpretation of what may be ‘forgotten’ in the texts

of mass media, academic criticism, psychoanalysis and critical theory itself" (p. 1). Trauma is, therefore, not a singular occurrence. Trauma can be felt and experienced at many levels by many people to varying degrees. Alexander (2004) identifies cultural traumas as "an empirical, scientific concept, suggesting new meaningful and causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions" that "also illuminates an emerging domain of social responsibility and political action" (p. 1). What this research hopes to examine is how that emerging domain shifts or changes online, as well as how those that suffer may make meaning for their lives in response to their suffering. Young (1997) highlights that suffering is "based on social codes (which include moral and religious codes)," indicating that understandings and mediations of suffering are based on the structures and discourses that govern everyday life and the way meaning takes shape. Alexander (2004) explains that

> Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real time, as an event unfolds, it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event as concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction. Sometimes, in fact, events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have occurred at all; such imagined events, however, can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred (p. 8).

Mediations of trauma are a part of a cultural process that is effected by power structures and the interaction of human agency with those structures, as well as memory and imagination (Alexander, 2004, p. 11).

Trauma and suffering here are taken broadly in order to allow the proposed research to explore multiple and varied types of trauma to discover trends and patterns as to how trauma is mediated and dealt with. Kaplan (2005) extends "the concept of trauma to include suffering terror," and this research extends the concept of trauma even further to include any event or experience through which an individual or collective actor's sense of wellbeing is shattered, even if that means they didn't experience the embodied trauma themselves but experienced it

vicariously through the Internet (Kaplan, 2005, p. 1; Alexander, 2004, p. 3). In the case studies that follow, I trace the way trauma is a catalyst forcing the central figures in each of these cases to articulate meaning around what they went through, what they think and feel about it, what it means to them and their larger communities, as well as what is or is not different and/or subversive about the meaning they have constructed for themselves. Doing so situates the mediations of suffering highlighted in each case within the broader understanding of trauma that exists socially. Often, as will be highlighted in Chapter three, those who witness trauma articulate a sense of hope and frame the sufferer as someone who must triumph over their suffering in order to maintain that hope. Using triumph as a lens through which to see trauma and mediation functions to position the actors in the various cases according to how their digital mediations inhabit socially constructed meanings, how the users produce their own subversive meanings, or some combination of the two. Using empirical data to understand where digital users situate themselves, either consciously or subconsciously, according to normative frameworks is useful in determining the way witnesses to trauma chose to comment and participate in the communities that loosely formed around one person or group's traumatic experiences.

This research, thus, cannot only look at those who are directly traumatized by an event, which is often a cultural expectation of participation, rather it looks at the witnesses to that event as well. This is simply because in witnessing tragedy, very real trauma can occur. This section so far has alluded to levels of trauma, here I will explicitly identify the following useful concepts: stress reactions, vicarious trauma and witnessing. Schuster et al. (2001) demonstrate that even those who don't immediately experience a trauma physically can have a stress reaction, meaning that they express one of many symptoms of stress (p. 1507). These people have not had an

embodied interaction with suffering, yet they may participate meaningfully in the communities online and are therefore important for consideration here. Considering the DSM-5 categories for PTSD, those suffering a stress reaction may be those that have experienced a loved one having a trauma or those that witness a trauma. For our purposes, however, we will also include those that experience a stress reaction through media. Kaplan (2005) extends stress reactions to what she calls vicarious stress. Kaplan notes that catastrophes and traumas produce new subjectivities even through a vicarious experience of that catastrophe. For example, one may not have known any victims of the September 11th terrorist attacks personally but may have a traumatic experience through witnessing the effects of the attack on the street, on television, or through social interaction. Kaplan indicates that "vicarious experience of trauma can be pro-social" in the way that it potentially allows vicarious trauma victims to share in what others have suffered (pp. 21-22). The concept of vicarious trauma is based upon research into the traumatization of therapists through their treatment of traumatized patients. Kaplan (2005) extends this trauma inflicted on an individual through hearing a trauma narrative to include those narratives mediated through film and television. Witnessing, in contrast to vicarious trauma that elicits an often emotional or traumatic response, involves a greater degree of distance. Again, turning to Kaplan (2005) we see that "witnessing involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common" (p. 122), rather than vicarious trauma which implies a closeness to and identification with the trauma victim, instead of the larger structural and social causes of trauma. Witnessing gives the viewer of trauma a sense of responsibility in the trauma; the traumatic event is no longer an abstract concept or experience that can be ignored or denied. In this way witnessing is more powerful for change than vicarious trauma because it acts as a call to action (Kaplan, 2005, p. 124). It can be assumed that oftentimes participants in the online

communities may have entered these communities as witnesses that desire to make a change in the structures and systems that allowed for certain traumas to exist and persist.

Those who have not experienced a trauma make meaning a certain way, while a trauma sufferers meaning-making processes have been broken down by the experience of being traumatized. While non-sufferers can feel an emotional response to another's trauma, a true vicarious sufferer will be distinct someone who simply saw the trauma and had a momentary emotional response and was able to move on. In witnessing, empathy is central to making a distinction between a simple witness of trauma and a sufferer of vicarious trauma and stress reactions. Often, seeing a trauma through the media will elicit an emotional, empathetic response that enables the spectator not to feel the protagonist's trauma, rather "they feel the pain evoked by empathy – arousing mechanisms interacting with their own traumatic experience" (Kaplan, 2005, p. 90). In other words, empathy does not indicate that one has experienced the trauma themselves, but the trauma has interacted with their previous social experiences to produce a new space of emotional reaction and meaning-making. A person can be an empathetic witness and later vicariously suffer. It is difficult to categorize suffering as trauma doesn't allow for a static experience. Due to the intensity of trauma, it is also not easy to readily discount traumatic impacts; there are various frames through which those confronting different forms of trauma manage, mediate and make meaning from them (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, p. 122; MacRae, 2008, p. 398). Alexander (2004) highlights that "human beings need security, order, love, and connection," (p. 3). Thus it makes sense that, as Walsh (2007) explains, "the effects of trauma depend greatly on whether those wounded can seek comfort, reassurance, and safety with others… Coming to terms with traumatic loss involves making meaning of the trauma experience, putting it in perspective, and weaving the experience of loss and recovery into the

fabric of individual and collective identity and life passage" (pp. 208-210). Thus, whether one stays a witness or becomes a vicarious sufferer through what they've seen, depends in part on their access to supportive resources. Egnew (2009) elaborates on this idea, highlighting that meaning-making is central to counteracting the "chasm of meaninglessness" caused by suffering and trauma, "Suffering is also transcended by investiture with meaning. Because suffering arises in a void of meaninglessness, discovering meaning transforms the experience" (p. 172).

The above definitions of trauma and its attendant experiences, as well as the theories that follow, illuminate the complex and varied ways the current mediatic moment allows for identity negotiation and self-presencing after traumatic events. The traumas explored in each case study will display how trauma operates through media, simultaneously recognizing the authenticity of agentic user's sharing their testimonies online, as well as identifying and exploring the limitations of the technologies in facilitating human commitment to communities of care. In sharing testimony of something as personal as a traumatic event, an event that shatters the very schema individuals use to narrate their lives, users make a certain ideological commitment to communities that, though loosely formed, provide some meaningful engagement for involved parties. Due to the complex nature of the digital, however, these users also can carefully choose how vulnerable to be, and overtime they curate their suffering according to previously held constructions of meaning around suffering and what a *good sufferer* looks like, as well as new meanings that emerge through their digital interactions. Each case will highlight various levels of trauma as well as various ways users engage in digital meaning production in order to negotiate who they are in light of what they have been through, felt, or seen.

DISSERTATION STRUCTURE AND DESIGN

This research is organized into seven chapters. This introduction serves to ground the research as well as provide important terminology that will be used throughout. Chapter two outlines the methodology used, as well as challenges to data collection in social media spaces. Chapter three surveys the literature in media studies and trauma studies in order to determine 1) how media has engaged with the subject of trauma 2) how academic literature has accounted for this engagement across fields 3) how digital media can account for trauma and to use various, interdisciplinary perspectives to build a dynamic and creative theory to understand how mediation and re-mediation operate online during and after traumatic life events. The theory developed here, to account for what users do online in regards to trauma, may have possible applications for mediations of many different types of events. Chapter three explores in depth how individuals seeking meaning around some life event negotiate multiple cultural factors and their own identities by capitalizing on the affordances of the digital space. Chapters four, five, and six will be devoted to the three case studies that make up the data set for this research. The case studies examined disparate cases of trauma including: The YouTube broadcast of the murder of Iranian election protestor Neda Agha Soltan, the tragic accident of CrossFit athlete Kevin Ogar resulting in paralysis and a great deal of digital mediation and re-mediation, and the photo story of Angelo Merendino's wife Jennifer's battle with breast cancer. While the traumatic experiences don't look the same in each case, they were all expressed, mediated, re-mediated, and shared broadly online, across various contexts and in various ways. In each of these cases there is evidence of the way the possibility to shift and change meanings in order to both cement ideologies and to subvert them takes flight in digital media. They also highlight various levels of trauma that are experienced and expressed through media. In each case, the primary sufferers and

all those that witness and participate in the communities, perform various roles in circulating, branding, re-mediating, and materializing the suffering that has occurred. These cases illuminate the way a dynamic theory of media and trauma, specific to digital media, can provide a clear sense of how and why users go online to express themselves, to cope, and to potentially heal from the various ills of life. The final chapter serves as a conclusion, bringing together key points from each case and providing points for future examination of this research.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGIES

The driving questions of this research explore how individuals, who articulate their voices online during, after, or as witnesses to traumatic events, independently form what can be considered communities, and/or cultivate spaces for meaning-making online. Included in this analysis is an attention to user engagement in digital spaces as potentially disruptive to hegemonic norms, noting the possibility of the spaces of digital communication as transgressive sites of expression. The following research questions guided this study:

- *Are people utilizing online platforms and mediations through technology to cultivate meaningful spaces through which to contend with trauma? If so, how?*
- *How does direct user suffering, direct trauma, witnessing, vicarious trauma or empathy impact online interactions?*

The questions above focus specifically on the way affordances of media platforms did or did not enable certain types of expression and meaning-making, particularly in the case of traumatic experiences or traumatic witnessing. Witnessing is taken here to mean any level of witness that leads to empathetic engagement, vicarious suffering, or some kind of action. Looking at mediations of trauma at both the collective and individual level, as well as micro-political acts, the questions point to an investigation as to whether or not online expression across social platforms can be subversive in its ability to foster meaning-making. Within these questions, there is a particular focus on who has the authority to speak, if and how communities are forming, and how these meanings fit into the larger theoretical framework that undergirds the following cases.

This research examines the following case studies to explore and answer these questions:

- The 2009 murder of Neda Agha-Soltan in Iran during a time of political unrest, the associated YouTube video of her death, and community formations and meaning-making activities produced online across social media platforms in response to the video.

- The story of Jennifer Merendino who died from breast cancer and her husband, Angelo Merendino's response to and photo story of her death online, and the digital media response to her death and mediation of it across platforms.

- The 2014 accident of CrossFit athlete Kevin Ogar and the subsequent online community formation, mediation, and re-mediation of his accident, and the outreach and meaning-making activities on various social media platforms.

These examples may seem like disparate and distant, unrelated examples of trauma, yet they were selected for a specific and particular reason. In attempting to develop a broad and effective preliminary theory about how meaning-making operates in digital spaces during times of extreme duress and trauma, it is important to select a range of cases that are not limited to one type of trauma or one level of experience and engagement with trauma. Important to all of these case studies as well, is my ability to access them and interact with them based on my social location and experiences. I was able to achieve a distanced level of interaction with each loosely formed community and thus was able, to some degree, to facilitate sensitive research. My access and ability to engage with each of these cases made them ideal for this research.

STUDY DESIGN

The original proposed version of the methodology and study design engaged in both textual/discourse analysis and an audience study in order to add depth and dimension to the data and findings. There were great challenges in effectively engaging in the latter part of the proposed research; however, the discourse analysis effectively examined several social media sites in order to discover what meanings were being deployed in and around traumatic events.

The social media sites examined include Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and various blogs hosted on multiple websites.

This research utilized predominately qualitative methods to answer the above research questions. Using a combination of various qualitative methods, this research systematically discovered, described and analyzed online responses to, as well as articulations and representations of, traumatic experiences. This dissertation built its methodology primarily from the visual methodologies and textual/discourse analyses explicated by Rose (2011), extending them to facilitate analysis and interviews that used a feminist lens to analyze meanings produced in disembodied spaces. It focused on data collection and analysis based on three sites of meaning production as articulated by Rose (2011). She highlights that meaning is made at the site of production, the site of the image (or object), and the site at which it is seen by an audience (p. 13). Each of these sites is important to this research and each was examined for every text sampled. These sites were analyzed through the modalities that they each possess, including a technological modality which examines how technological apparatuses enhance or detract from an image, artifact or text; a compositional modality which examines the content of the image, artifact, or text and its material qualities; and finally a social modality which examines the social, economic, and political expressions in an image, artifact, or text (Rose, 2011, p. 13). Since discourse is productive, it is at the very heart of any examination of the cultivation of meaning. Rose (2011) describes *Discourse Analysis I* as paying attention to the notion of discourses as articulated through texts, meaning the analysis looks for what discourses are being produced by the proliferation of the text (p. 146). Texts were sampled based on critical case sampling, as described by Patton (2002), in which a researcher selects a site that would yield the most information and have the biggest impact on the development of knowledge (p. 236). The selected

sites for the case studies included memes or other online postings that are re-mediated widely or viewed by many community members who participated in the mediation of a particular trauma.

To supplement the digital content in the discourse analysis, I had hoped to perform semi-structured interviews. Digital users seemingly adhere to unspoken, rarely discussed rules and mediate their traumas within certain boundaries. In an attempt to have users articulate for themselves why they chose to participate in certain digital spaces, I designed interviews and audience narrative requests that tried to get at how users see themselves delimiting the ideological boundaries of their participation in the communities they participate in, as well as how the communities are bounded as well. Alongside the textual and discourse analysis, a secondary data set would have consisted of interviews with central actors in each of the case studies and first person narratives from any interested participants in the various communities. The interviews would have taken place with those people who were most prominent in each case, for example, in the case of Neda Agha-Soltan the interview would have been with Arash Hejazi, the man who posted the video of her death to YouTube. The interviews would have been conducted through whichever technological means that was most comfortable for the research subject. The narratives would have comprised a large part of the data set and would be solicited from participant witnesses and would be written (or produced in whatever form most comfortable to the user in question) and emailed or messaged to the researcher via social media. These narratives were intended to allow users to articulate their experience with the case studies in question, the level of their trauma, and how, why and to what degree they participate in communities online. Using a very open format, with just a few guiding questions, these narrative requests sought to let the digital users, the research subjects, determine the direction of the

conversation.[1] Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter in these communities, traditional in person or conversational interviews posed a unique challenge and the hope with digital narratives had been to give users a space through which to articulate the impulses of their social media use at a respectable distance from the researcher. Many participants in online communities built around trauma capitalize on the anonymity and safety of that space as separate from the physical spaces they embody, thus many participants are reluctant to disclose their identities beyond the level of disclosure online. These narratives were intended to give this research the depth and richness of first person interviews while enabling users to maintain a desirable degree of distance from the researcher. These narratives were an attempt to enable users to overcome the precarious power disparities between researcher and research subject while still providing the reflections and personal interventions in the data the way an interview would. Despite the potential for data points the proposed narrative responses held, the requirements of soliciting data for scholarship from the Institutional Review Board proved to be a great barrier to this research. Long consent forms that protected users from potential re-traumatization seemed to cause users to shrink back from questions and slowly stop responding to research requests. There were also challenges to the technical sending and receiving of consent forms over social media where attachments and signature pages are difficult to easily send and receive. As will be discussed in more depth in later sections, I was only able to secure a handful of signed consent forms and subsequently only received a couple of narratives. I was not able to obtain long form narratives from users in every case study thus limiting my ability to examine how digital users demarcate the motivations for and boundaries of their digital engagement across cases. The narratives I was able to get are still valuable data and are included in the analysis of the respective case studies, though they enter

[1] The narrative requests as well as the guiding questions appear in full in Appendix A.

into conversation with the textual and discourse analysis discussed above, rather than forming their own data set. They do not, as they were intended, constitute a distinct and separate space through which audiences/producers could self-identify why they participate and thus provide a completely distinct angle to the research.

Despite the problems with narrative collections and interviews, the study design that focuses on in-depth examination of discourses provides a rich set of data that utilizes a unique form of analysis to engage digital content. Rather than try to get at data through a large number of users, this research explored in great detail what users said in their posts and with their visuals, and pushed these representations to examine not only why something was made, rather the modes through which technology was engaged to produce meaning. Thus this research looked at the possibilities inherent in the affordances of the technology for disruption of oppression and provided a critical perspective on the communities that subsequently formed (or dissolved). Rather than simply asking why people engage digital media, this research provides insight into both the way the technology affords users various things, as well as shows the versatility and agility of meaning-making in this space. This research looked at the three case studies, using specific examples to explore how individuals used technology after trauma. Patton (2002) explains, to get at meaning, methods such as surveys won't work, instead an interpretive framework is necessary in order to mediate the multiple frames of meaning (p. 56). There is an element of grounded theory to this research project, building theory up from this data is important because there are no existing studies that specifically examine online responses to trauma in this way. Due to that fact, qualitative methods best facilitate an inductive analysis that builds upon "specific, concrete, and detailed observations, quotations, documents and cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 58). This research unified somewhat disparate understandings of trauma by

examining physical tragedy, illness, violence, and political unrest through the same lens. In addition, this research explored relatively new platforms of social media and the aesthetic and technological expressions unique to them. Methodologically this research highlights ways to use discourse analysis to facilitate a media studies centric understanding of how technologies enable users to make meaning according to fluid ideological commitments to the content they post about. In this way, this methodology can be applied to studies beyond the subject of trauma and the media.

METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION

The data collection was divided along the three very distinct case studies. Before delving into the technical aspects of data collection, it is important to articulate why case studies were used to begin with. Case studies provide a concentrated way to look at a broad topic such as trauma through various cultural and social lenses. In using disparate case studies, this research was able to tap into diverse communities and thus ascertain and address identity issues that closely relate to and interpolate trauma when it is being discussed in a venue such as social media that is both public and intimate. Centering this research around case study analysis facilitated meaningful data. Schutt (2012) notes, "case study is not so much a single method as it is a way of thinking about what qualitative analysis can, or perhaps should, focus on" (p. 286). Case study analysis involves thick description that provides an understanding of what it is like to experience the setting in question, from the perspective of the natural actors in the setting, without actually having to directly participate in it (Schutt, 2012, p. 286). Case study also utilizes multiple data sources in order to "systematically investigate, individuals, groups, organizations, or events. Case studies are conducted when a researcher needs to understand or explain a phenomenon" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 136). In this case, the phenomena in question were the unique

expressions and re-mediations of trauma online that facilitated meaning-making processes; the case study format permits the examination of multiple sources of data in order to determine how this phenomenon operates on an informative scale. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) elaborate that case study, as an empirical inquiry that uses multiple sources of evidence to explore a phenomenon within its real life context, facilitates research into subjects "in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident" (p. 137). The use of multiple sources is imperative in order to triangulate data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 139).

In online expression, individuals are mediating between their online and offline experiences, thus context is both the space in which a traumatic event was/is experienced, as well as the space through which this experience and its aftereffects are expressed, mediated, and articulated. Wimmer and Dominick go on to highlight four characteristics of case study research that were consequential to this research design. First, case studies have a particularistic focus; focusing on a specific phenomenon makes this a good approach to tackle real life problems or experiences. Second, case studies are descriptive: the final product includes detailed descriptions of the topic under study, an aspect important to providing understandings of complex meaning-making systems. Third, case studies are, importantly, heuristic. In their ability to help people understand what is being studied they allow for new interpretations, perspectives meaning and fresh insights. Finally, as discussed with qualitative research more generally, case studies are inductive and depend on reasoning that allows space for formations of new relationships that, while they may use existing theories and hypotheses, are not firmly grounded by those structures and modes of interrogation (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 137).

Given the various reasons why case studies provide rich data, the case studies were set up accordingly. Due to challenges with getting research subjects to sign consent forms, all research

was conducted via public accounts on social media. No private data were collected. For example, if I was able to Facebook "friend" a case study subject, in other words be able to view and interact with their profile on Facebook, but they did not have a public account on Facebook, that data was not collected or used for the purposes of this research. From the date of IRB approval in October of 2014 through 2015, data was collected on each of the case studies. Every case study had unique spaces where much of the community expression was concentrated so the data collection methods were slightly different for each. Here are breakdowns for how data was collected for each case study:

Kevin Ogar and CrossFit

The majority of data collected for this case came from Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, with the data from Instagram providing the most in depth data with the most commentary from users. The majority of "posts" came from Kevin Ogar himself and user comments on each of Ogar's relevant posts were collected as well. Overall 72 posts were collected with anywhere from 5 to 15 comments analyzed from each post. These posts were examined for technical characteristics such as number of retweets, shares or favorites, tags, hashtags and cross-communications, as well as for the more pertinent and more in depth data points such as content, meaning, and reflections made in the posts or comments. Both visuals and written text were examined. For this case, while most of what was posted was widely shared, I became less interested in the number of times the images and content circulated, but in the consistency of the meanings produced by and cemented by the content, which will be discussed in the chapter that addresses this case study specifically.

Neda and the 2009 Iranian Election Protests

The data for this case centered around content posted to YouTube and Twitter. Due to the graphic subject matter of this case in the way Neda's graphic death was caught on camera and posted to YouTube, many mourners and vicarious sufferers used that platform to express grief, as well as to express revolutionary ideals, using her image. Twitter too was a central platform proliferating revolutionary sentiments with mass circulation. Protestors in Iran, and in support of Iran in 2009, posted their content using Neda's story quite frequently on Twitter, and provided many links via tweets to supplementary material about Neda and Iran. Eight YouTube videos were analyzed in depth as well as 20 Twitter accounts, tweets, and blogs devoted to Neda. While this number was much lower than the amount of individual posts collected for the case on Kevin Ogar, each item held rich data that required deep analysis. In addition, many individual tweets contained additional data because they led to full Twitter accounts or linked to websites, images, and blogs that concentrated in depth on Neda and the traumas that were felt due to what happened to her.

Jennifer and Angelo Merendino and "The Battle We Didn't Choose"

Data collected in this case concentrated on several curated websites created by Angelo Merendino, the husband and widower of Jennifer Merendino who died of cancer. Much of what was analyzed were media artifacts originally created by Merendino and picked up by popular press and social media aggregator sites. In addition, there was content mediated on YouTube (5 videos were analyzed in depth) and Twitter (7 Twitter accounts and their tweets were analyzed as well). Once again while Facebook had the potential to provide rich data it was hard to determine privacy on various accounts and so, without the ability to secure consent forms from users, that data could not be used. In particular, usable data for this case focused on the original

photo story created by Angelo Merendino, Merendino's TedTalks and their related YouTube comments, and commentary on articles that posted Merendino's photo story. Merendino's website that is devoted to telling his wife Jennifer's story and a WordPress blog were also analyzed.

Given the diverse ways each of these case studies operated online, discourse analysis of these case studies best suited this research. Through in depth analysis based on interdisciplinary theory, I was able to see the way participants engaged in these communities through a buoyant methodology that did not limit me to a particular platform, rather focused more on the type of content generated and asked questions about how the logics of the users and of the digital platforms facilitated the production of that particular content. Patton (2002) highlights various ways of approaching participant observation including *being for, being in,* and *being with* subjects (p. 8). *Being for* involves listening and offering a position; *being in* involves complete immersion in the world in question and entering other people's experience; *being with* is being present as one's own person and thus bringing one's own unique knowledge to the table (Patton, 2002, p. 8). This research involved *being with*, in that as the researcher I adequately sensed the setting, recognized what is important to see for the research, and brought my own knowledge to the observation and analysis. Situating analysis both inside and outside the research allows the researcher to recognize how various factors, including the technological factors, influence the social interactions taking place. This type of observation, from alongside research subjects, allows the researcher to recognize cultural formation from the ground up as well as be able to step back and put that cultural formation into larger structures and discourses that may be informing community interactions without the consciousness of the community in question. Analyzing the texts produced by trauma sufferers as both an insider and outsider enabled me, as

the researcher, to recognize any political impulses in those moves through my familiarity with the community, as well to examine whether those moves enforced or contested dominant representations and norms about trauma, ability, health, and violence. Direct observation was important to the data collection of many of the cases listed because the primary moment of participation (or the event in question) had passed and online records of that participation were used for data collection and analysis (though smaller portions of the community may still actively participate to a lesser degree in the community). Direct observation was also used simply because it better enables a researcher to capture the context in which interaction is taking place (Patton, 2002, p. 262). Importantly, direct observation enabled me to be open and discovery-oriented through the ability to "see things that may routinely escape awareness among the people in the setting" and discover things that people may not outwardly disclose themselves (Patton, 2002, p. 262-3).

CHALLENGES TO DATA COLLECTION

Collecting data from social media and digital sources is challenging in various respects. To engage in a qualitative analysis of digital media means being able to set parameters on ideas that are in rapid circulation and the effective utilization of search terms that put boundaries on what types of content digital searches result in. In particular, qualitative analysis takes a great deal of effort on the researcher's part to develop criteria to discern which search results will provide rich data while still maintaining a degree of objectivity. Given that I am not a computer programmer or developer, I was unable to utilize one of many "big data" tools that search through digital archives on social media in order to mine data. Thus, my research and data results were limited to those I could find using targeted searches conducted primarily via Google, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. That said, "big data" tools may not have yielded the depth in the data that was

required of this project. Though my own "human" searches potentially yielded less extensive and expansive results than they would have had I used some type of technology to better search through archives of online posts, in searching the digital sites myself I was able to both educate myself on what types of data were available, as well as delve into each data point in great depth. This process facilitated my use of fewer data points with greater precision, to provide a strong analysis and sound qualitative conclusions. That said, it took roughly one year, using only myself as a data collector, to mine through these sites manually and follow posts to where they linked. This was a massive undertaking that took a great deal of time and effort and thus would not be an effective mode of data collection for all researchers, particularly those with short amounts of time to search for and evaluate data.

An additional challenge to online research is that social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram limit search results and curate search results by providing "top" results rather than a blanket return of information. Much like Google curates search results, and results may also be the result of promotional, commercial endeavors, my research found that the same "ranking" of posts took place. Thus, while number of followers, retweets or likes on a certain post may indicate its impact on a community, it was difficult to discern when those markers were in fact an indication of the way neoliberal ideology guided certain posts into the limelight through sponsorship and paid advertising. It is also difficult to know at any time, as a qualitative researcher who is not using big data tools and data aggregation software to collect data, to know how social media sites enable and allow their archives to be searched at any particular time. The National Archive, in their White Paper on social media capture methods notes that capturing data from social media can be done through various tools ranging from "copy and paste into a word document" to using "Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) to create a customized tool to

download into a database" (*White Paper on Best Practices for the Capture of Social Media Records*, 2013, p. 9). While certain tools make social media data possible to capture, it is important to note "social media content capture is an emerging topic that has not consolidated around standards for capture" particularly around capture for research (Ibid., p. 9). Despite these challenges, I was able to search for and save data, using the native search tools on each social media site – Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram – as well as by following links to blogs and other media that users provided in their posts. I made it standard practice to screen shot information and data to ensure that any changes to the search and archives of the social media site would not further impact the data collection.

Challenges to Soliciting Narratives and Researcher/Subject Interaction

The very format and characteristics of social and digital media that make it such an ideal space for people to communicate about trauma, are also what make it a particularly difficult space through which to perform in depth qualitative research that includes an "audience" or "prosumer" perspective. While people engage in various ways and often very deeply using social and digital media, the nature of these technological media platforms often led research subjects to mistake this research for marketing or market research. It was particularly difficult, in attempting to collect data from Facebook, and solicit narratives from users on all social media platforms, to communicate the necessity of a consent form. As the research in this dissertation deals directly with traumatic experience, the concern on the part of the Institutional Review Board of re-traumatization through communication was important to contend with. Ultimately a lengthy informed consent was developed, but given its complicated language and the inflexibility of social media mechanisms of delivery, and it needing to be signed and sent back, it proved a

barrier to the research.[2] Using a format such as short-form social media necessitates consent be delivered via that media, which proved near impossible when dealing with a lengthy word document. Oftentimes, in doing research, I encountered a barrier in attempting to instruct users from around the world how to sign the consent form either on paper or electronically. Thus, willing subjects often ended up declining participation because the process was difficult for them. The barriers to entering the research thus became very high because they took users out of the instantaneity of the online space and would have caused more work than they were willing to put in.

Other obstacles simply had to do with the fact that without being a "friend" offline to many of my research subjects, they had very little reason to "friend" me online or allow me into their social networks. While Kevin Ogar, for example, accepted my Facebook "friend request" he did not respond via Facebook or any other online platform to my request for an interview or written narrative of his experiences online. Aside from a general statement from one of the central actors in one of the case studies, my multiple requests for interviews with the three main actors in the cases (Ogar, Merendino, and Hejazi) were met with silence. This, however, was a meaningful data point in that it provided a sense of the ideological boundaries these users put on their desire to articulate their trauma within and outside of digital spaces. While these users were seemingly open to discussing their traumas, the boundaries and opportunities for curation provided through social and digital media platforms provided them a space to make meaning thus allowing them to choose not to engage with their trauma in alternate, perhaps more personal or less curated spaces. Multiple and frequent requests for consent forms to obtain permission to look at private social media accounts were made to individual participants/witnesses to these

[2] Informed Consent is available in the Appendix to this chapter.

cases, all of whom commented on social media posts or made posts of their own to mediate the trauma in these cases. Many requests were sent via social media messaging services such as the direct message feature of Instagram or Facebook. While some users showed some interest, that interest faded as the process continued with the consent form. Others still, whose social media pages or personal narratives may have proven helpful, did not get my messages at all, particularly on Facebook. Given that we weren't Facebook "friends," all of my messages went to a spam folder, so users did not see their messages unless they searched through their spam. Ultimately I decided, in order to both adhere to Institutional Review Board guidelines, and to obtain the most fruitful data without harming or burdening any research subjects, not to collect data from Facebook. Thus the focus became only public accounts on Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, as well as any public blogs, images or other data connected to via social media posts about the cases. It would be beneficial in the future, with more time and financial resources, to attempt to meet some of the online users face to face in order to humanize this research and better articulate why I am interested in how digital technologies afford sufferers of trauma space to explore its effects, as a result thickening the research with an "audience" perspective. Future research will attempt to include the "audience" or "prosumer" perspective, however for this project the focus remains on how it appears the technologies were being used based on various theories of meaning-making, trauma, and media.

Research Cautions and Positioning the Researcher

Before concluding this chapter on methodology, it is important to articulate my own positionality as both a researcher and participant in digital media. It is my proximity to each of these communities that made them ideal case studies for this research. That being said I consistently had to recognize and be conscious of my role as a researcher as well as a trauma sufferer and

(former) community participant in some of the cases. I had to self-reflexively identify my own subjectivities to research subjects in order to add validity to my research. In order to reduce bias, I paid extra attention to my positionality as a researcher and the privilege that grants me as well as my unique position as a sufferer. Markham (2005) advises that online, a researcher must have

> sensitivity to the context, interrogation of one's own presumptions and flexible adaptation to a new era in social research, one in which we recognize the limitations bred by our traditional five senses and take the risks necessary to reconsider how and why we seek and create knowledge (p. 800).

Additionally, Markham (2005) warns that even in disembodied research the researcher's body is privileged as "the site of experience" and the "residence of knowledge" (p. 808). I consistently grounded my research in feminist methodology that pays attention to the relationships between power and inequality alongside knowledge production and recognizes the "inseparability of research projects and methods from social and ethical values" (Jaggar, 2008, p. xi). This research sought to be rigorous in its critical examination of power dynamics in the data collection and evaluation process and uphold ethical values through the Institutional Review Board as well.

CHAPTER 3

WORKING TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF TRAUMA AND DIGITAL MEDIA:

A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE & THEORY BUILDING

Encountering or witnessing trauma is complex and varied experience that, to some degree, has been mediated online. These digital mediations of trauma exist in a particular mediatic moment that is neoliberal, while simultaneously allowing for authentic engagement with vulnerable subject matter. The current mediatic moment is fast-moving and quickly changing. The participatory environment quickly taking hold via social media allows for the building of loosely formed communities while still allowing for deeply personal and individual engagement and concurrent branding of experiences. In order to understand these occurrences and situate them as they act in the broader world, it is important to contextualize them as they relate to the larger literature on trauma and understand how media studies, as a field, might be able to account for what is being communicated around traumatic occurrences online. In particular, this theory-building must account for the way digital platforms are being used in interesting ways to facilitate communication post-traumatically or about trauma that has taken place because a tragedy has been witnessed online. This chapter builds a working theory that is adaptable and malleable, that can respond in various ways to the changing media landscape. This theory captures how trauma exists, manifests, operates and is mediated through social media in online, digital environments. In many instances of trauma, online communities, or approximations of communities, have formed and cultivated new and emergent meanings in the wake of difficult experiences of suffering. It is the formations and functions of these communities in individual lives that is of interest here as well as how this particular media moment, in conjunction with the

affordances of various technologies enables and allows for these communities and meanings to emerge. In this chapter, I develop a theory to help articulate what is happening online in relation to trauma. This theory attempts to situate these mediations of trauma, the community formations that emerge from them, and the produced meanings within a larger structure of meaning-making and media and to understand how trauma operates online.

In theorizing trauma and media, I have asked what it is that makes the digital space significant to those who have experienced trauma? Is there a measureable difference in meaning-making strategies between those that have an embodied experience with trauma and those who experience that trauma vicariously through online interactions? And do users in this online realm delineate between sufferers and non-sufferers as in-group or out-group members? Online digital technologies have various affordances that are potentially useful to trauma sufferers, thus academic research must account for the ways users are engaging these technologies subversively, and must also take a critical stance and recognize how these tools may enable trauma sufferers and witnesses to name oppression or explore various, often contested, facets of their identities. In order to best understand this theory, it is most appropriate to begin with trauma itself and then articulate how media has historically interacted with trauma in different ways, in order to determine if what is happening now, via digital technologies, is new, subversive, or different in any way. This chapter is organized into four central sections. The first section, on relevant literature situates this theory in the larger context of critical theory, answering important questions about power, neoliberalism, and who is able to participate and make representations in this space. Using both a feminist and post-structuralist lens, this section attends to the various spaces of contestation, inhabited by agentic users online, as they relate to larger structures of power. After grounding this research in critical theory, the following section explores the way

legacy media and some digital technology interact with traumatic experience and also highlight relevant, contemporary work in media studies that will enable this theory to move past binary distinctions of audiences and media and account for trauma sufferers/witnesses online as both users of media and producers of media content. The third section on participation, platforms, materiality, and digital spaces for authentic engagement and resistance online addresses the way embodied users interact with powerful technologies addressing agency, power, and determination as they relate to digital media. This section bridges critical perspectives with careful analysis of how changing technological platforms offer opportunities for, or foreclosures of, those having suffered from a traumatic experience that they've choose to mediate in digital spaces. The final section, on memes, play, and the as-if, third space fostered through interaction in the digital realm, offers a potential bridge between the current media theories, experiences of trauma, and what users are cultivating in and through online spaces. It represents the ways in which many perspectives in media studies and other critical theories may come together to offer an innovative way to understand how users are producing meaning in online spaces and how that meaning is a part of a plethora of mediations of users' material, embodied existence that exists in the physical and digital worlds. Ultimately though, this theory attempts to find flexible ways to account for the user engagement and resistance after traumatic events and how, across various types of traumas, users conceptualize themselves, social rules around how to overcome trauma, and who they are and aspire to be. Despite the various power differentials that exist online and in neoliberal mediated spaces, users engage reflexively when and how they want to engage, thus mediating and re-mediating their traumas according to existing meanings they internalize and new meanings they produce. This chapter provides an interdisciplinary and flexible theory through which to examine and analyze those reflexive engagements in digital spaces.

FROM CULTURAL STUDIES TO FEMINIST DISABILITY STUDIES: RELEVANT LITERATURE AND GUIDING THEORIES

It is tricky for a person who suffers a trauma to know what moment is *the* moment that creates and perpetuates a traumatic experience. Most people who suffer either through direct experience, through witnessing in physical, embodied experience, or witnessing via media (both of which often, though not in every case, cause a sort of vicarious trauma), rarely account for events exactly as they happen. Rather, those that suffer represent their suffering based on cultural influences, context, norms built into media platforms, and their own unique social location and identity. Peters (2009) in a discussion of media witnessing, particularly as it relates to traumatic media events, notes "since the transformation from experience to discourse lies at the heart of communication theory, witnessing entails many of the most fundamental issues in the social life of signs, especially how the raw, apparently private, stuff of sensation can have any input into the public world of intelligible words" (p. 27). Burgeoning digital media, though a part of a long history of transformative media that shifts the way testimony is given, changes the way online users represent experiences, memories, and pain. Before examining the way digital media platforms provide as-if spaces for users to explore the mediations and expressions of various degrees of trauma and suffering, I explore the way representation and cultural studies influence this body of work and how these foundational theories were brought to bear on the case studies examined. Representation and, in effect, meaning-making are vitally important in exploring the aftermath of experiencing, witnessing, and sharing traumatic events; thus, this research needs to be situated in a critical literature that attends to dominant media representations, power, social constructions of meaning, and identity production. When examining lived experience, no critical examination would be complete without attention to the complex ways in which these experiences are embedded in dominant media representations of what it means to be well, what it

means to be sick, what it means to be a victim or survivor, and what it means to be normal. These representations of survival and overcoming cannot be understood outside of complex relations of power and intersectional analyses of identities such as race, gender, social class, and sexual identity. It is essential to consider how the dominant media representations of illness, violence, or other types of traumas differ across socially constructed lines of race, gender, or class. Additionally, it is important to know how those dominant representations influence the self-representations and interrogations that lend to meaning-making online.

Taking cultural studies as a starting point, this research pushes notions of representation to understand how media representations shift, are altered, or stay the same when using digital platforms that ostensibly provide spaces for self-representation and expression. The question of representation, by the self and others, is central to determining how meaning is made in a mediated environment. By interrogating cultural studies, in conversation with other theories around media, trauma, disability, illness and others, there is an opening through which to examine how representations in online media are or are not resistive, liberatory, oppressive or commonplace. A primary question this theory answers is, whether the various actors in each of the case studies engaged in resistive work by mediating and making meaning from their traumatic experiences online. Thus, taking account of the way representation operates in the digital sphere facilitates discovery of resistive acts of meaning production. This section begins with representation and expands to include feminist disability studies as a lens that will further elaborate on the work of cultural studies as it relates to traumatic events and the construction of meaning around them. From there, crip theory will contribute to this discussion by deepening a representational analysis through intersectionality. The act of "cripping" cultural studies serves to make cultural studies a useful tool through which to examine, in particular, the trope

triumphing over traumatic events. In other words, an intersectional lens using disability studies accounts for the creation of a *super-crip,* a term that will be examined later in this chapter. Traumas are life altering events that remove the constructedness of the world from a sufferer's frame of reference, rendering them disabled. Though a uniquely feminist disability studies lens has not been used in cultural studies to examine trauma before, it is a useful theoretical framework to illuminate the intersectional dynamics inherent in suffering from trauma, witnessing trauma, and/or vicariously experiencing trauma.

Hall's concept of representation is a central grounding concept when looking at meaning-making and media. Hall and Jhally (1997) note communication is complex in the way it is intertwined with power and social influence. Hall, in particular, sees the interrogation of the image as a means through which to see past the face value of an image and explore the way various social forces are at play in any given representation. Representation, thus, is always more complicated than it appears to be. Every mediation of an idea functions constitutively, meaning that "events – the meaning of people, groups, and what they're doing" have no fixed meaning (p. 7). "Representations – since they're likely to be very different as you move from one person to another, one group or another, one part of society or another, one historical moment or another – just as those forms of representation will change, so the meaning of the event will change" (Hall & Jhally, 1997, p. 7). Cultural context then, becomes vital to the interpretive nature of representation. "Culture is a way in which we make sense of or give meanings to things," and digital platforms have a culture of their own, which in turn constitutes distinct meaning production and interpretation in that space (Hall & Jhally, 1997, p. 9). An examination of online material as it relates to cultural representations (even self-representations), in this sense, is an examination of how meaning is produced. Hall & Jhally (1997) make apparent that the

production of meaning is not benign, rather it is a product of symbolic work that conveys meaning to someone else – these "signifying practices" are imbricated by questions of power and who has the ability to communicate ideas, in what way, and to what audience (p. 14). Because of the way trauma subverts constructed ideas of social order (previously referred to as world-making schema), representation of trauma is crucial in giving meaning to an event that is contingent in nature. To Zizek, for example, trauma is unrepresentable in the way it allows a Lacanian notion of the Real – a pre or non-linguistic reality – to emerge highlighting failures and fissures in social constructions and practices (Meek, 2011, p. 190). Though I diverge from Lacan's notion of a pre or non-linguistic reality, I recognize the way a visceral encounter with a trauma, that shirks the social hierarchy and constructed ways of knowing the world, can shift reality and, therefore, can impact the way representations are, or are not understood, articulated, re-mediated and how, ultimately, meaning is made from them.

Trauma provides a lens through which to ask why representation and culture matter to media, and to individual's engagements with and identity production through the media. From a media studies and cultural studies perspective the analysis of representation, particularly when considering how trauma is lived within society, is a critical endeavor. Critique, as a way into the case studies, must be dissected based on the unique combination of theoretical frameworks being deployed in this research. Banet-Weiser (2013) situates critical practice as an "encounter with culture – and of the power dynamics that comprise, structure and validate culture – that also takes culture itself as the starting point for critique" (p. 230). For Banet-Weiser (2013) critical practice insists that any "critique of culture is productive and generative" meaning that any in depth analysis of the way trauma is represented in, constituted by, or interacts with social media needs to take account of "the way in which dominant power relations structure the way we

inhabit ourselves and our institutions" (p. 231). This notion of how power shifts the way individuals inhabit themselves and institutions takes on a specific meaning in social media. Because of the quasi-intimate nature of social media, it is difficult to distinguish between the content in posts and the users who make those posts, as they constitute one another and the posts and users are constituted through the larger power structure. The social media space causes users to curate their own experiences to use as evidence and analysis of the rhetoric they produce, thus forcing digital interaction into an identity project wherein users interpolate themselves through their posts and the broader digital environment. Identity, in this way, is produced through and interpreted by the lens of the mediated space, a space that users shift by virtue of their existence within it.

Feminist post-structuralism, in conversation with Hall's concept of representation, is useful here. As individual users attempt to interpolate their personal identities, even as they are in flux after traumas, by taking advantage of affordances of online technologies, they inhabit spaces with often nebulous forms of power that act upon them. In order to take account of the ways in which power operates online, a feminist post-structuralist framework is deployed; this framework articulates and looks at power in very specific ways. Building from structuralist notions that language and discourse constitute lived realities, post-structuralist thought notes that the relationship, between signifier and signified, that creates meaning, is unstable. Feminist post-structuralism is particularly invested in this instability as it provides a space through which to recognize the way society identifies and categorizes certain types of bodies as inferior. This framework also affords a recognition that those categories are not fixed, therefore allowing for opportunities to interrogate power and shift discourses around certain types of bodies. Identity is formed, after all, as a response to how one is hailed or named, thus the way individuals are hailed

often places them in a pre-determined subject positon (Jaggar, 2008). Often, when individuals step into their subject positions they misrecognize themselves as being in charge of that subject position thus erasing traces of power, and falsely articulating themselves as the author of their own subject position. This becomes of crucial importance to those who have been through or witnessed a trauma, as their participation in online spaces is directly linked to their changed subject position. Who is able to speak, with whom, and when is dependent on the various subject positions of users (Jaggar, 2008). Misrecognition of the self makes invisible those discourses that constitute dominant, mainstream meaning and this, in turn, can create a crisis of agency, enhance and enforce dominant discourses, and stifle other ways of knowing. For sufferers of trauma, it is important to be able to articulate alternative ways of knowing that get outside of constructed categories of meaning and identity, so that suffering bodies can cope in non-oppressive ways.

Another helpful perspective that informs this theory is feminist disability studies because of the way it accounts for trauma on the body. At its core feminist disability studies interrupts the notion that women are disabled by compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy and situates both femaleness and disability not as a lack or deficiency; rather, it explores the "conceptual and lived connections between gender and disability" to "make visible the historical and ongoing interrelationship between all forms of oppression." As Garland-Thomson (2011) notes, our semiological understandings of disability and gender are predicated on difference; notably what they are *not*, and how they are interpellated, "Without the monstrous body to demarcate the borders of the generic, without the female body to distinguish the shape of the male, and without the pathological to give form to the normal, the taxonomies of value that underlie the political, social and economic arrangements would collapse" (p. 4). Feminist disability studies highlight how notions of passing and coming out as *victim, sick, disabled, or victimized* function in online

representations of traumatic experiences. Mainstream representations of trauma have a tendency to strip users of their agency in choosing how to navigate ideas of illness, wellness, surviving and of victimhood, by placing them in a constructed understanding of disability, positioning them against dominant articulations of normalcy. To be traumatized is to be disabled, and to be disabled is to fall outside of social, normative frameworks, and thus traumatized bodies are conditioned to believe that trauma must be erased or overcome. In using feminist disability studies there is a recognition of the violence of coming out and passing as disabled as parallel to the way survivors are often compelled to name their various traumas using oppressive language and often reinscribing trauma on their bodies.

For example, as later sections will explore in greater depth, the testimony and narrativizing of Holocaust traumas, shifted and rearticulated suffering into a catalyst for achievement noting that the only way out of traumatic experience is to triumph over it. Thus, it is useful to use disability and queer studies to underpin analyses of the way mediations of trauma operate. Bringing disability studies to bear on this literature around trauma studies and the Holocaust is helpful in the way it illuminates the concept of a super-sufferer, a particularly eligible and legible sufferer, or more aptly – the *super-crip*. In particular, language around the *super-crip* in media "shape[s] content and sway[s] understanding" as well as "constrain[s] what we are *permitted* to say" (Rothe, 2011, p. 34). For disabled bodies, particularly bodies that are mediated, to become the *super-crip* means reframing and re-representing the disabled body as a body that despite all odds overcomes the debilitating disability or trauma it endured in order to emerge stronger than it began. The way bodies are allowed to experience trauma is dictated by normative, received narratives that disallow certain types of sick bodies to exist. Instead of recognizing agentic bodies, sick or disabled bodies are hailed into "a story of heroic overcoming

of the odds" (Swartz, 2013, p. 157). McRuer (2006) terms "cripping" as a way to reclaim the language of disability in a generative way. He posits that culture can be "cripped" in the same way that culture can be queered. While McRuer acknowledges that it is unlikely for individuals to begin referring to themselves as "crip" as many have adopted the term queer, he creates a new space through which meanings and representations of "compulsory able bodiedness" can be put to rest (p. 49). Operating from the assumption inherent in dominant, mainstream discourse that trauma is disabling and that having a disability indicates lack, or that people with disabilities are, as Linton indicates, considered "more dependent, childlike, passive, sensitive, and miserable and are less competent than people who do not have disabilities" the necessity of a space through which disabled and traumatized bodies can interrupt constructed discourses of what it means to be well or *normal* is important.

There has been scholarship that explores wellness, illness, ability, disability and various other manifestations of trauma throughout recent history, and English departments largely took up the call to research the way trauma is mediated through literary works and testimony. While media studies have an ability to broaden the view of where trauma is mediated and how those mediations are interacted with, it is helpful to examine some of the work around trauma done in fields outside of media studies, in order to engage with this inter-disciplinary theoretical framework. The section that follows explores the explicit treatment of trauma in literature and in the media. Often, explorations of media and trauma have attended to the way mass media have covered large scale traumatic events, such as the September 11th terrorist attacks and the Holocaust. Using the progression from trauma studies to studies of media and trauma, the following section will serve to provide context as to where the *field* (loosely named a field here) of trauma and the media is presently. This will bring the critical theories underlying this research

into conversation with contemporary media studies scholarship around voice and the digital realm, in order to bring a more contemporary and responsive theory of media and trauma to the fore.

BRIDGING THE FIELDS: CREATING A FRAMEWORK FROM WHICH TO BUILD A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF NEW MEDIA AND TRAUMA

A history of the cultural significance of trauma can be traced in a variety of ways; much of the literature circulating around the cultural paradigms of trauma revolves around extraordinary traumatic events that had far reaching consequences for social, cultural, and political life. One such instance is the Holocaust, which is the historical event from which the field of trauma studies was developed. Rothe (2011) argues that "popular trauma culture emerged when the genocide of European Jewry was incorporated into the collective memory of the United States because American Holocaust discourse generated the dominant paradigm that would subsequently by employed to represent the pain of others in the mass media" (p. 7). He argues that the very public, national appropriation of suffering led to the large scale representation of suffering as necessitating a happy ending, a degree of survival, and a level of redemption. In other words, early literature in trauma studies articulates a socially established need to overcome and triumph over hardship, suffering, and disability. Importantly, the normalization of the extreme suffering of Holocaust victims served to enable audiences to be moved by "the Holocaust spectacle" as vicarious Holocaust victims, and apply that suffering to the trials and tribulations of their mundane, everyday lives, rather than to bear witness to actual testimonies of sufferers. "Overcoming victimization – increasingly termed survival, even if the victim's life was not threatened – thus replaced traditional notions of accomplishment and heroism. While the heroes of old altruistically risked their own lives to save another's, the objective of the modern-

day antihero is simply to survive" (Rothe, 2011, p. 8). The media are central to this process of shifting trauma narratives from articulations of a traumatic experience to the normalization and subsequent reinvention of trauma and suffering as a space for epic achievement.

Interdisciplinary scholars who study trauma also attend to mediation of trauma. Kaplan (2005) writes about the "impact of trauma both on individuals and on entire cultures or nations, and about the need to share and 'translate' such traumatic impact" (p. 1). Arguing that trauma produces new subjects, she notes that it is "hard to separate individual and collective trauma" (p. 1). As a prominent author in trauma studies, a field that emerged from studies of the Holocaust, Kaplan notes that trauma comes in many forms and from many places, but one central source of trauma is the media. She argues, "people encounter trauma by being a bystander, by living near to where a catastrophe happened, or by hearing about a crisis from a friend. But most people encounter trauma through the media, which is why focusing on so-called mediatized trauma is important" (p. 2). Media acts on trauma in many interesting ways, often in cases of large scale traumas, such as the Holocaust or the 9/11 terror attacks, a great deal of content is shown, written, and discussed, and in that constant barrage of information there is a fear of exploitation. There is a concern from sufferers, and in scholarship, that events become "fixed" with certain meanings causing testimonies of trauma to become static and immovable within frequent, dominant representations of that event, experience, or type of event. Kaplan's discussion forces the considerations of which meanings about, and reactions and interventions to, trauma become acceptable, and what kinds of narrations and testimonies of trauma enter into the social imaginary. Ultimately, the trauma inherent to much of the modern world produces subjects that are articulated in and through the media.

Despite possibilities of exploitation, trauma should be shared for the possibility of change. Kaplan is careful to recognize that despite the fears of the fixing of meaning of traumas, and the potential for exploitation, "it would be wrong to rule out the importance of empathy and sharing trauma just because the United States media exploit catastrophe" (p. 22). In fact, Kaplan argues that the witnessing of trauma, while it may produce vicariously traumatized subjects (here considered just as important as other sufferers of trauma), may be useful in fostering change in relation to the various forces that cause traumas. Witness is importantly distinguished from empathetic reactions:

> Arguably the difference involves distance; empathetic sharing entails closeness but may lead to the over-identification of vicarious trauma. Witnessing has to do with an art work producing a deliberate ethical consciousness, such as we saw earlier in testimonies but with even greater distance (p. 122).

She goes on to argue that as Hoffman implies, "through its very symptoms of discomfort, vicarious trauma may have a socially useful effect" (Kaplan, 2005, p. 122). Vicarious traumas compel viewers to take responsibility in the shared trauma, this takes place because in the process of witnessing and giving account, the witnessing is itself being witnessed (Kaplan, 2005, p. 124). This type of witnessing, however, must operate not on the level of the individual, but function to take individual trauma and extend it to the structures that produce it. Notably, a sort of distanced positioning of viewers "enables attention to the situation, as against attention merely to the subject's individual suffering, and this positioning thus opens the text out to larger social and political meanings" (Kaplan, 2005, p. 125).

The positioning of viewers is important for more than just witness. Sharing, coping, and meaning-making go hand in hand for individuals suffering directly from traumas. The attention garnered from sharing, while perhaps enabling voyeurs to take residence, can also be an

important aspect of coping. When a sufferer is made legible through sharing, they often feel as though their suffering may serve a purpose. Trauma sufferers often attempt to articulate and testify to their traumas in order to create awareness, but also often simply to cope. Thus, building from Kaplan's research about the possibility inherent in the mediation of trauma, I argue that trauma sufferers play an important role in the perpetuation of the media that serve to create witnesses to trauma. Walsh (2007) finds that strong connections, formed through sharing, counteract the feelings of "insecurity, helplessness, and meaninglessness" that the wounds of trauma inflict (p. 208). He argues that making meaning of traumatic loss and experience is essential to provide users with the resilience needed to counteract the helplessness and terror they have endured. Community formation, Walsh argues, can help recovery and awaken both sufferers, empathetic viewers and vicarious trauma sufferers "to redefine our identity… and take initiative in caring actions to benefit others" (Walsh, 2007, p. 223). Media, particularly new media, will later be explored as one avenue through which this benefit alluded to by both Kaplan and Walsh can take place.

The way any person suffers is constituted by the broader concepts of memory and meaning. Suffering, after all, "is based on social codes (which include moral and religious codes), and these codes may reject the idea that all human beings are eligible to suffer" in psychological, existential, or spiritual ways (Young, 1997, p. 245). The social codes that enable trauma sufferers to testify to suffering, and that allow witnesses to both be traumatized by and respond to that suffering are part of the creation of traumatic memory. Young (1997) notes that the fear of trauma is based upon, "fear that things will bring pain," a fear that is constituted in part by a person's embodied state and in part by memory (p. 253). Though Young does not refer specifically to media, it is plausible to argue that the fear of traumatic memory is often nurtured

by media, as media are an important carrier of collective and social memory. Nytagodien and Neal (2004) recognize that collective traumas are embedded in the social heritage of groups, a heritage that is often represented through media institutions and through everyday interaction. Importantly, Nytagodien and Neal argue that

> The meaning of collective memory derives less from official records of what happened in the past than primarily from echoes, pressures, and unresolved conflicts from the past that are revealed in contemporary experiences and present-based struggles. With the passing of time, the boundaries around specific events weaken as they are placed within the general framework of social life. Traumatic experiences are drawn upon as negative frames of reference, as reminders of egregious mistakes, and as moral imperatives that such mistakes are to be avoided in the future (p. 474).

Moral imperatives are often communicated through media, thus, trauma and media function in tandem in the construction of important collective memories about both individual and collective traumas. In order for sufferers to contend with the embodied nature of trauma, as it becomes solidified through memory, there is a dialectical struggle between the "desire to repress or deny what happened as well as a perceived necessity to proclaim or speak loudly about the terrible events that occurred" (Nytagodien & Neal, 2004, p. 467). The following paragraphs bring the trauma studies literature into conversation with the media and trauma literature. This gesture will identify how users proclaimed their suffering, how that was useful and how it was not, as well as how users may be able to use new digital media to differently engage with trauma as individuals, within structures, and as they contend with collective memory and constructed ideas about what it means to suffer and be traumatized.

While sharing and making suffering legible can be helpful in coping, this process is also a complex one that possibly re-inscribes the trauma on the body of the sufferer. Suffering, here, includes those who engage with a subject online and are traumatized for the first time, alongside

those who are re-traumatized by the very act of going online and sharing or interacting with mediated trauma narratives. Further, all those who bear witness to mediations of trauma (on or offline) and have meaningful, authentic experiences with them become a part of the web of suffering and thus meaning-making that ensues. Digital interactions with trauma are a direct outgrowth of traditional, legacy media and their engagements with trauma. However, the affordances of online, digital technologies have provided users a space to interrogate their experiences of living through traumas more directly and on a seemingly more individual basis. The way users are hailed by digital media is an extension of and response to a certain cultural moment that is drawn from a long history of mediating traumatic events and experiences. Testimony and trauma are not newly constitutive in and across media platforms. Legacy, or non-digital, media have long histories of mediating traumatic events. Meek (2011) notes that "trauma is not only a psychological condition extended into the domain of literary and media texts. It has always formed a central part of psychoanalytic theories of culture" (p. 2). Trauma is central to culture and constituted in, by, and through culture. Media, as a central cultural repository, offer media users and media consumers a rich space through which to provide testimony about trauma and to witness and engage with traumas ranging from the individual, embodied traumatic experience to the more cultural and collective trauma. Rothe (2011) reflects that in the United States "we've become accustomed in American culture to stories of pain, even addicted to them… In a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture, or death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion" (p. 1). In this way, traumas are placed squarely on the bodies of sufferers by media, and often exploited by mainstream representations, in order to provide society with compelling stories full of feeling.

Rothe gestures toward a complicated and contested mediated space for trauma sufferers. Trauma exists in culture based on how it is constructed and constituted through that culture's norms. The gesture of articulating, sharing, and making public one's suffering in order to overcome, contest, or cope with a traumatic event of some kind, is a common trope in representations of media and trauma. The existing material on trauma circulating in media "teaches its many consumers that in order to overcome traumatizing experiences and transform weak victims into heroic survivors, the traumatic memories must be narrated" (Rothe, 2011, p. 4). It is in the narration of trauma and in the naming of trauma that the experience becomes something that can be meaningfully studied. While trauma exists in the clinical sense, the way it is culturally and socially understood depends explicitly on the way it is articulated. Trauma, in the way it is examined here, refers to the way users (either those who are direct or vicarious sufferers) are constituted through their testimony and how their testimony in turn constitutes the trauma itself, thus fostering the production of meaning, meaning with the potential to shift how trauma has traditionally been understood.

Trauma and its mediations are not linear or chronological, therefore media theory can capture the unique social, spatial and temporal nature of trauma. Trauma is characteristically contingent and changing. No trauma exists socially and culturally until it is represented, testified to, or made part of a narrative. Narrating trauma cannot happen outside of mediation. Notably, even when the trauma is vicarious or what Meek (2011) terms virtual trauma, it is constituted through its mediation. Madianou and Miller (2013) note that mediation is part of a dialectical relationship between users and media, highlighting how "mediation tries to capture the ways in which communications media transform social processes while being socially shaped themselves" (p. 174). Thus, it is important to follow Meek's (2011) advice to situate trauma in

media, he argues that trauma "remains haunted by the presence of a more general media culture" (p. 3). Notably, trauma is not mediated in only one way or in any kind of linear fashion. Due to the way that trauma interrupts the fabric of the day to day narrative of an individual or group's daily life or lived experience, it displaces narratives in both time and space. Trauma, as is argued by many trauma theorists, is not always felt or fully felt at the time it occurs, it is "intrusive and insidious" (Meek, 2011, p. 5). Analysis of mediation of trauma must recognize this trans-temporal, trans-spatial nature of trauma and be prepared to situate the traumatic experience in a complex cultural context that shifts over time, always producing new traumatized subjects through its mediations. "Kaplan proposes that 'trauma produces new subjects'; that is, it produces new forms of political identification based in different experiences of victimhood, shared suffering and witnessing" (Meek, 2011, p. 6). Meek urges scholars to "ask how modern cultural forms, especially those of modern visual media, have helped to create conditions in which trauma has assumed such significance" (p. 8).

Viewing trauma, and the various contested meanings of trauma, is not just about verbal or written testimony; in representations of trauma there are complex visual communications taking place. Trauma is often mediated through visual means thus engrossing viewers in different ways. Visual communication is important for understanding the contingent, logic defying nature of trauma, and in a way the visual expressions of trauma instantiate the traumatic events. Images call users to them in certain ways and interpolate individual identities through the content portrayed in interesting ways. Images are not benign and thus, as a part of the complex mediation of trauma, the power of visual culture must be attended to. Mitchell (2005) explores how images "seem to come alive and want things" (p. 9). He argues that images bind us in a "paradoxical double consciousness" in which "we need to reckon with not just the meaning of images but their

silence, their reticence, their wildness and nonsensical obduracy" (p. 10). Positioning images as living organisms, Mitchell forces scholars to examine not just the way mediations of trauma take place, but the way the image objects take on meanings and how that might impact the way viewers see mediations of trauma, and the way in new media spaces, users might interact with those images. Elkins (1997) similarly argues that while the eyes are commanded by our desires, so too are images persistent in their interest and use. While eyes can "understand only desire and possession," the objects they stare at are spaces of nourishment in the way that the desire to possess with the eyes creates the very objects in their view (p. 25, 29). These "observer-objects" want to speak to the viewer, they call to the viewer and force the viewer to recognize that seeing is not a passive act, rather it is "hunting" and "dreaming." Elkins (1997) urges readers to recognize seeing, in a way that it creates the object and is then created through the interaction with the object; "this seeing is aggressive, it distorts what it looks at, and it turns the person into an object…seeing is not only possessing…seeing is also controlling and objectifying and denigrating" (p. 27).

In the way Elkins articulates seeing, the viewer and the object constitute one another. To extend his ideas to trauma and media, the media are the outlet through which the sufferer is made legible and through which the sufferer may recognize their own suffering. In other words, active seeing is one way for sufferers and witnesses to give meaning to trauma. This active seeing is a part of what Mitchell (2005) refers to as the "double consciousness" of the living image, a simultaneous belief in and disavowal of what images portray (p. 11). In the case of trauma, it is the simultaneous recognition and denial of trauma so central to suffering. This discussion is particularly important because of the way the visual nature calls upon viewers to bear witness. Zelizer (2010) argues that images of trauma and suffering implicate audiences and acquire them.

She notes that the subjunctive moment, or as-if moment is particularly important to images that are difficult, contested or hard to look at. The subjunctive moment "forces an event's meaning through the display of images that are contingent. What all of this suggests is that the voice of subjunctivity – and its concomitant invocation of emotionality, contingency, and imagination – become particularly useful around events that are unsettled" (Zelizer, 2010, p. 15). This allows the visual to take on meanings and representations beyond their denotative meanings: a user can invent and reinvent an image. This potential for reinvention is central to both the recognition of why trauma operates so effectively as a narrative in legacy media, but also illuminates how trauma has become the subject matter of so much online discourse. Difficult imagery begs us to re-make it, to give it meaning, to settle the unsettled, in other words, difficult imagery forces its viewer into a sacred relationship with imagery, a relationship where unique meanings are produced through the interaction with the visual. That is why people look at trauma, and often why it is a part of cultural, collective memory, and why many cannot seem to look away. Visuals, in enabling sacred interactions with images, facilitate media rituals. Legacy media treat mediated rituals differently than new, digital forms, with new media tools building on the changing nature of media content, as well as the contingent, subjunctive nature of seeing trauma.

Visual media, more than any other type of media, becomes part and parcel of important mediated and mediatized rituals in everyday life, both online and offline. Legacy media have often treated trauma in a way that errs towards exploitation of individual testimonies and experiences, and uses trauma to largely articulate suffering from a perspective that is often politicized and reflects dominant power structures. Often, stories told during times of trauma, or stories about trauma in mass media, are part of a naturalized and ritualized viewing of trauma as entertainment, as a space for viewers and powerful actors to draw trite moments or edifying

lessons from, and as fodder for the ongoing news cycle. The ritualized nature of the way trauma is viewed is a media ritual that, as Couldry (2012) notes, serves to construct the myth of the sacred center. Seemingly independent and perhaps nontraditional media moments often serve to coax people into participation with certain media practices while obscuring the structural power dynamics that lay below the surface. Images of violence, trauma, and the attendant normative identity categories that circulate in media around illness, disability and traumatized bodies, as well as the routine viewing of them in legacy media, fosters and furthers false notions of the normalcy of marginalizing identity categories and social and institutional power relationships.

Sumiala (2013) distinguishes this perspective of media ritual from Pascal Lardellier's alternate take on ritual. She says:

> "Pascal Lardellier offers a different take on the relationship between media and ritual. He uses the expression 'ritual media' to describe certain programs that consist of ritual elements as they share specific stylistic and morphological similarities and reception modalities. So, while Couldry argues that media rituals highlight values related to the media, Lardellier takes a different view and maintains that 'ritual media' is aimed at accomplishing collective participation in society and sometimes even universal communion. Rather than masking, ritual media crystallizes community in a very Durkheimian sense of the word." p 9

In turning to Sumiala, it can be concluded that rituals are cultural practice that are "carried out in relation to, via and through the media." Due to the way media work, we ritualize the ways we view trauma. In viewing trauma media participants engage in ritual media in the way that they collectively participate in an act of suffering or mourning, but they also participate in media rituals that serve to reify certain ideologies through mediation of traumatic events. Sumiala goes on to note that media rituals are "recurring and patterned forms of symbolic communication that allow us, through performance, to attach ourselves to the surrounding media-related world" (p. 9). Rituals can help users negotiate their existence in social worlds, build social, cultural and

family capital that is important to the narratives they create about themselves and their communities. Notably, however, these rituals are not always available outside of privileged Western, classed, gendered contexts and thus must be interrogated from the perspective of identity.

Considering the way media facilitate ritual, it is clear that new media, fostered through digital spaces, can enable meaning-making in unique and powerful ways that legacy media cannot. New media offer users spaces to cultivate powerful symbols that perhaps enable them to shift the ritual viewing of them. New media can interrupt Couldry's notion of the ritual constructing of ideology around a sacred social center. New media have the potential to allow traumatized users to enter into ritualized cultural practices of testimony, sharing, and production of meaning through the content they produce and engage with. Through quickly proliferating and reproducible social media content that is posted on the Internet, users cultivate and participate in communities that they create and maintain. In order to analyze and interrogate these ritual practices, it is important to bring to bear recent content from the field of media studies that, while perhaps not written with trauma in mind, extends to trauma in useful ways, thus positioning scholarship on trauma and the media to account for shifting digital landscapes.

PARTICIPATION, PLATFORMS, AND MATERIAL BODIES: EXPLORING ONLINE EMBODIED PARTICIPATION AS RESISTIVE ACTION OR CULTURAL COOPTATION IN THE FACE OF TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT

McLuhan (2009) famously noted that "the medium is the message" and articulated that "technological media are staples or natural resources, exactly as are coal and cotton and oil. Anybody will concede that society whose economy is dependent upon one or two major staples like cotton, or grain, or lumber, or fish, or cattle is going to have some obvious social patterns of

organization as a result" (p. 111, 116). While these views on changing technologies are wrought with an overly deterministic sentiment that claims technology is as essential to human existence and social conditioning as resources, responsible media studies must account for the proliferation of, and possibility inherent in, digital platforms. Though these spaces build on historical forms of communication, the shifts in technology and the way those shifts influence user ability to share socially is an important consideration, particularly since platforms in digital spaces seem to have unspoken rules of participation that govern the discourses that active, agentic users engage in. Appadurai (2015) urges scholars not to exclusively focus on the work of users that engage the technology, but to see the technology as being a part of what constitutes those agentic acts of users, as they relate to media. Using the analogy of religion, Appadurai argues that religion mediates "between the invisible and visible," thus media are a technology of religion, bringing together ideological concepts with embodied experiences and physical spaces (Appadurai, 2015, p. 228). Using the term "mediants," he goes on to argue that these mediants, or technologies of communications, and the way they interact with "actants" (users with agency) "allow us to foreground the socialities that emerge through specific materialities" (Ibid, p. 228). Thus, the technology, and the interaction between the technology and specific users who pursue a cause via that technology, for the purposes of this exploration – coping with a trauma, places power in both the actual physical form (in this case the technological platform) that mediates and in the user who engages that mediation. Ultimately, Appadurai urges scholarship to move past the overly deterministic proclamations made by McLuhan that man is an extension of the machines that are used but, also not to discount the way technologies directly impact material existence. It is important, however, in developing this theory within a largely feminist post-structural lens, to intervene in Appadurai's theorizing of mediants and actants. Much of what may be perceived as

giving agency to mediants and actants simultaneously, through recognizing the power of technology, may also constitute an erasure of identity categories of subaltern bodies, as well as subsume important political categories that subvert dominant power structures. In granting power of meaning-making to technology, this theory assumes in some ways an equality to the way technology is accessed and interpreted. Further, it is important to stay aware of the fact that, even as technology may speak users in certain ways, a user's interpretations of the way materialities of technologies operate are situated in that user's particular social location, based on their identity categories and understandings of culture and representational politics. Notably, "mediation and materiality cannot be usefully defined except in relationship to each other. Mediation, as an operation or embodied practice, produces materiality as the effect of its operations. Materiality is the site of what mediation -- as an embodied practice – reveals" (Appadurai, 2015, p. 224). Mediation also produces materiality as the effect of representation, and through discourses of power, and social systems of control.

When looking at a subject that is contingent, embodied, yet operates for so many on a level of abstraction, it is important to recognize the way technology – or mediants – and concepts of media witnessing interact. It is vital to consider how the media and the media witness constitute one another; it is in seeing, feeling, experiencing, producing and witnessing mediations that their representations come to produce meaning. As was reviewed in earlier discussions of levels of trauma, many share traumas in media, many witness traumas in media, and many suffer in the act of witnessing, thus becoming vicarious sufferers. Because of this process, we have what many have termed a *crisis of witnessing*. Peters (2009) claims that in witnessing, those that rearticulate that which they've witnessed are simply copying, and their reiteration is nothing more than hearsay (p. 7). If operating from a purely technical understanding

of what it is to witness and thus testify, such as the space of a courtroom, this may be true; however, in the participatory, embodied community that sufferers engage in online, this reiteration is much more than hearsay. The quickly changing online representations, mediations, and re-mediations are productions of meaning – meaning that stems from embodied, material experiences and the embodied subjects interaction with technological mediants. The articulation of suffering in a way that gives sense and meaning to it is a function of the participatory space, the as-if space of possibility that exists online. While Peters (2009) determines veracity to be a central component of witness, for sufferers this is not central to their ability to produce meaning around their traumas, and in turn the suffering they've experienced. The truth of an event is less vital to meaning-making than a user's interactions with the media and what is subsequently produced. Peters (2009) notes, "the love of liveness also relates to the power of real time. If one sees it live one can claim status as a witness present in time if not in space, if one sees it on tape, one is no longer a witness but rather the participant of a transcription" (p. 36). Though Peters argues that seeing a recording is not much more than participating in transcription, witnessing in new digital spaces feels to users to be an intimate act of immediate, live witness. Digital technologies apparent creation of a sense of instanteity and the feeling of urgency in posting, commenting, and re-mediating life's contingent moments takes the everyday occurrences of life and makes them important and shareable, and turns individuals into witnesses worthy of testimony in a collective space. In fact, to digital users and consumers, when something happened is relative to when someone bears witness to what happened. In a digital space anyone can testify to their suffering at any time, and that testimony, by virtue of the trans-spatial, trans-temporal digital platforms, carries an urgency that cannot be communicated through legacy

media. In digital interactions, not only can anyone testify, anyone can feel that their testimony matters.

The search for meaning and authentic engagement is not a concern that only stems from the development of new technologies. The laments and worries of changing societies around notions of authenticity are what Taylor (1991) calls, "the malaises of modernity" (p. 1). He notes that the individualism that coincides with modern freedoms has caused our "breaking loose from older moral horizons" or chains of order to give the world a means of making sense (Taylor, 1991, p. 3). While these orders created barriers for many, the discrediting of them caused the world to lose "some of its magic" (Ibid., p. 3). With the breakdown of various systems of order and the rise of individualism came the "ethic of authenticity," an ethic that stems from an idea that "humans are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong" which, without a moral system of order must come from the individual and "comes to be something we have to attain to be true and full human beings" (Ibid., p. 26). Given this pressure to find meaning within oneself, it makes sense that when trauma collapses the world-making schema individuals have built around their everyday lives, they would go on a search for meaning. This search, in part, takes place online. Moores (2012) notably argues that "media theorists and researchers must now attend more closely than they have previously to issues of embodiment in media use" in order to take account of a "politics of bodily knowledge and experience" that enter into power structures and have great consequences for "collaborative place-making practices" on digital platforms (p. 105).

Much of what is observed in terms of online engagement, particularly as it relates to individual negotiations of meaning, can be seen as the legacy of Protestantism in terms of both meaning and identity production, but also with regards to health and healing. Klassen (2011)

notes that within Protestantism, particularly in North America, it is the "ubiquity of healing that makes it carry such heavy burdens – mending the body, psyche, and spirit, ending off ever changing viral and bacterial threats to live, and restoring justice and right relations" (n.p.). Healing, thus was seen as part and parcel of the Protestant religious project and "liberal Protestants became agents of medicalization" (Ibid). When interrogating the human need to engage in authentic, moral meaning-making, it is important to consider this influence of healing and recognize that even secular digital users may be invoking a sense of liberal Protestantism in their quest to heal themselves and make their trauma *meaningful.* Notably, Klassen (2011) argues that "twentieth-century Protestantism, especially in its liberal forms, has long been characterized as having … a theology in which 'self-realization" was more of a goal that overcoming sin" (n.p.). Many digital users posting about traumatic events are on journeys of self-realization. They are searching for a new world-making schema that accounts for their previously held beliefs, their traumatic experience, and their embodied experiences. People's lives, as they are articulated online, are interpolations of their offline bodies and their various social and ritual based meaning-making systems, systems that inherently change with traumatic experiences. Those that go online to make meaning are deliberately cultivating space for shifting expressions of voice around their varying embodied experiences of trauma. Some may look for healing and triumph in the normative sense, while others may use this space to cultivate wholly new meanings. Kraidy (2016) notes that those who go online for activism or to create meaning around contingent events use the "human body as tool, medium, symbol, and metaphor" (n.p.) just as one Egyptian blogger did. Kraidy notes that, for the woman behind *A Rebel's Diary*, a blog depicting a naked woman protesting the denial of freedom of expression, even though she is alive and living safely in exile, "her body suffered a social death at home" (Ibid.). The complex interactions between

the online and offline body, as often seen through a liberal Protestant lens, are central to understanding why and how trauma sufferers participate in digital environments.

The technology too, affords various types of interaction, through which to produce representations of the material body. Banet-Weiser et al. (2014), in a discussion of the participatory nature of today's mediated world recognize the dual investment in "voice" and in "practices of listening" necessary in order to comprehend the affordances of the online space, and of a collective online attention (p. 1074). Notably, what is considered by many scholars as creative in online, digital spaces, that are capable of simultaneously producing media and forming community, is not just that which is produced at a corporate or commercial level. While there can be no doubt, as this chapter has already conceded, that online and digital platforms are heavily commodified, they do enable a space for production of meaning on a grassroots level. Gray argues that "if meaning is one of the ultimate products of creativity, paratexts are vital sites of creativity and key parts of the creative act. Every text has many creators and authors" (Banet-Weiser et. al., 2014, p. 1076). It is this work of production of creativity and meaning-making that makes these digital spaces special. They enable users to inhabit trauma in ways that let them explore the contingent nature of their very existence, and this meaning is produced through the making and re-making of digital content. The users and the technology come together to create a space that uses, as Clark et al. (2014) note, "action and meaning interfaces that operate through a complicated latticework of back stages and front stages, based on cultural and technological work of many varieties" (p. 1461). Without giving too much credence to the technology itself, it is imperative to explore meaning-making online as an act of material bodies engaging with technologies of mediation that allow for expressions of humanity, testimony of suffering, and foster spaces for others to bear witness. Kraidy (2013) argues that while "technology publicizes

corporeal dissent…the human body is the *indispensable* political medium" (p 287). Trauma, whether personally experienced or through media witness, demeans the body and social constructions and norms around bodies and identities. Users often seek a space where disembodied articulations of self can empower, change, or foster new meanings around their physical, material circumstances. Kraidy (2013) goes on to argue that "the body is the medium through which struggles for power, identity and legitimacy are physically fought, socially constructed and ideologically refracted" (p. 289). Trauma forcefully re-constructs meanings around the physical body and lived experiences, and inscribes certain socially constructed understandings of what suffering looks like on distressed bodies, thus individuals who seek meaning often seek out spaces to articulate, contest, or even affirm the way their bodies are understood in social regimes. Technology often provides these users the platform through which they engage in this expression.

This analysis has made reference to issues of power in various ways, which for the purposes of positioning the act of sharing trauma online as a micro-political move, is a central consideration. Many scholars and media commentators are wary of the space of possibility found online and often lament that too much credence is given to the neoliberal space that is the Internet. Dean (2009), in her book Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies, paints a rather grim picture of what she terms the "imaginary site of action and belonging" that the Internet provides (Dean, 2009, p. 43). Dean believes that the networked social life that is perpetuated online cements privilege, inequality, and a lack of effectivity in politics. She argues that "new media technologies strengthen the hold of neoliberalism and the privilege of the top 1 percent of people on the planet" (Dean, 2009, p. 48). Dean (2009) uses the war in Iraq and the Bush administrations posturing toward the Middle East as an example of the way communicative

capitalism has protected "raw power while immunizing it from substantive change since all change has already been coded in terms of democracy" (p. 119). Echoing Dean's argument, Giroux (2011) identifies what he calls "zombie politics and predatory capitalism" in which absolute power is unleashed "against all those individuals and groups have been 'othered' because their very presence undermines the engines of wealth and inequality that drive the neoliberal dreams of consumption, power and profitability of the very few" (p. 37). He highlights the way in which those with a platform to speak on the conservative American state of affairs use "an appeal to absolute certainty, which becomes the backdrop against which a politics of lying and a culture of deceit, fear, cruelty and repression flourish" (Giroux, 2011, p. 47). This "zombie capitalism" that reifies power and diminishes the possibility for social change is argued to be cemented by the communicative systems that give a false conception of voice to those with dissenting opinions. Each person is allowed their own tiny space for expression in the vast and endless marketplace of ideas so that ideas become relativized. As Dean (2009) argues, "relativism encourages certainty in one's own convictions because it accepts that others have their own convictions: My convictions make me who I am" (p. 120). With absolute certainty circulating in an environment that relies, as Dean (2009) argues, on "an inescapable injunction to enjoy," subjects tend to see themselves as "mutable projects ever available to improvement and refashioning" through the purchase of products and participation in capitalist marketplace of ideas and hopeless striving (pp. 132-133).

While Dean (2009) provides a compelling argument that anyone can express an opinion online thus rendering those expressions a part of endlessly circulating content with very little value offline, the mere condition of testimony being situated in a neoliberal space does not rid it of its authenticity. Dean's critique rather narrowly dismisses what she articulates as the intense

meanings, “emotions, intimate feelings” and senses of self that develop and are shared though social media online (p. 30). While it is true that capitalism and neoliberalism adversely affect the ability of new ideas to interrupt the status quo, in a competing marketplace of discourses, online spaces actually have power. Online discourses have potential to shift the way various dominant discourses operate, despite their relative inability to overthrow the system as a whole. Dean essentially argues that users become complicit in their own oppression in the way that they buy into the illusion that a choice between a variety of products enables voice or communicative action. While this may be true to a degree, an individual’s desire to “make themselves known and visible” is more complicated than just contributing to an endless stream of data (p. 4). Indeed, Dean herself argues that the Internet can in fact serve as a vitally important space for connecting activists and fostering mass mobilizations, and I would argue that these spaces and these articulations provide for practices of “collective engagement” online and often extending back into the offline realm (p. 39, 47). Without discounting Dean’s argument, and recognizing the value in contesting the online spaces which are all too often un-critically identified as democratic venues for change, I argue that the cases here highlight that though neoliberalism often diminishes the value of expression, the power of voice and communication online are very much subversive and function as micro-political acts with the potential for offline, embodied efficacy. That said, these cases, and other cases that emerge in digital spaces are neither completely subversive or oppressive, they are part of a complex web of meanings that inhabit a space between being liberating and making users complicit in their own oppression. The site of absolute certainty that Dean and Giroux see as being prominent in communicative capitalism, is in fact a state of ambivalence.

The concept of ambivalence when dealing with issues of trauma makes the issues of *ethic of authenticity* even more important. Particularly when considering the moral value of the narratives that trauma sufferers articulate online, research must account for the privilege of looking away as witnesses or vicarious sufferers, as well as the way the everyday actions of sharing can be political. First, to attend to the issue of the privilege that comes with witnesses being able to look away, it is helpful to explore the theme of memory that comes into this theory quite often. Though users can look away, once someone bears witness to trauma, that trauma, even when the individual looks away from it, is stored in their memory. Thus, it is important to articulate how the digital technologies are shifting concepts of remembering. The way a digital user remembers will impact the way they participate in online spaces, as well as impact their material existence. The dialogues around digital media have shifted from binary distinctions of the digital and the physical as separate spaces for consideration, rather, these realms must now be taken together. Thus, analytical concepts must take account of the way users' narratives, testimony, and the stories that compose their memory act on technology, and the way technological platforms act on agents' sharing of narratives, testimony and trauma online. Bassett (2014), in a discussion of narrative, an important component of memory, argues that "narrative is part of what it is to be human, it wells up 'like life itself'" (p. 1). When sufferers narrativize their traumas they become a part of the cultural fabric that makes up the constructed society that dictates the structural and political norms. When others bear witness online, their memory is shifted – no future memories can be made without the resonances of the testimonies of trauma sufferers. As Ellis (2009) notes, the mediated environments that turn modern citizens into witnesses produce "a new and distinct form of perception which carries a sense of responsibility – however weak – towards those events, summed up in the telling words 'they

cannot say that they did not know'" (p. 73). In testifying, sharing, and enabling others to bear witness to trauma, online users shift the way individuals, communities and collectivities remember, thus providing spaces and opportunities for political expression. That said, simple witnessing, as opposed to witness that leads to vicarious trauma through the suffering of others, is a privileged view. According to Ellis (2009) "media witnessing is not that of encountering the brute fact, the feeling of participation…it is witnessing from a privileged position…" (p. 78). Despite the fact that seeing is not the same as experiencing, it is impactful in processes of remembering. Memory is political, while political memory *can* function to legitimate a social arrangement, it also constitutes something much larger, especially online. Political memories are events that dictate understandings of the past and desires for the future and are remembered specifically for the way they harbor power. Political memory functions much in the way a physical memorial does: imposing "meaning and order beyond the temporal and chaotic experiences of life" and cultivating a space through which mourners, sufferers, vicarious sufferers can bear witness (Mayo, 1988, p. 62; Walkowitz & Knauer, 2004, p. 1). It is in this everyday act of remembering, of bearing witness, that political memory offers possibility for subversion of normative frameworks and thus digital testimonies of trauma are political.

De Certeau (1984) argued that "many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many 'ways of operating'…" (n.p.). In essence, de Certeau argues that in performing the practices of everyday, that coincide with the breakdown of local stabilities, consumers become what are termed "immigrants in a system too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it" (n.p.). Thus, their everyday actions become acts of defiance, every move in everyday life becomes a tactic to defeat, defy, or dismantle in some way the system that oppresses individuals.

When fissures to the everyday occur through traumatic experiences, individuals experience a deeper than normal breakdown in social norms, causing the everyday acts of sharing, naming trauma, or even inhabiting everyday life to become tactical. Even the most mundane acts of everyday life become important tactics of defiance and spaces for the subaltern to speak from. Traumatized bodies are told not to speak, or if they speak their narrative is meant to fit within the context of the survivor or even of *super-crip*: ever recovering, ever triumphant. For these traumatized bodies that are so often disenfranchised by society, and that no longer fit into social norms, the things they do in their daily lives, their everyday acts become political. In this sense, no witness who is traumatized by what they've seen is a benign actor. Witness, too, is an important factor in making legible the everyday tactics of all sufferers. On the issue of mundane witness, Ellis (2009) highlights that though mundane witness does not require action, it gives space for users to "share in the unfolding of a complex and largely arbitrary world which we struggle to comprehend. In this process, we feel something of the emotion of others and have a sense that we're are engaged in a difficult process of understanding that is shared by others" (p. 86). Both seeing and expressing the tactics of the everyday takes contingent, life-altering moments, and the images that represent them, and gives them meaning. There is a usefulness in seeing everyday tactics as political, as full of possibility. Returning to de Certeau (1984):

> The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver 'within the enemy's field of vision,' and von Bulow put it, and within enemy territory. It does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a district, visible, and objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing of possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of

> the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse…In short, a tactic is an art of the weak (n.p.).

The following section attends to the way everyday tactics enter into the media sphere enabling shifts in political memory by utilizing the affordances of technological platforms and fostering as-if spaces where contingent moments of trauma can be explored, named, and shared into communities or at the very least, collectivities.

At the intersection of trauma and technology, agentic digital users narrate their traumas through the technology, in order to position themselves in relation to normative systems or systems of oppression. When examining the way users (users here broadly refers to the multiple levels of traumatic engagement: sufferers of trauma, vicarious sufferers of trauma through viewership, empathetic viewers, and witnesses) interact with and create testimony online, one cannot neglect the way the digital environments too, constitute the users. In being embedded in everyday narratives and testimonies, these users bear witness to the momentary tragedies that dictate and govern much of life, as well as change the boundaries and borders that previously governed digitally mediated social spaces as trivial forums through which to post the inane details of the passing of life. The way the technology and the agent constitute one another to articulate the importance of witness and testimony post-trauma in the everyday, (rather than just large collective traumas that have been the previous locus of research in the field of media and trauma) makes clear that meaning-making in the everyday is a worthy outcome of participation, and indeed, a resistive outcome.

Banet-Weiser et al. (2014), in their discussion on creativity in media participation, note that it is important to look at how everyday people are creative. Specifically, Jonathan Gray notes how "vitally important" it is to "study grassroots, everyday practices of creativity" (p.

1076). The everyday is a valuable space for resistance, ordinariness is a productive space where tactics and rules of resistance have shifted resistance from the exclusive domain of big business and large scale institutions. In other words, the space of resistance now goes beyond what Dean (2009) articulates as "larger organizational efforts and…the formation of political solidarities with more duration" (p. 47). Everyday witnessing inhabits a more abstract space of tactical media that neither interrupts the neoliberal order or changes the circumstances of the individual user, but has "power in the spontaneous eruption, the momentary evasion of protocological control structures, the creation of temporary autonomous zones, that surely play their part in making possible the opening for political transformations" (Raley, 2009, p. 27). Even with this possibility for creating openings, participation in digital media during or after trauma, or in witnessing, is not fully about instrumental, measurable outcomes and change in the way Dean and others conceptualize the political. Rather, in arguing that sharing and expressing voice is a productive, political act, this theory posits that in sharing one's voice in digital spaces users become, as Jenkins argues, "imagining communities, since they are shaping these collective identities through the activities facilitated by these platforms…" (Clark et al., 2014, p. 1466). Within and among these "imagining communities" Frosh and Pinchevski (2009) note

> Unlike traditional notions of judicial or scientific witnessing, and unlike the panopticon, it [media witnessing] does not only serve an instrumental purpose (to enable a judgment, furnish a replicable result, discipline bodies and behavior). Contemporary media witnessing serves as its own justification, putting society permanently on view to itself for its own sake, as the audience perpetually witnesses its own shared world because *this is what mass media do* (p. 11).

Arguing that media do what media do for their own sake and for the sake of the user's self-affirmation and expression does not empty mediated testimonies of traumas of their value or importance. In fact, Frost and Pinchevski (2009) continue that

> Media witnessing, we suggest, represents a third phase: it casts the audience as the ultimate addressee *and* primary producer, making the collective both the subject and object of everyday witnessing, testifying to its own historical reality as it unfolds. It is the emergence of this collective performance of mundane, perpetual self-affirmation – in, by, and through the media – that makes media witnessing not only analytically useful but also culturally significant (p. 12).

Considering the way users engage the shifting technological landscapes is vital to this research, additionally, it is helpful to consider how trauma shifts user engagement with technology. The way the digital interacts with traumatized users involves inscribing and re-inscribing sufferer's traumas back on them and on their communities through repeated viewing, re-mediation, and the meme-ing of trauma. However, in testifying, sharing, narrativizing, meme-ing and even creating vicarious sufferers and media witnesses online, users are producing spaces of community, comradery, and even political action. Users are making socially significant gestures that, while not solely political in nature, help users explore status quo assumptions around suffering, while exploring articulations of what it means to suffer. Bridging the work of various media scholars regarding individual voice and tactical media use, even in interaction with powerful structural forces, fosters an understanding of the way trauma sufferers use the Internet to directly mediate and re-mediate their suffering. Building from this section, which traces the work of various scholars on trauma and treatments of trauma in legacy media, the following section articulates ways to extend that research, and place it in conversation with important media theories, to account for voice being expressed online.

FINDING AN OUTLET AFTER TRAUMA: VOICE, TACTICAL MEDIA AND THE POSSIBILITIES AND REFUSALS OF NEW MEDIA SPACES

Within contemporary media studies there are multiple avenues through which to understand how meaning-making takes place during and after times of trauma, or the witnessing of trauma. It is

reasonable, based on the theory explored thus far, to posit that users that go online to articulate traumatic experiences and/or carve out spaces that enable sense-making in the wake of direct traumatic experience. Media witnesses, vicarious sufferers, and empathetic viewers similarly attempt to carve out space to either make sense of their own experiences, or to make sense of the trauma as it is located on another's body, or in society more generally. Regardless of the location of the trauma and how it impacts a user's sense of self, this theoretical framework argues that users cultivate spaces through their interactions with digital technology to make their suffering legible and to articulate meanings, both alternative and mainstream, around trauma. Contrary to the often problematic representations of trauma, most notably seen around the Holocaust and September 11th terrorist attacks, in which sufferers are forced to claim the status of survivors, online spaces offer more complex ways to articulate suffering thus allowing users with varying levels of trauma to position themselves in relation to their suffering and dominant discourses around trauma. Meaning, users may in fact position themselves as triumphant survivors, or lacking victims, or they may inhabit various degrees of those roles at different times. Though users are not wholly contesting dominant ideas of what it means to suffer and what types of suffering are socially acceptable, in their negotiations of the meanings available to them and the new meanings they produce, there are fissures and contestations being made within online spaces that are significant and potentially subversive. The meaning produced is often as a response to dominant meanings that are part of the received narratives around traumatization and experiencing trauma. Users position themselves on a sort of continuum of suffering – there are those that suffer in a way that conforms to the dominant discourses around *acceptable* trauma and those that entirely and unapologetically contest those discourses.

Online spaces offer an alternative media outlet for trauma sufferers to participate in. Polymedia is a concept that looks at the media as a space through which users can self-select the mediated form of communication that best enables them to articulate their particular message. Within that framework users can express *voice* through various media tactics in everyday online spaces. Couldry (2012) indicates that people participate in mediated networks in order to presence themselves, in other words, this is "people's attempt to manage their presence (and presence to others) over time" (p. 49). In so doing, individuals utilize their networks to put into "circulation information about, and representations of, themselves for the wider purpose of *sustaining a public presence*" (Couldry, 2012, p. 50). Couldry (2010) argues that voice, or "giving an account of oneself and what affects one's life" is a central part of what it means to be human, and the effective opportunity to have one's voice heard and taken into account is a human good (p vi). He goes on to argue that, for those expressing their voice, it is important to know that their voice matters. The issue is that the contemporary crisis of voice is built upon the fact that neoliberal systems of organization "ignore voice, [and] assume voice does not matter" (p. 1). Couldry fundamentally believes that "having voice takes resources to be recognized by others as having voice" (p. 7). In the neoliberal system only some voices have the resources needed to be recognized. Couldry (2010) asks

> What if under particular conditions (themselves connected to neoliberalism), the general space for 'voice' that mainstream media provide works in important respects to amplify or at least normalize values and mechanisms important to neoliberalism and, by a separate movement, to embed such values and mechanisms ever more deeply within a contemporary culture of governance? (p.73)

In times of trauma and suffering voice takes a central role. Morris (1997) highlights that voice stands in opposition to silence. The idea of silence is central because "suffering, like pain, with which it is so often intermingled, exists in part beyond language" (p. 27). During times of

suffering or trauma individuals become metaphorically voiceless because the experience of suffering feels so unknowable. Morris (1997) continues, establishing that suffering

> implies an experience not just disturbing or repugnant but inaccessible to understanding… Suffering tends to make people inarticulate, and in this sense the voicelessness of suffering often resembles the quiet retreat of people who live with chronic pain, who discover that months or years of unremedied complaint finally exhaust care-givers and even family. Such patients withdraw into an uncommunicative isolation, constructed in response to an environment where effective help and concern have all but vanished (p. 27-8).

The current system is one in which trauma sufferers and witnesses exist within often commercialized spaces within neoliberal ideologies that subsume voices of the less powerful by more privileged, more powerful voices, thus, it is crucial that there exist a space of expression for suffering bodies. Part of what is significant for sufferers in digital media, given the importance of individuals to express their voice, is the making of the invisible visible. It is crucial that the inability of suffering bodies to be a part of mainstream culture becomes visible; they are bodies that cannot access society and which society cannot access, they are bodies often erased in society. Online spaces offer a potential for the possibility of legibility for sufferers. The importance of voice cannot be overlooked as a means through which sufferers are *presenced*. Returning to Morris (1997), he argues that for those in pain, for those who have suffered, "voice matters precisely because suffering remains to some degree inaccessible. Voice is what gets silenced, repressed, preempted, denied, or at best translated into an alien dialect… Indeed, voice ranks among the most precious human endowments that suffering normally deprives us of, removing far more than a hope that others will understand or assist us" (p. 29). The online space fostered by digital media enables users to express voice, to carve out a space where they can authentically express, or at the very least *feel like* they authentically express their suffering in

meaningful ways. These acts, while perhaps not revolutionary, enable articulations around trauma that more appropriately allow others to bear witness to meaningful, agentic stories.

When suffering is invisible, oppression is inherent. Online spaces, in illuminating sufferers, even on small scales, interrupt oppression. After a traumatic life event individual bodies are often regulated by norms around ability/disability, as they intersect with other identity categories. Digital media, and the various affordances of digital technology, have the potential to enable individuals and groups to subvert the regulation of their bodies by enabling them to have a voice and give an account of their experiences online. As the case studies and empirical analysis in this project highlight, many contemporary examples of online voice that have proven to be effective as social action offered online users ways to shift how they choose to narrate and remember their traumatic experience. *Voice*, while perhaps in a crisis, is a still a helpful tool of communicative action with great potential. I argue that online spaces have the capacity to interrupt cycles of oppression within the current system and structure of politics, and foster change. In fact, I maintain, counter to Couldry, that the sheer act of sharing one's voice – regardless of audience – is a political act. I also hope to show that the *illusion of voice* and authentic expressions of voice are not that far from one another. Even the *illusion of voice* can be a powerful micro-political gesture.

Voice, like representation (as conceived through a feminist post-structuralist lens), cannot be interrogated without an interrogation of power. The neoliberal system that defines so much of the structural constraints on who is able to post, in what venue, for how long, with what language and to what audiences, requires deeper analysis as to how in inhibits or enables digital agency. Putting aside for a moment questions of who has access to digital platforms in the first place, neoliberal logics can foster, shift, inhibit, demean or otherwise change the interactions in

the digital space around traumatic life-events. With the threat of misrecognition of oneself a central issue to authentic engagements in online environments, it is essential to make note of how power inequalities may or may not impact user meaning-making. As Centeno and Cohen (2012) highlight, "the political world of neoliberalism may be best understood as being based on increasingly asymmetrical power" (p. 326). Power inequalities are present on the Internet, yet are sometimes overlooked by users. It is important to situate these communities within that political environment where ownership structures impact power positions and consider questions of how fulfilling these communities can truly be, while being controlled by commodifying structural forces.

Trauma, like the Internet, exists within, and its lived experiences are conditioned by, neoliberal ideology. Meek (2011) notes that Derrida, specifically discusses terror and trauma after September 11, 2001, in relation to neoliberal ideology, arguing that hegemony works through technological media to "solicit[s] testimony in support of its free market ideology in the realms of politics, the media and academic culture" (p. 187). Often, critics of online communities, and the optimism about the potential of digital spaces that go with those communities, note that digital spaces are governed by the very neoliberal logic that places users in the center of their own oppression. Morosov (2009), for example, states that the wellspring of information sharing through social media sites online only "amplifies the noise" and places any subversive strategies or movements squarely in the hands of powerful interests that control structural inequality, thus robbing those movements of their momentum (p. 12). While this research cautions that users may become complicit in their own oppression by serving powerful interests through the supplying of their testimonies of trauma, it also operates from a space that recognizes that even if an experience is commodified, that doesn't strip it of its authenticity.

The concern with voice, and often a reason online spaces come under criticism, is that the contemporary crisis of voice is built upon the fact that neoliberal systems of organization "ignore voice, [and] assume voice does not matter" (p. 1). Couldry fundamentally believes that "having voice takes resources to be recognized by others as having voice" (p. 7). In the neoliberal system only some voices have the resources needed to be recognized, others exist only to enforce dominant power structures. Couldry (2010), asks if the space for voice in fact amplifies neoliberal power structures and embeds them in popular culture, and therefore in society (p.73). Users are commodified through their practices in digital space, and in articulating themselves through the affordances of digital technology they re-inscribe the tools that oppress them in many ways. Despite that fact, users are also engaging in authentic, discursive meaning-making and while those meanings may be taken up in the well-spring of commodified culture, they are also creating fissures in that culture. In fact, though users must exist in and are constituted by structures of governance that are steeped in neoliberal ideals, their moves towards self-reflexive expressions of themselves can shift perceptions and understandings of concepts such as sickness, health, ability, disability, and normalcy in small ways that constitute openings in the dominant discourses. Indeed, acts of self-disclosure online may not shift structures of oppression in order to overturn them, instead, certain binary distinctions that operate insidiously through structures that dictate what types of identities and bodies are acceptable in mainstream spaces, may be dismantled, and allow users to position themselves on a continuum of meaning in more useful and productive ways.

Since all online platforms are steeped in a neoliberal world, it is irresponsible as scholars to discount what is happening on digital platforms as only commodified and thus void of authentic meaning. Following the lead of media studies scholars, Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee

(2012), I suggest that while Internet spaces are not absolutely liberating and healing, the affordances of these technologies do enable the emergence of significant meanings in new and interesting ways. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) help to complicate the neoliberal space as a space for activism, contestation of meaning, and new meaning production. While they note that activism has been hollowed out by rampant commercialization they also note that "…commodity activism may illuminate the nettled promise of innovative creative forms, cultural interventions that bear critically, if in surprising ways, on modes of dominance and resistance within changing social and political landscapes" (p. 3). Their theoretical framework moves away from binary distinctions of what is productive or disruptive in activism in a neoliberal and commodified space, and towards a more holistic view that carries structural inequality alongside important considerations of individual agency. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) argue that it is more helpful in research to "move away from an either/or logic of profit versus politics, from linear distinctions between cultural co-optation and popular resistance that have characterized these debates within cultural studies. Instead, we situate commodity activism within its larger historical contexts, its emergence over time revealing the vexed and contradictory means by which individuals and communities have marshalled the ideological and cultural frameworks of consumption to challenge, support, and reimagine the political and social dynamics of power" (p. 3). This lends itself to the questions: Are online articulations of grief, activism? Are they disruptive? Are they inherently and only/always commodified in the way they exist online? (i.e. does their very presence on social media make them a commodified form?). In addition to exploring these ideas, the unique, interdisciplinary theories provided herein provide a framework to carry this tension between a recognition of the power dynamics inherent in forms of digital, online communication, activism, testimony and witness, as well as the user agency and the

ability for these spaces to afford users as-if spaces to be creative, and to play in order to produce meaning and re-mediate the ways stories around trauma have traditionally been constructed, told, understood and shared.

Polymedia helps in understanding how voice might work in a fragmented, converging, neoliberal space. Specifically, considering the feminist post-structuralist framing of this theory, it is the potential for slippage of meaning inherent in the concept and theory of polymedia as articulated by Madianou and Miller (2013), that I call attention to. Polymedia highlights some of the ways that voice can be expressed in meaningful ways using the affordances of online technologies and articulates how these meaningful expressions of voice serve to increase human capital. When examining spaces of suffering and the way users seek out spaces through which to articulate their suffering on their own terms, even if they've internalized dominant discourses, we see users moving towards new, digital media spaces and capitalizing on various characteristics unique to those technologies. Polymedia is the "emerging environment of communicative opportunities that function as an 'integrated structure'" through which we can understand "new media as an environment of affordances" (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 170). Thus, users are able to use the different affordances of digital technologies and spaces, and the communities they can access through those technologies, to find opportunities for expression. Additionally, polymedia conceives of media as a relational tool, thus distinct media can no longer be understood as existing independently, rather they must be understood in relationship to one another (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 175). Once individuals have gained access to a certain type of media (bearing in mind that unequal opportunities of access across the world do limit the ability of some to express voice in the way being discussed here) the relative cost of each individual act of communication is quite small, thus new media is proliferated and new choices

and means of communication are offered, leading to slippages around the boundaries of where and how users communicate and thus the meanings they produce. (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 176).

Often users will go to different online technologies for different reasons, capitalizing on what each unique platform offers them in relationship to their individual needs. These media, which allow users to communicate one to many or one to one, and their affordances dictate expectations and ideals about social experience and in turn, a user's place within social structures. For trauma sufferers, their social experiences have been interrupted and corrupted, thus polymedia may allow for the reconstruction of social worlds, or recreation of existing ideas and spaces of social expression. Certain types of media are seen as more relevant to certain types of communicational relationships but, also "most relationships create a particular configuration of media that works best for their particular communicative needs" (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 179). Individuals strike a balance between various social media platforms and tools in order to find a way to articulate voice that is meaningful to them. At the risk of placing too much agency in the hands of the individual, I argue that in a system of polymedia, the individual's cultivation of a bricolage of media, through which they mediate certain ideas and relationships, functions as a struggle over power, autonomy, and for an authentic space to express voice. In this multi-faceted media space, some users enter into spaces where ascribed identities of *sufferer* can be interrogated, pushed, cemented, or shifted through the ritualized offering of testimony, acknowledgement of other's testimonies, and interactions between user posts.

Bringing the aforementioned ideas together, it becomes clear that the way power and voice operate in mainstream discourse means that users must find places to make themselves legible, and the platforms made available in digital space might very well be that place. It is

useful to put the notion of polymedia in conversation with the idea that "people's voices only matter if their bodies matter" (Couldry, 2010, p. 130). Can voices that have been erased from mainstream discourse, by traumas that have stripped their holders of privilege, be reclaimed through polymediatic social relationships? Indeed, Massumi (quoted in Couldry (2010)) argues that "the very notion of bodily experience as 'determined' or 'constructed' by external discourses missed what really matters: 'the nature of the process [of construction]' in everyday practice" (p. 90). If articulations of the self, its positionality, its erasures and its claims to power are enunciated online via social media, and constructed and produced through and by that media, is that not, in and of itself, a subversive move? If polymedia, as the ideal is articulated by Madianou and Miller (2013), grants individuals a degree of agency in deciding what they want to share, to whom they want to share with, when and in what way they want to share, and how to bridge those various relationships, it is logical to argue that those people now have a meaningful space to narrate their lives to others in a way that is meaningful to and productive for them. Couldry (2010) is insistent that if voice is not heard, if there is not a space through which to acknowledge that "my voice matters," then the effectivity of voice is diminished and thus ensues the "crisis of voice" (p. 1). Arguably, the agency established through new media, as articulated through polymedia, ostensibly gives individuals the recognition that their voice matters. Though in action these voices may, to a degree, enter into the vacuum of ideas, they are an authentic experience in digital spaces and thus, in the authentic experience is a sense that the user's voice has been meaningfully uttered. Banet-Weiser (2012) suggests "the contrast between an offline empowerment that is 'real' and an online empowerment that is 'fake' is ultimately beside the point, since it misses the logic of digital technologies, simultaneously dynamic and disciplinary" (p. 67-69). I argue that the imagined spaces produced online can be productive for those

engaging in them. In articulating a space, however small, through which cultural norms are being contested to any degree is a political, or more aptly – a micro-political act of importance.

Audre Lorde (2003) famously argued that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (p. 2). While this may be true in some scholarship such as that Lorde was commenting on, in the new spaces of expression afforded to individuals by polymedia where meaning is no longer static and formats and forums for political action are continuously evolving, the Internet may in fact provide a space wherein the master's tools (media, for example) begin to, in whatever small way, dismantle the master's house. I will elaborate this point through a discussion of Banet-Weiser's (2012) understanding of branding, authenticity, and ambivalence. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that "branding is a primary context for identity construction and creative production" and discusses "what it means that authenticity *itself* is a brand: that 'authentic' spaces are branded" (p. 11). While Banet-Weiser understands the empowerment potential of new media technologies as a balance between "creative activity and exploitation" (p. 44), she also understands that in "recent U.S. history, political ideals such as social equality, freedom and empowerment are realized through the practices of consumption and consumer citizenship" – much of which has moved online (p. 48). She argues the complicated idea that the

> Market is always a possibility and a refusal, but the nature of its possibilities and kinds of refusals depend on the larger cultural context of technology, politics and the construction of individual identity. In brand culture, with its attendant Web 2.0 technologies for consumer-generated content and DIY production, the outgrowths of neoliberalism's radically "free" markets are knowledge and affect – the stuff of identity – as well as culture itself (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 49).

Authentic engagement is a form of social and political capital for online users, particularly users who have suffered a trauma. In this space of possibility and refusal is a space to claim authenticity.

This notion of possibility and refusal is inherent in the concept of the micro-political act of resistance. When examining online spaces where potential sufferers witness, experience, mediate and make meanings that may resist constructed ideas of what trauma victims/survivors or witnesses may be, scholarship bears witness to instances of small scale dissent or "bottom-up resistance." In this resistance, those who feel disenfranchised in some way attempt to regain control and interrupt dominant ideas of identity, ableism, mourning, violence, illness, martyrdom or any other cultural construct that functions normatively (Raley, 2009, p. 2). Raley (2009) identifies a tactical user as someone who says "*See how I try to manage the ties that bind and produce me*" (p. 2). The tactical user functions as part of tactical media which "contributes to the discourse on the digital humanities by examining the aesthetic and critical practices that have specifically emerged out of, and in direct response to, both the postindustrial society and neoliberal globalization" (Raley, 2009, p. 3). Raley (2009) in her descriptions of various online art projects (though we will extend tactical media beyond the realm of art activism that she employs), elaborates tactical media as media that interrupt and disrupt dominant regimes through "the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible" (p 6). Tactical media is temporary, ephemeral and open to the unexpected. Tactical media operates in the symbolic, "the site of power in postindustrial society" (Raley, 2009, p. 6). In other words, tactical media takes advantage of the ambivalent space enabled by the branding culture of digital media and "aims to create situations 'where criticality can occur'" (Raley, 2009, p. 9). Tactical media, as micro-political action has no

revolutionary expectations, meaning tactical media work within the parameters of the structural systems. Raley (2009) posits, "these artist-activists thus critique and resist the new world order but do so from within by intervening on the site of symbolic systems of power" (p. 11). Tactical media represents resistance as "fleeting, ephemeral, and subject to continual morphing" thus echoing Banet-Weiser's articulation of the ambivalence of contemporary online subversive gestures (Raley, 2009, p. 13). Tactical media, like the concept of ambivalence, obtains its power from its instability. Instability, after all, opens up space in culture for contestation. Within tactical media, the political criticism is subtle or even oftentimes covert (Raley, 2009, p. 15). In the struggle for coherent meaning, tactical media enables users to resist and become conscious of their own oppression (Raley, 2009, p. 18).

When users are able to inhabit spaces in tactical ways, they interrupt the commodification of their experiences. While this contested space does not stop user's testimonies from being commodified, digital platforms create possibilities for users to inject the experience, testimony or witnessing of trauma with a sense of authenticity and importance as a part of lived experience. The authenticity of expression that users experience online looks and feels like genuine engagement, and thus provides similar benefits to offline, authentic engagements. This so-called simulacrum of authenticity nurtured online can be just as powerful as an organic, offline experience. Further, this project disentangles the false assumption that economic development and human progress as mutually exclusive. If we consider the fostering of community in the wake of trauma to be a sign of human progress, and that progress can be made to some degree using the tools made available through digital spaces (regardless of ownership), then we can recognize that we don't have to resign ourselves to "a zero sum game between economic growth on one hand and human development on the other" (Couldry, 2014). In fact, Couldry (2010) uses

the work of Amartya Sen to urge consideration of ethics, human life, and human capabilities when examining neoliberal discourses and matters of voice (p. 16). This research is situated between a heavily neoliberal environment that has consistently been challenged by the potential of the tools of digital technology. Every day, users engage in their own storytelling online and as Orgad (2005) identifies, this narrative function needs to be recognized "as a socially significant experience" (p. 5).

Online meaning-making does not exist in a silo, rather, meanings cultivated online operate similarly to what Raymond Williams describes as lived experience: "The peculiar location of a structure of feeling is the endless comparison that must occur in the process of consciousness between the articulated and the lived" (as cited in Couldry, 2010, p. 94). The articulated for the purposes of this examination exists online, while the lived is experienced both online and offline. Individuals are interpolated through the media in many ways, and even in the unique space of quickly changing digital technology that is rife with "prosumption" (the act of producing and consuming by individual users), dominant and subversive representations permeate the boundaries of social media and social networking spaces that are central to online meaning-making practices. While there are many spaces that could enable the mediation of trauma from therapeutic and self-help spaces in legacy media, such as the safe spaces fostered by professionals, few of these offer the affordances that the digital offers, nor do they allow for individuals to fully mediate their own trauma. There is a specific way that the digital space makes possible what was not possible before. Through varying sensations and forms, the extent to which media and digital artifacts can operate is substantial. The aesthetic allowances of the online – the multimodal, multisensory, multimedia artifacts produced online – enable meaning formation in innovative ways. This production of cultural artifacts enables sharing and

progression of ideas, and in so doing, the digital media make possible that which was not possible before: the ability to represent and craft new images in personal yet universal ways.

Though seeing trauma is not always tantamount to experiencing it, trauma can occur by seeing the pain and suffering of others. The aforementioned discussion of witnessing and vicarious suffering highlighted how various actors and digital users can be distressed through the visceral experience of seeing trauma in digital space, particularly when looking at visual representations of suffering. As Sontag (2003) notes, when photographs render suffering real, spectators are forced to reflect on "how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering" (p. 103). Empathy, then, is significant to this research and operates on multiple levels. Empathetic viewers may view from a distance, they may engage in the communities as benevolent actors with a desire to help, or they may begin to participate in the communities as vicarious sufferers of trauma. Though empathy does not in and of itself indicate that viewers of trauma will suffer, empathetic viewing in online spaces can lead to vicarious suffering and trauma. This trauma can be contended with via the very tools that helped to cause it, but viewing of trauma is not without its problems. While empathy plays a big role in how viewers of trauma become participant witnesses or sufferers, there are those that view trauma that have no feelings of empathy, nor do they feel pain in looking at subjects that are most often hard to watch. This discussion would be incomplete without mentioning the way digital technologies, and the empowerment offered to users by the openness and flexibility of these platforms, are not benign. As Banet-Weiser (2012) in a discussion of Andrejevic's work highlights, these spaces need to be understood "as a coexistence between creative activity and exploitation" (p. 44). While these spaces may prove to be productive sites of meaning-making that enable coping in the face of trauma, they are also

spaces rife with what Banet-Weiser terms “voyeurtainment,” or the relentless self-exposure characteristic of the Internet age (p. 52). “Voyeurtainment” lends itself to spectacle and exploitation rather than productive discourse and empathetic viewing. Without dismissing this concern, I argue that agentic users inhabit digital space regardless of the voyeurism that goes on and much like with any media format, they acquiesce to the negative to engage in the productive, every day tactics that help them cope after trauma.

Meaning, as a driving concept in this research, and the main thing that is produced online is worth deeper engagement. Here, meaning is taken to indicate how people make sense of the world in order to navigate their lives within it. Meaning must be parsed out in relation to this research, particularly as it relates to trauma. Meaning, during traumatic times, becomes unstable, changeable and fluid. As Egnew (2009) notes with illness, “the conventional expectation of narrative involving a past leading into a present that foretells a foreseeable future is 'wrecked' by illness. The present is not what the past was supposed to foreshadow, and the future is too frightening to contemplate” (p. 171). This shift in pre-existing meanings and the disintegration of previous understandings of life worlds indicates that the best way to cope with trauma is to establish a new understanding of the event or experiences that dislodged the various “givens” of everyday life. Personal and collective meaning becomes important in understanding how individuals and groups navigate times during which their personal and social schemas, which allow them to “get up in the morning, go about a daily routine and strive for long-term goals,” are interrupted (Lee, 2008). As Emmons (2005) articulates, “the explanations that a person offers concerning ultimate issues – the nature of life and death, the meaning of suffering and pain, of what really matters in life – have profound implications for individual well-being” (p. 735). Most people are resistant to changes in “their basic assumptions about the world and

themselves" yet in the case of traumatic life events "individuals confront very salient, critical 'anomalous data,' for the victimization cannot be readily accounted for by the person's preexisting assumptions" (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, p. 116). As users seek to find places to express their positioning in a world of binary distinctions between traumatized and un-traumatized, sick and well, or able and disabled, they inhabit a sort of in-between space. Similarly, in moving towards digital platforms, through which sufferers articulate the disjunctures between who they were and who they are, they enter into a sort of digital in-between space that is enabled through technology, and in turn allows users to interrogate their newly created categories of self. The following section will bring together the various ideas and disciplines explored so far and push the boundaries of media and trauma studies to articulate what it is in the nature of the digital space that makes trauma testimony so possible. When suffering is abundant, meaning changes based on how trauma has impacted it, the following section attempts to understand how the possibilities and refusals opened up by users online have allowed for a way for trauma sufferers to make meaning and sense of their traumatic experiences.

MEMES, RE-MEDIATION AND PLAY AS TACTICAL MEDIA IN THE DIGITAL THIRD SPACE: USING THE AFFORDANCES OF THE TECHNOLOGY TO CULTIVATE MEANING AND SENSE-MAKING AFTER TRAUMA

The online realm, which enables the creation of a sort of "third space," allows for meanings to emerge in communities that exist because the participants have no other choice but to articulate and name the trauma they have experienced. After living through experiences dire enough to shift the very fabric of a person's everyday life, these individuals are left wanting for an environment in which new schemas can be developed. The online realm has the potential to afford users space for the negotiation of life-making schemas. These spaces are different from previous conceptual spaces that limited *space* to the reach of the body; rather, these disembodied

spaces tend to support freer performances of identity, thus enabling the meaning-making so central to dealing with and addressing trauma.

Hybrid spaces challenge homogenizing articulations of culture and allow for constructions of culture through negotiations of meaning. A hybrid space is a space of ambiguity and contradiction that points to a disavowal of authority that otherwise would not allow for this type of signification, and enables individual users and communities that form online to create new norms around what it means to engage with trauma. This hybrid space, through which these negotiations can take place, is a space of translation, imitation and re-mediation. There is very little produced that is truly new here, rather meanings overlap and displace one another. Bhabha and Rutherford (1990) note that "meaning is constructed across the bar of difference and separation between the signifier and signified" (p. 210). This meaning operates through a process of translation or "a process by which, in order to objectify cultural meaning, there always has to be a process of alienation and of secondariness in relation to itself" (Bhabha & Rutherford, 1990, p. 210). Furthering that point, Bhabha tells us that "translation is always a way of imitating, but in a mischievous, displacing sense – imitating an original in such a way that the priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact that it can be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum and so on: the 'original' is never finished or complete in itself" (Bhabha & Rutherford, 1990, p. 210). This ability to cultivate a simulacrum that is invested with meaning that is unique from the original meaning, is an important component of the third spaces that online users create through their interactions with and mediations of their traumatic experiences. The depth and possibility inherent in the playful nature of the third space, as it is enabled by the digital technology, will be explored in greater depth.

The playful nature of the third space is demonstrated by the way memes or other online posts get taken up by multiple users and expand beyond their original intent. While memes may often be silly articulations of the latest pop culture joke, they often carry with them deep-seated cultural beliefs. In exploring memes and meme culture – which will here be used to explore not just memes, but the way online posts shift, get shared, and are re-mediated online – scholarship must take up the question of how and why the Internet has becomes a trusted site for information gathering and personal sharing. it is interesting and important to examine why people go online in the first place and what happens when individuals enter a space that situates them somewhere in between their online and offline existence. Recalling Couldry (2012) indicates that people participate in mediated networks in order to presence themselves, it would appear that the quest for meaning-making in digital space would also be a quest to express voice. Balkin (2004) asks pertinent questions about digital speech and democratic culture, noting "instead of focusing on novelty, we should focus on salience. What elements of the social world does a new technology make particularly salient that went relatively unnoticed before? What features of human activity or of the human condition does a technological change foreground, emphasize, or problematize?" (p. 2-3). How, then, do these salient categories enable the act of presencing as Couldry understands it and, for the purposes of this discussion, how do individuals dealing with traumas presence themselves online and offline? In answering these questions, it is helpful to break down the acts taking place in the digital sphere that contribute to and cultivate culture. Culture is cultivated online through the act of sharing and participating in the system. Again looking to Balkin he sees digital space as a system of meaning,

> It is a cultural system as well as a political system. It is a network of people interacting with each other, agreeing and disagreeing, gossiping and shaming, criticizing and parodying, imitating and innovating. People exercise their freedom by participating in this system: They participate by interacting with others and by making new meanings and

> new ideas out of old ones. Even when people repeat what others have said, their reiteration often carries an alteration in meaning or context…they reshape, however imperceptibly, cultural conventions about what things mean, what is proper and improper, what is important and less important, how things are done and how they are not done (Balkin, 2004, p. 5).

Balkin goes note that humans are made of culture and what he terms the "digital revolution" enables innovation, sharing, and reiteration across borders and boundaries (Balkin, 2004, p. 12). Interesting in his discussion is the notion of reiterating, sharing and making new meanings from old ones, the very basis of memes in digital media.

Memes capture why digital spaces are captivating, given the remediatory nature of online social media. Memes and meme culture can provide insight into the way various digital technologies and platforms have afforded users the ability to re-mediate ideas, allowing new meanings to emerge. Many scholars agree that "human communication is a tool for sustaining and consolidating culture" (Piekot, 2012, p. 187). The nature of digital expression, as Piekot (2012) explains is "manifested in messages which are created in a way which blurs the boundary between what is true and false or real and artificial; another blurred boundary is that between the original and a copy" (p. 192). What is important here, is not the truth of any one form of expression, rather the meaning that it is imbued with and the meaning that any one user derives from it. Multimodal, multisensory internet memes are also intertextual, they constantly refer to previous texts in order to convey new messages and re-mediate previous ideas (Piekot, 2012). Memes, as online phenomena, are based on a concept first developed by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins "to describe the natural human spreading, replication, and modification of ideas and culture within his Darwinian hypothesis for cultural evolution" (Chen, 2012, p. 7). Dawkin's model of cultural development was based on the notion that ideas and knowledge would spread through imitation and transfer. Knobel and Lankshear (2005) describe the three

original characteristics of successful memes: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity (p. 1). Fidelity is the quality of a meme that allows it to be easily transferred and re-mediated, "fidelity has very little to do with truth per se and memes are often successful because they are memorable, rather than because they are important or useful" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005, p. 2). Fecundity is the rate at which an idea "is copied and spread" and longevity is simply the length of time that a meme stays relevant, "The longer a meme survives, the more it can be copied and passed on to new minds, exponentially ensuring its ongoing transmission" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005, p. 2).

Memes have an ability to create meaning online and offline, they do more than just "free[ing] the ten-year-old boy in all of us" (Senft quoted in Walker: Walker, 2010). Memes, in the third space fostered by the Internet, can shift consumption of media from passive to active, engendering new points of significance and fostering change. Memes make users feel like they are a part of something significant, something bigger than themselves. Knobel and Lankshear (2005) expand, "the power of memes to spread contagious ideas and to infect minds with particular ideas is widely recognized, and different groups have begun experimenting with meme engineering and distribution on quite significant scales" (p. 19). The potential of these memes is more than just the spreading of contagious ideas, rather it is the proliferation of meanings that have the capacity to mobilize individuals and nurture commitment to social causes and change (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005, p. 19). The meme is not the only online form that encodes cultural information and gives way to evolving meaning; the Internet in general, and social-networking sites specifically, provide space through which individuals can perform and play with their identities and recreate, re-mediate, and shift cultural ideas.

Third spaces, as types of hybrid, in-between spaces between the online and offline, are central to how meme-ing works. Based off the concept of the third place (for example a place

between work and home) the third space concept theorizes that there are "new digital environments for creating and nurturing forms of community bonds beyond the social spheres of home and work" and that "digital cultures express and mediate our vital need for meaningful social interactions and form an extension of our social experience" (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2012). Willett, Robinson, and Marsh (2009) indicate that "it is in this third space that the meaning of cultural objects is negotiated and in which dominant discourses can be contested" (p. 64). Borrowing from Bhabha's third space, Willett et. al. highlight that within the third space "different cultural signs and competing discourses exist alongside each other rather than eliding into each other, and in doing so, new meanings are able to be produced" (Willett et al., 2009, p. 65). Important to this consideration is the fact that, it is not the Internet or social-networking sites that form this third space, rather it is the range of possible uses of them that allow for the creation of a liminal space. The online environment facilitates the creation of the third space. The dimensions of space are no longer confined to the body, space

> is also a mental or conceptual dimension, one which may float free of any physical mooring, but which uses the notion of space metaphorically and may provide a means of imagining and giving expression to human possibility, cultural difference, the imagination itself, as well as social relations (Knott, 2005, p. 159).

Khan (1998) also utilizes Bhabha's framework to expand on the notion of the third space, "Bhabha's notion of hybridized subjectivity in the third space helps to explain how individuals negotiate the contradictory demands and polarities of their lives" (p. 464). This notion of third space challenges homogenizing articulations of culture and allows for the individual construction of culture through memes, online forums, social networking, religious and/or national texts. This space is a space of ambiguity and contradiction, a space that allows one to contest an identity that has been avowed to them and form new meanings, as well as foster new understandings of their identity for themselves and others.

Davies (2009) points out that the habit of accessing things online is "more about 'participation in online events' than 'keeping in touch'" and in that process of collaboration, texts emerge and are produced that have the potential to change identities and relationships (p. 108). Bargh and McKenna (2004) highlight how this potential is played out online. In talking about the Internet, they tell us that "although some welcome it as a panacea while others fear it as a curse, all would agree that it is quite capable of transforming society" and it is in fact human beings that are at the heart of the Internet's power. While many commentators worry that the Internet and social-networking sights isolate individuals, in fact, communicating with others online serves to strengthen offline ties and facilitates the formations of new close relationships in environments that offer relative anonymity and space away from physical stigma's that would otherwise be visible (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p. 583). In a study of online journal writing, Andrusyszyn and Davie (2007) found that journals that were shared not only enabled conversations with others, but led to introspective awareness of one's self and heightened cognitive awareness (p. 2). Digital spaces allow a broader range of resources for sharing to users, as well as a broader range of means and forms of communication through those resources. According to Börzsei (2013), Internet memes, and I would extend social networking/media, "showcase a new kind of understanding of the world, and a new kind of creative and social outlet" (p. 24). While the notion of re-mediation is nothing new, it has also never been so prominently featured in the mainstream (Börzsei, 2013, p. 25). The users of certain platforms on the Internet, through these modes of sharing, have developed a culture that is unique to that space, that transcends traditional cultural and geographical boundaries, and unites individuals based on common interests, thoughts or concerns (Marshall, 2005, p. 4).

The way individual users articulate thoughts, concerns, and petitions online, through memes or other playful and creative forms, allows them to enter into an as-if space where, through the liminality of the space, meaning can be contested as part of a complex set of media rituals that enable users to feel a sense of connection to community. Users go online in order to be a part of something, they participate in order to establish a new meaning-making schema and thus new understandings of their lives. In this process, digital users who respond to trauma are creating and participating in new ritual acts that can serve to shift the previous media rituals. Recalling that Couldry (2012) argues that media rituals serve to construct the myth of the sacred center (p. 61), often obscuring structural power by ritualizing media acts that feel personal and individualized, it is important to note that trauma is mediated through mainstream discourses that urge sufferers to survive and thrive in the wake of their tragedies. Images of suffering and trauma are also part of a routine viewing of tragedy which potentially fosters and furthers false notions of the normalcy of global power relationships. That said, these ritualized viewings of mediated traumas are some of many "reference points" that render some bodies and their suffering legible, while others are illegible and delegitimized as a part of dominant social categories and value systems. While this theoretical framing takes a critical lens in order to dissect the way these value regimes come to be, it is also important to account for the way individual online users may be going to digital spaces and using the affordances of the technology to reimagine social systems of classification. These users reframe media rituals in new spaces, thus creating fissures to society's sacred center and interpolating themselves and others in new, potentially meaningful ways. Couldry (2012), also notes that "the basic human rituals are very familiar: rituals that mark birth, death, marriage, the joining of a group, communication with the transcendent. Their subjects are linked to the basic human needs for order" (p. 71). Generally, research has shown

that in order to maintain a sense of normalcy in everyday life, people operate based on certain constructs or assumptions that guide a healthy life, when trauma interrupts these assumptions, norms and constructs and call into question the very fabric of who individuals are (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, p. 114; Kirmayer, 1992, p. 328). In times of trauma, the very systems of order that make apparent one's identity in relation to the social world are called into question thus it stands to reason that online users may be articulating their voice in ritualized ways in an attempt to be recognized by the mainstream culture but also by shifting, emergent ways of knowing.

The ritual, cultural practices of re-mediation help users do the work to separate their mediations of traumatic suffering from the ways they would be conceptualized in the mediated, social, sacred center that Couldry refers to, yet still enables them to, through symbolic communication, make sense of their world. Viewing traumatic events has become common place in modern mediated culture. The ritualized viewing of trauma can, as Carey states, "create the forms of social relations into which people enter" and impose order on chaos (Carey, 1997, p. 314). The liminal space created by online spaces are potentially generative and allow for new ritual constructs, and in these constructs we see meaning made and memories formed through everyday gestures, movements, and practices. Thus, this theoretical framework does not argue that as trauma sufferers and witnesses, users should not bear witness to and testify about suffering, rather users and scholars should be critical of the unequal flows of information, and the structural power dynamics that are obscured by viewing individuals who have suffered without understanding the context of their traumas. Rituals can help users negotiate existence in constructed, contingent, social worlds, and build social, cultural, and family capital that is important to the narratives individuals and collectivities create about themselves and their communities. Notably, however, these digital rituals are not available outside of certain contexts

and are not benign of power and this must always be a part of the critiques of these spaces. Further, repetition of events does not always serve to enable the cultivation of a sacred center, nor does repetition necessarily generate social and cultural capital for all or some of those individuals that engage in these ritual acts, thus digital engagement of trauma sufferers must be contextualized and studied on a case by case basis. Notably, Derrida argues that traumatic events and social wounds are constituted by and constitutive of the everyday. He recognizes the repetition of the everyday experience, what I term ritual, as a part and parcel of trauma itself: "What is a traumatic event? First of all, any event worthy of its name, even if it is a 'happy' even, has within it something that is traumatizing. An event always inflicts a wound in the everyday course of history, in the ordinary repetition and anticipation of all experience" (Borradori, 2013, p. 96). In making memes, in mediating their traumas, in creating social media snippets that are easily shareable and re-shareable, ever shifting and changing, growing meaning as it evolves, these users find ways to deal with the wounds of the everyday, the wounds that break down their rituals. Indeed, it is in the very act of ritualizing online sharing and producing meaning through re-mediation, users cultivate new rituals that, in the third spaces of digital expression, enable space for community formation, coping, and micro-fissures in the discursive constructs of traumatized subjects.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has developed a strong context into which this research is speaking, and has brought together multiple, inter-disciplinary theories of media and trauma to bear in ways that will be useful not just in examining the case studies central to this research, but also useful to exploring multiple cultural vicissitudes that are shared online. There are many impulses that this chapter intended to articulate relating to trauma and the media. First, by situating this theory building in

various critical theories that attend to representation and embodied articulations that interact with complex media institutions, there is a space through which to account for power, privilege, and neoliberal impulses that often empty out meaningful exchanges online. Through a survey of the literature around trauma and legacy media, this chapter then enabled the reader to imagine the way trauma has traditionally operated in and through media, and how media has treated trauma, through a critical lens while paying careful attention to discourses that are constructed. Finally, in identifying new and interesting theories in media studies and adjacent fields, this chapter allows for the bridging of existing trauma theory with media studies to provide a critical framework that can carry the work of individuals in online, digital spaces alongside the complex social and institutional forces of power that impact who, how, and what is put online and what gets proliferated on digital platforms. Central here is the notion that, while structures are sure to still speak individuals, and representations determine the way trauma, embodiment, and identity are understood, even within an oppressive structure, authentic, tactical expressions of self are possible. Further, these articulations have the potential to create fissures in dominant discourses around who is allowed to speak on trauma and in what way, potentially creating space for more invisible, suffering bodies to emerge. Though there must be an awareness that the often false promise of technology may lead users to be complicit in their own oppression, the following research highlights that, despite oppression, there is notable and useful meaning being produced online by and for those who have suffered traumas in their lives and chosen to testify to them in the digital third space.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE OF NEDA AGHA-SOLTAN
TRAUMATIC VIEWING, MEANING MAKING, AND MOURNING IN THE DIGITAL REALM

INTRODUCTION

In 2009 Iran went through a tumultuous summer. Following the contested results of the presidential election between Mir Houssein Mousavi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, thousands of people, young and old, men and women poured into the street, their silence ringing out as a protest against the Islamic republic and perceived manipulations of election results. This became known as the Green Movement. In the face of a largely peaceful protest that made careful use of Islam in order to give the government little reason to condemn the movement either rhetorically or legally, the Iranian state responded with unexpected force and violence making the images of this violence a call to action for change (Varzi, 2011). It was during these peaceful protests that the Basij military took to the streets confronting the Green Movement that evolved in the days following the election (For Neda, 2011). In the context of these protests, and through the instantaneity of new media, the world became captivated by an image of the death of a young woman on June 20, 2009. Neda Agha Soltan was participating in the protests that day. She walked down the street with her music teacher, her head scarf wrapped around her pony tail, a visor blocking the sun from her eyes. She was shot in the heart and a mobile phone camera graphically captured her death in a 47 second video that was subsequently posted to YouTube and aired all around the world (Hejazi, 2011). A second video, equally as brief, caught a second angle of her murder and it too became one of the most-watched videos on YouTube at that time.

The video was later picked up by news agencies on a global scale and seen both in online media and in the mainstream media.

Neda's death captivated the world. President Obama cited it as heartbreaking and she became the rallying cry for the revolution (Zelizer, 2010). Her name, in a strange irony, means "voice" and she was quickly claimed as the unequivocal voice of the opposition protestors in Iran. Neda's image has since been re-appropriated by the digital community and images crafted from the video of her death have been imbricated into meanings that are rooted in a number of domains, including religion, gender roles, and conflicts between modernity and tradition. It is with this that this case study begins. Neda's story highlights three separate but intertwined and significant instances of trauma. The first level of trauma is the death of Neda, the trauma she endured, and the trauma of her grieving family. The second level of trauma significant to this case study is the way her death was mediated and thus the trauma viewers suffered by bearing witness to her death as vicarious sufferers and/or empathetic viewers. The third important level of trauma is that of the Iranian nation and how collective trauma was mediated. As this chapter highlights, this trauma is wrapped up in complex ideas of collective and political memory and the way trauma and memory interact. The time of protest in Iran during 2009 was arguably a time of collective trauma, calling into question many of the status quo discourses that maintained Iranian society, however loosely. While this case study pays more attention to the mediations of the trauma of bearing witness, it is important to note that this case study is part of a context of a larger, cultural, collective trauma. Through analysis of the way death, trauma, embodiment, gender and religion are manifested in a series of social media posts and YouTube videos that re-mediate the imagery of Neda's graphic death, the power of the "third space" made possible by

digital media to alter a collective memory, enable coping and meaning-making, and express the desires and needs of a nation, and an entire generation comes to the fore.

NEDA: WHY SHE CAPTURED THE DIGITAL WORLD

A simple Google search of the name "Neda" will link you to graphic images of a young woman bleeding to death on the street, her gaze locking with the camera lens, as though to invoke viewer attention and emotion. Each of the videos of her death has had over two million page views as of January, 2017 (Wounded girl dies in front of camera, 2009). Her death was tweeted about, blogged about, and there was an on-going public outcry surrounding both her death and the alleged election fraud that led to her death. Christensen (2009) notes that even "two weeks after the Iranian elections, global 'tweets' (messages posted via Twitter) on Iran and the elections continued to flow at an astonishing rate" (p. 2). The proliferation of online media in the wake of the protests opened up an as-if space for mourners of Neda, who were precluded from mourning her death in Iran's public environments. It is significant to note the way, as Christensen (2009) argues, "Twitter, Facebook, YouTube etc also contributed to the dissemination of the iconic visual image of post-election Iran" (p. 3). With users on various digital platforms proliferating Neda's image, they in fact re-shaped her trauma as their own, embodying Neda, and intermingling their stories with hers, thus making her into an icon of their suffering and what they, as protestors, desired to overcome. Due to the way the images were taken up by media (both mainstream and digital media) and the immediacy the online environment provided, Neda and "images of her lifeless eyes staring into the lens of the camera, blood flowing from her nose and mouth, have become as familiar as those of the young Kim Phuc running naked down a street during the Vietnam war" (Christensen, 2009, p 3).

The response to the powerful imagery of Neda's death was immediate. In the days following her death, in various media and across platforms, Neda took on many forms and many labels. Based on the cross-section of videos and social media analyzed for this case study, the following is a brief list of the names that were given to Neda: "We are Neda," it was said in one context. Elsewhere, she was hailed "Martyr," and "Angel of Freedom," "Pillar of the movement," "symbol of struggle," "symbol of goodness," "The YouTube Martyr," and "Our Angel" (Neda, 2009; Burns &Eltham, 2009; Amnesty International, 2011). Later sections of this chapter examine in depth the power, symbolism, and meaning of the images, text, and videos briefly described here, yet, even at a glance it becomes clear that Neda was not just mourned, she was revered, she was hailed, and she was iconized as a martyr by those who bore witness to her death. As an article in *The New York Times* article explained just two days after her violent death, "the very public adulation of Ms. Agha-Soltan could create a religious symbol for the opposition and sap support for the government among the faithful who believe Islam abhors killing innocent civilians" (Fathi, 2009). The power of what had been witnessed and the power of witness itself, were almost immediately articulated and understood. A woman participating in a protest for her political freedoms and human rights could now be a symbol evoking prayer, faith and hope. Neda was an angel, a voice, and a symbol of a movement that used digital media to signify her importance.

The following chapter takes on one small subsection of the posts on YouTube, Twitter and in the blogosphere in order to discover and highlight how the mediation of Neda's trauma in turn constituted a trauma for her community and those who knew and cared for her, for those who witnessed her death that day, for those who witnessed her death online, and for the Iranian collective imaginary. Working from the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter three, that

attends to issues of identity and representation, cultural construction of discourse, feminist and disability studies, and trauma studies – all as they relate to traumatic experience online, several important background elements of Neda's narrative, trauma, and the testimony about her come to light. Neda went to the streets that fateful day in 2009 to engage in peaceful protests with her compatriots, what she became, through the mediation of the image of her dying, brings complex notions of identity, nationality, politics, violence, trauma, memory, imagination, gender and witnessing to mediated publics in a deeply visceral way. Witness, particularly in the case of Neda, operates in part through the media. Media witness is a complex space that forces users to occupy a space that is difficult to occupy, while also granting them the privilege of looking away. As Ellis (2009) notes, in media witnessing, "the monstrous and the mundane occupy the same space" (p. 74). And while media witnessing allows a digital user to partake in some part of hearing and seeing events, the discourse of the digital as well as the politics of representation play in important role in how an online user sees trauma. Zelizer (2004) notes that

> the visual, unlike the verbal, might best tell a story by strategically catching things in the middle. It depicts for its onlookers a moment in an event's unfolding to which they attend while knowing where that unfolding leads. This means that visual work often involves catching the sequencing of events or issues midstream, strategically freezing it at its potentially strongest moment of meaningful representation (p. 158).

Thus, when audiences see something represented for them within a particular political and historical moment, they use the meaning-making schema they have to make meaning from it. In witnessing Neda's death, digital users both erased and made legible her gender, her political and social identity, and in turn the political, collective, social imaginary of the Iranian protesters in the street. The various and contested meanings that a diverse swatch of digital users conveyed are endemic of their social locations and of the mediated environment that existed at the time of their online interactions. They did, as Zelizer (2004) notes, tell a story from the middle, from

what they saw and what they knew, and in so doing, they created and cultivated a new Neda, one that existed outside of the physical realm, one meant to embody their tragedies and traumas, and enable them to fight for justice and freedom.

THE CASE OF NEDA

Through analysis of eight YouTube videos and 30 social media posts on Twitter and websites/blogs that re-mediate and discuss the original video, it becomes clear that Neda went from being a "referential image to an iconic image symbolizing a greater cause and struggle" (Stage, 2011, p. 421). The content of the videos includes images of Neda, pre- and post-death, put to song or poem, and mash-ups of the original video. These videos are both in English and Persian, they include images of peace, angels, religious symbols, blood and freedom, there are multiple photos from the protests, slogans such as "where is my sister?" and the common slogan "where is my vote?" as well as ancient Persian and Zoroastrian imagery. One particular website that was deeply powerful to the re-mediation of the image of Neda implored users to embody Neda, as a symbol, by writing the words "I am Neda" or "We are Neda" on their bodies or on items that they held in front of their faces. This posthumous tribute site was run by Amnesty International under the URL Nedaspeaks.org and though this is no longer a live site, Amnesty International provided users who were moved by the plight of the Iranian protesters and Neda herself, with instructions to re-mediate her image in a particular way. They essentially provided users simple instructions as to how they could meme Neda's death and in so doing, proclaim solidarity with Iranians that suffered through Neda. Using what was previously the site nedaspeaks.org, Amnesty encouraged users to educate themselves about human rights in Iran to address Neda's death, which they term a "sea-change in political power in the world" (Boniadi & Jollett, 2010). Currently the URL that used to be images of users invoking Neda's image as their

own and embodying their suffering on their bodies, contains tribute messages to Neda posted over a year after her death, mostly in Persian. The introductory text reads, “One year has passed…we are 15,509 voices” and is followed by line after line of the phrase, “in memory of Neda” ("We Are All Neda," 2009). Further themes were perpetuated through digital media, in particular gendered and religious tributes to Neda, who was consistently represented and mediated as a fallen angel and an innocent victim of the Iranian government. All of these sites of mediation and re-mediation of Neda highlight how embodied suffering can be taken on by vicarious sufferers and empathetic witnesses through the deliberate selection of sites of protest through the concept of polymedia. Users who were traumatized by Neda’s death seek out specific, distinct spaces through which to articulate their suffering at the hands of what they have witnessed.

In the social media posts and YouTube videos analyzed, several themes appear. One is the language that evokes emotion. Many of the videos refer to Neda as an angel and beloved. In these videos, images of Neda in her daily life are juxtaposed with images of protests and set to song/poems. The songs and poems call out to Neda as a symbol of peace and a “prayer for the dissidents,” as well as using her image to represent an ancient Persian ideal of secularism or an Islam that bridges modernity and ancient Iranian values (“Neda”, 2010; A Poem for Neda Agha-Soltan, 2009). As Varzi (2011) explains, the Green Movement seen in 2009 was not a cry to return to a pre-revolutionary Iran, or to displace Islam. It was a manifestation of a desire to have separation of church and state, and a reclamation of Islam; the language surrounding Neda’s death and the tributes to her are clearly indicative of a call to action that harkened back to pre-revolutionary Iran. There are many videos in which her images are intermixed with images of roses, religious icons, clasped hands, and white doves. Other videos only reference her and do

not include the original imagery of her or her death at all. In one YouTube post, a man, Dr. Rafey Habib, stands in front of a black curtain, quietly reading a poem that urges Neda, in afterlife, to "let your love give birth to the Islam your poets dreamed" (Habib, 2009). In one video memorial to Neda, an Iranian poem calls posthumously on Neda to bring Iran back to its former glory (mikemcpd, 2009). The language used creates a careful balance of sadness and hope in the face of loss, re-appropriating that loss and creating a sense of religiosity from it. The overarching theme that unites all of the online posts examined as a part of this case study is the way each user who posted about Neda articulated a very outwardly authentic expression of grief, of mourning, and of vicarious suffering. She died, they bore witness to her death, and thus their suffering is collapsed together, now mediated across digital platforms. Neda, in effect, had died for these people and they articulated that they felt a sense of loss and responsibility to her, her death, and their country. The following section takes some of the highlighted data and examines the various meanings made present, as well as discursively explores mediations of power and identity with a particular focus on how the trauma of witness led to ritual posting, religious interpretations, and gendered representations.

Religion, Gender and Representation

In the various online expressions of grief around Neda, certain representational, cultural signifiers come to the fore and are important to articulate here in order to provide a functional analysis of the empirical data. The digital, cultural artifacts deploy various visual markers to articulate the battle between good and evil. This battle is one inherent to part of the pre-Islamic culture that existed in ancient Persia, namely Zoroastrianism taught practitioners to allow "good thoughts, good words, and good deeds" to rise over bad thoughts, bad words and bad deeds (Hejazi, 2011). Notably, religious imagery features prominently in many of the articulations of

grief and trauma related to Neda. Morgan (1997) discusses the ways in which religious images can be forms of comfort, but also ways in which aesthetics can be avenues for understanding the sacred, noting that the devotional image, such as those created for and about Neda, are seen as "a promise, a restless sign, a harbinger of that which awaits" (p. 31). Neda is taken up as a martyr and becomes a new religious symbol in the tradition of Marian devotions, she, like the Virgin Mary, stands as a sign of that which is possible for any Iranian, or revolutionary, fighting for freedom against an oppressive regime (Kamalipour, 2010). Neda, like other religious symbols, becomes a marker of the collective memory of a society, a collective memory which is articulated in the third space of the digital realm, in this case most specifically through YouTube. Morgan (1997) highlights how memory functions for groups as follows:

> The commingling, even apparent identity, of subjective and objective domains, of the mental image and the physical one, is noteworthy because it merges idiosyncratic memories with collective ones. The image lodged in one person's mind is simultaneously shared with many others and becomes a material link binding groups together…collective memories such as these naturalize a group's sense of the world, performing yet another vital act in the social construction of reality (p. 195).

It is important to note that it is not the digital realm itself that constitutes the creation of collective memory. Rather, the digital facilitates the process of memory creation outside of confines of traditional spaces. As Carr (2011) explains, "what gives real memory its richness and its character, not to mention its mystery and fragility, is its contingency" (p 191). Collective memory is contingent and relies on culture, history, and faith.

Significant to this analysis of why and how users articulated meaning around Neda's death and the trauma of witnessing it, is the way mediating her image and her life became a ritualized meaning-making process. Outside of traditional religious representations, re-articulations and re-mediations of religion in Neda's name, the ritual of posting made the trauma

of watching Neda die, a quasi-religious experience for users. Users, who perhaps felt helpless to change the fate of Iran and Iranians, appeared to find hope, comfort, and meaning in Neda's image, or more aptly, what they could do with Neda's image. The ritualized nature of the way trauma is viewed is a media ritual that can sometimes, according to Couldry (2012), serve to construct the myth of the sacred center. Individual, personal, and perhaps nontraditional acts often serve to entice people into participation with dominant media practices while obscuring the more insidious, structural power dynamics that operate at a systems level. Many users, in an attempt to recuperate their power and Neda's power, as well as make sense of the extreme violence and trauma that was taking place in Iran, went to digital media to make meaning. This ritual of mediation, while perhaps not powerful enough to overthrow a contested regime, did allow for meaning to be made in the wake of trauma. Recalling chapter three, rituals are cultural practices that allow users, through performance, to attach to and connect with a "media-related world" (Sumiala, 2013, p. 9). Thus, it is important to recognize the layered rituals that manifested online in the wake of the trauma of Neda's public death. She was both a religious symbol to users but also enabled a sort of quasi-religious ritual, where users could mourn her, pray with and to her, and cope with the trauma of watching a woman die, as well as the trauma of a fractured political and public space.

Neda's power, as a symbol, as a digital marker of trauma, and as a cultural figure that enabled Iranians and others to rally around the Green Movement protestors, cannot be examined without careful attention to gender politics. Grounding Neda in Iranian history and the context of the Iranian women's rights movements illuminates why imagery shared around her trauma, and the trauma of those who watched her die online, deployed specific gendered representations and how those meanings fit into the shifting discourse trauma, media, and Iran. Women were an

active part of the 1979 revolution to overthrow the Shah yet the revolution was hijacked from women and the road ahead, as Moghadam (2004) describes, "has been an arduous one for Iranian women. They were, first, the major losers of the Revolution, as they saw their legal status and social positions dramatically decline in the name of religious revival" (p. 1). Gender is built into political, social, and cultural practices and gender discourses and constraints faced by women in Iran limit their mobility and ability to respond to political opportunities (Moghadam, 2000, p. 60). In Iran, while women have made some gains that are marked by growing rates of literacy, more opportunities to work outside the home and obtain educations, and positions in the parliament especially through the 1990s, gains have been firmly situated within the structural and religious constraints of the Islamic Republic (Moghadam, 2004, p. 2; V. M. Moghadam, 2002, p. 1151). Both religious and secular women sought to oppose the repression they experienced under the Shah's regime but later found that the Islamic regime would strip them of civil rights and freedoms as part of a heavy handed patriarchal theocracy (Tohidi, 2002, p. 5). Given this basic understanding of Iranian women's feminisms we can conduct an analysis of gender and Neda, specifically in the mediations of trauma related to her death.

There has been public controversy about Neda's role and status as a protestor on the day she died. It has been claimed by defenders of the Iranian regime (in response to her rise as an icon of the movement) that she has been falsely identified as an innocent bystander when in fact she was an active participant in a political movement. Her gender has invited her representation as an innocent victim – almost a pawn – in a world of men who seek to debase and devalue helpless women (Kamalipour, 2010). In articulating Neda's innocence in this way, these users inadvertently turn Neda into an inherently disabled figure, her gender constituting a lack, her mediation constituting a desire and need to save her weak and less capable body and bodies like

her. In reality, Neda was an educated and autonomous member of society, a reality that suggested to many Iranians that her death was a possibility for any of them. At the same time, though, creating a discourse of the innocent and weak woman killed by the horrible patriarchal state, the images were able to mobilize a certain population outside of Iran through emotional appeals. The mediations of Neda that were proliferated after her death highlight the ways sufferers use digital frameworks to simultaneously inhabit liberating ideals that create fissures in oppressive social fabrics while still reinforcing dominant discourses on identity. Despite this characterization, there was a deeply passionate response to her death from both those who believed her to be an innocent bystander and those who knew she was protesting for change. Neda became a complex and nuanced symbol of the collective history of a group of people who had been misrepresented by their state and the West, but who now had participated in her death by viewing her murder (Mortensen, 2011). As an Iranian woman, she lived within various borders and embodied marginalized identities and her beauty, her dress, and her image subverted claims about women made by the Iranian regime (Kamalipour, 2010; Nafisi; 2010). The Basiji saw this subversion of the "traditional" Islamic beliefs, and feared the beauty that accompanied it; "God tells them to control it, they cannot, they kill it" (For Neda, 2011). Neda looms large, as a martyr, as a symbol, as a victim, and most centrally here, as a sufferer, precisely because she was a woman. More than just her gender, the way she inhabited that gender, with Westernized markers of beauty and innocence, made her a powerful symbol that people felt they could unproblematically rally behind. Sabety (2010) analyzed the ways in which Neda's video had an impact and how it "turned Neda into the Marianne or the female emblem of the uprising in Iran." She concluded that it is the very femininity and Western habits of Neda that made her so subversive and it is her femininity that make her a likely victim of the Iranian Islamic regime

(Sabety, 2010). By feminizing the uprising, she called attention to the women whose civil rights and freedom have been most deeply impacted by the Islamic regime in Iran (Sabety, 2010). This manifestation of women, made only through death, caused Neda to become sacred and, just as images of Mary are thought to reproduce tangible manifestations of the sacred, so does the image of Neda (Wojcik, 1996, p. 129).

IRAN, IMAGERY, AND DIGITAL MEDIA: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR NEDA

Central to the analysis of Neda, her trauma, and the 2009 trauma of protest that befell the Iranian people, at home and abroad, is the way Neda was a trauma sufferer, how her image caused vicarious suffering of trauma, and how those who bore witness to her death chose to mediate her trauma, their trauma, and ultimately the trauma of the Iranian protestors as a whole. Due to the complex historical context in Iran that fostered the situation that led to the 2009 protests in Iran, it is important to think about how trauma, mourning, grief and suffering operate publicly in Iranian society, as well as how digital spaces are differently employed. Notably, Duranti (2013) argues that

> The relevance of pictures in the understanding of the political history of contemporary Iran… is strictly connected to the advancement of what Walter Benjamin defined as the 'technological reproducibility' of the world of art. Indeed, the introduction and subsequent development of press and photography in Iran has exerted an enduring influence on the strategies of struggle employed by different Iranian dissident movements since the Qajar era. These advances allowed a broader circulation of new ideas and made possible the denunciation of state violence by means of visual elements (p. 1345).

As Duranti notes, the use of imagery for subversive movements in Iran is historically constituted, and is indicative of and important to any analysis of how digital media was deployed during times of political unrest. Much of the imagery circulated in Iran and by Iranian diaspora, generally, tends to take on a "hybridization of the Iranian cultural identity and the Western

media, both in terms of technologies and in terms of the language used to communicate the experience of exile" (Duranti, 2013, p. 1352). When considering the trauma that Iranian society went through as a collectivity through the protests of 2009 and in the mourning of Neda, it becomes important to recognize the power of imagery and the way images circulated online that enabled a certain type of expression to be portrayed and a certain degree of meaning to be produced. The visuals in this case highlight the double consciousness forced by powerful imagery, the viewers constitute the meaning around the image and the image constitutes the suffering of those who bear witness to the tragedy the image depicts. With the proliferation of cell-phone technology in Iran for both journalists and everyday citizens, a loosely if at all structured community of young people has emerged, and taken hold of a space to lay claim to violations of their human rights, personal freedoms, and various deeply felt inequalities perpetuated by the Iranian government (Duranti, 2013, p. 1354).

The cultivation of this hybridized, space for dissidents to embody their suffering and protest is, in part, constituted by the affordances of the digital technology. The ability for images to be quickly made and re-made, combined with the possibility of digital spaces for discourses that subvert dominant social discourses makes the playful, as-if space of online expression quite powerful. The oppression encountered by Iranian citizens and diaspora, who choose to embark on a journey of online protest, can be seen on a broad level as a collective trauma which they are, as a society, using the affordances of digital technology to respond to. Further, the witnessing of the death of Neda traumatized both those individuals who cared for her and knew her, but also those who bore witness to her death and suffered vicariously due to the graphic nature of it, and the circumstances that led to it. Neda's death, and the ability to represent it, remake it and portray it in various ways via digital media, served to re-inscribe the pain of the Iranian people on her

body and infuse that pain into the image-object she had become. In the ways that Neda's death was taken as a collective, national loss, her death also highlighted the way community's form after trauma and use digital media to cement action – both action that subverts the dominant discourse, and action that reifies the trope that trauma must be overcome. Neda became a subversive symbol in the way her trauma was taken up by audiences and framed in the language of martyrdom, most often language used by the regime. Her role was no longer that of trauma sufferer alone, she was a martyr and thus her death was relevant to all those who believed she died for them, and her martyrdom was perpetuated by the tactical nature of media, as well as the spaces for expression of voice online. She was not, unlike other martyrs, a figure that was palatable to the Iranian regime. The act of watching Neda's death on YouTube, and the various modes of re-mediation of that death, serve as concrete examples of the possibility of online spaces to respond to offline foreclosures of discourse. These acts of everyday witnessing inhabit that space of expression of voice through tactical media. Sharing and articulating voice online is a productive and political act, and there can be a recognition of the mediation and re-mediation of the images of Neda as micro-political gestures that took advantage of the communicative opportunities (via polymedia) of the digital space to tactically inhabit the various structures of control in order to manipulate and resist them (Couldry, 2010; Madianou & Miller, 2013; Raley, 2009). Given the way the Iranian government was curtailing both access to information for its citizens and inhibiting spaces of public mourning for Neda, users went online to disrupt those structures through their digital expression. While they did not overthrow the system that bound them in many ways, users took advantage of the instability and ambivalence of digital mediation and produced meanings that allowed them to contend with the trauma of Neda's death, the

trauma of seeing her death, and the trauma their government and the 2009 protests inflicted on their nation.

It is further meaningful to recognize that the visual, digital culture does not just go online and then exist only there. In fact, Neda was part of a very specific third space that allowed her to exist on and offline, even after death. In today's society sacred spaces exist beyond the brick and mortar confines of churches, mosques and synagogues. The dimensions of space are no longer confined to the body, space is fluid, and as Knott (2005) reminds us, space allows for the imagining of human possibility and difference. Engagement in an online, digital space, that uses narratives provided by real people who suffer, facilitates the creation and maintenance of a unique space that bridges the online and offline worlds into a sort of as-if space. Important to, and often neglected in, explorations of the digital is the importance of the body and the embodied subject, as well as how the body interacts and interpolates itself through the digital realm. Kraidy (2016) notes, "the body is an important medium, but it is also more. The body integrates our physical world with our subjective feelings, our social experiences with the meanings they hold…But the body also extends in social space…by connecting ideas and action, perceiving, producing, processing, and dissemination images and feelings, the body is a linchpin of revolutionary change" (n.p.). Bodies enable users to make meaning and express that meaning in the digital realm, and bodies also enable users to reconstitute themselves, their bodies, and meaning in an offline space.

The trauma of Neda is one such example of the body fluidly traversing the boundaries of online and offline existence and meaning production. Users, in trying to remake the life-making schema that narrate their daily lives, engaged in a process of representing Neda as both a digital marker of their suffering, but also a physical, offline representation as well. Neda's image since

her death has been commodified and the images of her have been "thingified." Neda has become a tangible, offline thing that can register similar meanings to her online image, this is done by making her into an image-object. There are a variety of Neda products that were and remain symbols of counter culture for those who wear or use them (Stage, 2011, p. 430). The transformation of Neda into a symbol of a counterculture, particularly those instances in which her image is used to elicit a new kind of religious response, are akin to images of the Virgin Mary and the way those images have been deployed throughout Mexican history. There, the Virgin can be seen as a "symbol of counterculture inviting her believers to escape the restraints of established order in the hope of communion…her purity carried the promise of redemption" (Taylor, 1984). The physical representations of Mary, and thus Neda, border on idolatry but powerfully show how such images can become iconic and meaningful. Notably, when it comes to traumatic experience, these representations and articulations of female figures highlight what Appadurai (2015) names as the process of religion, mediating "between the invisible and visible" (p. 228). When examining technological mediations of an offline event, such Neda dying in the street, it is important to recognize the way traumatic death deepens this experience of media bringing together ideological concepts with embodied experiences. Zelizer (2010) uses Neda's image to elaborate on how powerful images of death implicate the viewer in what they are seeing. By giving the viewer a sense of being a bystander in a murder, the video of Neda elicits an emotional and visceral response that has thus given her a kind of eternal life on the Web. The digital realm gives Roland Barthes concept of "third meaning," in which viewers understand not just literal and informative meanings but also symbolic ones, a new place to thrive (Zelizer, 2010, p. 12). In the case of Neda, the digital response is indicative of a place in which bystanders and those who bear witness to her death can express the symbolic significance that transcends

the pure informational qualities of the video. As one blogger put it, access to Neda's death gave Americans access to their own humanity (Zelizer, 2010, p. 11). The video of Neda as she is about to die makes sense because it pushes the subjunctive nature of the visual; the visual "situates action within the hypothetical" thus adding uncertainty to the images and making it so they can reappear and resurface in different contexts (Zelizer, 2010, p. 14). Neda's video and image has done just that. In addition to the YouTube tributes to her, there were masks and posters made that carried slogans such as "We are all Neda" and "We are all one Neda, we are all one calling" ("We Are All Neda," 2009). These physical manifestations of Neda allowed protesters and supporters around the world to embody their protest against the Iranian regime and injustice against humanity (Stage, 2010, p. 421).

Neda's significance as a new quasi-religious figure is manifested through the response to her death that continues to captivate viewers. There is a sense of hope in her death. Just as the Guadalupe was important to Mexico, Neda is important to Iran "not only because she is a supernatural mother, but also because she embodies their major political and religious aspirations" (Wolf, 1958, p. 37). Neda stands in an esteemed tradition of prominent Iranian and Muslim women. Just as Anahita, (renamed Holy Masoumeh in Islam, the sister of the eighth Shia imam revered for being immaculate) was honored for dying young, virginal and innocent, Neda is honored (Hejazi, 2011). While Neda was a twenty something, outspoken, modern, divorced woman, her beauty caused her to be seen as innocent, the truth of her identity had little bearing on her representation in the digital world. She was said to have had no political affiliations and was, in many respects, considered an innocent bystander (Fathi, 2009). This gives her much of her power. As Bryan Joseph Costales has said, "When a tyrant dies, his rule ends. When a martyr dies, her rule begins" (Stage, 2010, p. 429). Neda's power is in the meaning her image evokes.

Her name means “voice” and her death is now seen as a calling. The digital realm made devotions to this calling and to this martyr possible – and even more importantly – accessible. Her power exists in the digital realm. YouTube and other social media gave Iranians, both in Iran and in the diaspora, a space to express themselves with relative anonymity and without censors and the fear of the Islamic regime in Iran (Kamalipour, 2010). They also constituted important aesthetic affordances, new capacities and capabilities for articulation and expression. “Whatever her political stripes, Neda has now attained the iconic status of a hero-martyr of the postelection protests” and this process was facilitated greatly by social networking (Naghibi, 2011).

GRIEVING ONLINE: THE VICARIOUS TRAUMA OF WITNESS

On June 20, 2015 at 6:25 a.m., on the sixth anniversary of Neda’s death Mehdi Heydarian tweeted an image of Neda that pictured her prior to her death, without her hejab, fully made up, looking beautiful (Heydarian, 2015). Above the image the text read

> #NedaAghaSoltan
> Birthday: 1983
> Flight: 2009
> Death: Always alive

Tweets like the one Mehdi Heydarian posted, substantiate the notion that Neda, to those who suffered empathetic or vicarious trauma by virtue of witnessing her death, exists beyond the years of her physical life. Her image, her story (either true or manufactured by online mediations), and her legacy are interwoven in a complex web of identity, collective memory, representation, and mediation. In sharing the grief around Neda’s death and the digital immortality of Neda, Heydarian presenced himself as a mourner and sufferer, expressed voice, and performed those actions for Neda posthumously. Musical tributes, stylized photos of Neda’s

bloody face, and admonitions of those who killed a "peaceful protestor" fill Twitter, even now, years after her death. Users lament the fact that the Iranian regime prevents the ceremonial commemoration of Neda's death, thus they take their trauma into the digital realm. Digital users protested hard line politics with the immortality of their new angel, as one user said, "they may try to erase the cries for freedom and democracy that echoed in Iran's streets, but they can't remove #NedaAghaSoltan from our hearts" (Yazdi, 2015).

This project had hoped to include an audience study that consisted of guided narratives from digital users in order to ascertain their reasons for and intentions in participating in online communities that address suffering in one way or another. While Chapter two of this dissertation highlights the challenges in obtaining those narratives, various people were willing to come forward for this case study. It seems that the case of Neda's death, as it related to political protest, was something digital users, and in turn vicarious and empathetic sufferers, wanted to keep in the spotlight. There were four users that were willing to come forward. One user was Yasamin Beitollahi, a social media and public relations advisor and journalist who often writes about Iran for *The Huffington Post*. Despite her enthusiasm about sharing the knowledge she had cultivated in participating in online communities for Neda, she was not able to write a narrative in due time for this project while maintaining her work with various organizations. Another author-activist who wanted to help propel research on Neda forward was Maryam Jamshidi, an author, lawyer, and activist, but she too could not provide a narrative because of her book tour for her book, *The Future of the Arab Spring.* Despite their inability to respond, I found the enthusiasm of these very prominent actors in the disparate communities that came together around Neda's death to be an interesting data point. Rather than relegate their grief to polymediatic, deliberate, anonymous curated corners of the Internet, digital activists in this case

did not fear venturing out of the bounded spaces of the digital platforms; rather, they sought to bring their reflexive engagement with her death, and its political importance, into a greater spotlight. The story of Neda, and what she came to mean to the Iranian people and their supporters both inside and outside of Iran, points to the power of mediation, of meaning-making, and of post-traumatic articulations in the digital realm. Taylor (1991) notes that individualism brings forward an "ethic of authenticity" through which individuals often feel pressure to articulate a "moral system" that encapsulates their sense of right and wrong. Here, it becomes clear that, with the trauma of Neda's death, users felt a pressure to articulate new meanings around what was right, and to cultivate meaning from tragedy. This work that these users perform, in constantly and consistently articulating meaning around Neda's death, and their willingness to come forward to share their experience of vicarious suffering, highlights the way digital participants, particularly when the trauma is political, take advantage of spaces in which technology registers, publicizes, and makes legible "corporeal dissent" (Kraidy, 2013, p. 287).

In soliciting narratives from digital users, I found it particularly important to ask Arash Hejazi, the individual that tried to save Neda's life and whose friend took the video of Neda on that fateful day in 2009, to articulate from his own perspective why he felt the need to mediate her death in the way he did. Dr. Hejazi, who is in exile in England, wrote his memoir *The Gaze of the Gazelle* through the lens of what he saw and participated in on the streets of Tehran in 2009. In posting the video that his colleague took on the Internet, Dr. Hejazi notes, "I knew it was a dangerous thing to do. But I was furious at the injustice I'd just seen. I hadn't been able to save Neda, and I was in a state of despair. In those moments, it was the only thing I could do" (Mattin, 2011). Despair and desperation, in causing fissures in the world-making schema that account for individual's beliefs, force changes in the way people position themselves in the

world, and thus forces action in articulating the disjunctures caused by trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Emmons, 2005). Notably, those who suffer by experiencing and witnessing a traumatic event, as Dr. Hejazi did, exist in an in-between space that, in many ways, functions in and through technology, and allows users to interrogate the new categories of self that were forced to light by the experience of suffering. When I contacted Dr. Hejazi, while he was unable to provide a full narrative he provided the following statement:

> Many thanks for your kind email and support. Neda represents the new generation in Iran. The world was shocked when they were faced with the fact that a whole new generation existed in Iran, born after the Revolution, who wore jeans and sneakers, didn't care for their Hijab, and were ready to fight for their basic rights. She symbolized that generation and gave the message to the world. That's why her death was so impactful (Hejazi, 2011).

Dr. Hejazi calls on a few notable identity markers that touch upon gender, generational discourse, ideals of freedom as both Western and democratic, as well as how representation operates through death. Without explicitly calling upon gender, Hejazi notes that Neda was representative of a generation that did not care to wear Hijab, he notes her characteristically Western dress, and that this, in a way, made Neda's message accessible to the world. Working from a feminist, post-structuralist framework, these representational, identity categories that Dr. Hejazi interpolates Neda through, indicate the way media witnessing operates through discourse, and often dominant discourses. Recalling Peters' (2009) argument that media witnessing of traumatic events, "entails many of the most fundamental issues in the social life of signs" that enable the transformation from experience to discourse, we can see how Dr. Hejazi transformed his experience into the discourse that often governs femininity in Iran (p. 27). This framing of Neda, however, enters into the online realm where it can be re-mediated over and over according

to the logic of playful meme-ing, thus locating in the narrative of gender a possibility to unravel it.

The discourse around secularity and freedom is one that builds from mediated discourses both inside and outside of Iran. This is a discourse that uses markedly binary distinctions in order to situate freedom as Western and oppression as non-Western or in this case, Islamic. While women are subjugated in Iran by nationalist laws and a patriarchy that is proliferated and perpetuated through religion, the discourse around gender and freedom is often problematic and complicated (V. Moghadam, 2004, p. 5). Women were very much at the center of 2009's Green Movement. The women who participated in this protest movement lived within various borders and embody marginalized identities in many ways. Paidar (2001) contextualizes women's contested identities through their forms of protest,

> Secular middle-class women demonstrated their objection to forced hijab on a daily basis and irritated the authorities over the color, size and shape of their hijab to no end. Secular middle-class youth in Western fashion outfits fought daily battles on the street with the anti-corruption police. The subjugation of women and youth became the main preoccupation of the authorities, who every now and then gave up their street battles with half-covered women and young men mixing in public, but resumed them when they went too far (p. 5).

This examination is just one facet of a complicated feminism that exists in Iran. While many women push back against religious norms and ideas, many other women seek a religious reinterpretation of Iran rather than a secular transformation (V. M. Moghadam, 2002). Najmabadi (2005) advocates for a widening of the scope of history considered by Iranian feminisms, problematizing the selective histories that situate the women's movements in Iran firmly against the backdrop of the Iranian revolution. Many scholars argue for the possibility of an Islamic feminism that reappropriates religious symbols, while secular feminists argue the

enthusiasm about so-called Muslim feminisms "obscures the fact that in a country like Iran, Islam is not a matter of personal spiritual choice, but rather a legal and political system" (V. M. Moghadam, 2002, p. 1148). There is a great complexity in articulating, examining, and representing women's rights in Iran. Feminist post-structuralism and feminist disability studies would push to find the instability in the various constructed categories that exist for Iranian women, for example the binary of secular versus Islamic, and seek to position neither as a lack or disability, rather to perceive them on a continuum that is related to and intertwined with politics, power, representation, and mediation within and outside of Iran.

The final narrative testimonial I was able to acquire as a part of this research came from a blogger named David Morisset, who wrote a poem the day after Neda's death entitled "30 Khordad 1388" reflecting the Iranian date of Neda's death. The poem is as follows:

> A voice says, "Cry." And I said, "What shall I cry?"
> (Isaiah 40: 6)
>
> Thick black hair pulled primly back,
> Almond eyes dark like charcoal,
> Olive skin recalling velvet.
> Then the rush of red
> And the cries of her companions.
> Oh … those cries!
> Before we wept with them.
>
> She looked like the Persian girls,
> Who graced our offices,
> And worked with us
> So they could learn English.
> Yet somehow they taught us
> About their courteous country
> Before we realized.
>
> They were blessed by curious energy,
> Smiles brimming over with goodwill,
> Laughter like music in their voices,
> Calling each other 'joon'.

Perhaps members of her family
Breezed through our peripheral vision
Before we went home again.

We were all so young then,
Living in 1970s Tehran
At a time when we heard
Its people knocking noisily
On the doors marked 'freedom',
Seemingly prised open,
Before once more slammed shut.

They're still knocking.
We can hear them in cyberspace.
Now they're calling us with pictures:
A voice too loud to ignore today.

* On this day (20 June 2009) a young Iranian was murdered by a Basij sniper in Tehran. Videos of her terrible death screened on internet sites all over a justly horrified world. Her name was reported as Neda, meaning 'voice,' or 'call', or 'cry' (Morisset, 2009).

I came across this poem as a part of the tweets that circulated with the hashtag #NedaAghaSoltan. After connecting to Morisset's poem through Twitter I reached out to him via the comments section of his blog, to see what prompted him to write a long-form piece of communication about Neda, as well as retweet his poem on the anniversaries of Neda's death each year. In this narrative Morisset notes that his initial reaction to the video of Neda's death was one of horror (Morisset, 2015). Before delving into his narrative I will first examine the themes in the poem "30 Khordad 1388" in order to highlight themes that are akin those found in other online mediations of Neda's death, and the larger Green Movement. Throughout the first stanza, Morisset clearly calls upon markers of gendered beauty such as likening her skin to velvet. Later, in the second stanza Neda is conceptualized as a "girl" as opposed to a woman, her innocence and her desire for freedom, here bound to learning the English language, paramount to her being a legible victim. In the third stanza there is apparent a clear affinity between Morisset and the Iranian people, he notes the fervor of the years before the revolution and the way

freedom seemed to be on the other side of what Khomeini promised. He harkens back to revolutionary discourse, playing to what Varzi (2011) notes are "deep roots in postcolonial and mystical philosophy that, even after a revolution gone awry; a ten-year bloody war; and 30 years of economic, social and physical hardships, has not yet been made obsolete" (p. 53). Morisset, throughout the poem, refers to youth, seemingly equating youth with the hope that allows for protest to occur. Notable in his fifth stanza is how he refers to "cyberspace" as the space through which the protest, which led to many doors closing upon revolutionaries, continues via digital mediums. He notes, "Now they're calling us with pictures: a voice too loud to ignore today" (Morisset, 2009).

Morisset's argument about the visual is pertinent to this case study, as well as the overall theory around trauma and media explored here. When examining mediations of trauma, visuals are seemingly "harder to ignore" than other forms of media. Trauma freezes its subjects, whether those who live the trauma or witnesses to the trauma, in a contingent, subjunctive space (B. Zelizer, 2010). Visuals, particularly when situated in this subjunctive, as-if space, call upon digital users in powerful ways, the images calling upon user and the user calling upon the images, both looking for meaning. Mitchell (2005) notes that visuals force viewers to "reckon with not just the meaning of images but their silence, their reticence, their wildness and nonsensical obduracy" (p. 10). Morisset's text, like many of the other mediations of the trauma around Neda's death, calls upon the voice of the visual. Morisset's post, as others, fits within three visual themes. Posts often discuss or use imagery of Neda in three main formats. The first are stylized, meme-like images of Neda, the second are images of the cell-phone video of Neda's death, and the rest are images of Neda, usually without her Hijab, where she is alive and well, most often smiling in the sunlight. All of these types of images serve to create a specific set of

meanings around Neda, meanings that highlight her oneness with other, non-Islamic victims, as well as meanings that distance Neda from her actual existence and construct her into a symbol that can be taken on by those who suffered in watching her die. Morisset's poem makes Neda into a figure of love, a memory, and a marker of hope in the sense that her death can be overcome in what he terms "cyberspace." The descriptive nature of Morisset's poem is powerful and telling as to how the voice of the visual motivated Morisset. This poem was shared on Twitter with the caption "the rush of red" and an image of Neda's headstone covered in flowers (Morisset, 2015).

I asked Mr. Morisset to identify the reasons why he wrote about Neda. He first outlines his background, having spent two years in Iran at the Australian embassy in Iran, he bore witness to much of the unrest that characterized Iranian society in the 1970s. He has a clear understanding of the revolution noting that in the 1970s Iran was in a space where rapid social change and economic growth was possible but "the hijacking of the Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters robbed Iran of that chance" (Morisset, 2015). He makes a clear distinction between a secular reformation of the Iranian government and what he witnessed in the rhetoric of the Green Movement, articulating the way the protestors wanted "targeted reforms" rather than an overthrow of the power structure. Morisset found himself faced with the question of how to respond to what he had seen. He notes he was struck by the cries of those who were with Neda that day, sounds clearly audible in the video of her about to die. He noted how her plight reminded him of the following:

> I also remembered the Bible verse from Isaiah (Is 40: 6 ESV) where the Old Testament prophet is urged by God to "cry" (sometimes rendered "shout" or "speak" in less exact translations). The prophet's response is "what shall I cry?" So I faced the same question. How could I, as a writer and poet, respond to what had happened to Neda? I had been working on a novel partly based on my own experiences in 1970s Tehran. At the centre

> of the narrative was a relationship between a naïve Australian diplomat who had fallen in love with a young Iranian woman, again drawing on some of my own history. In the YouTube clip of Neda I saw that her facial features were very similar to those of the lady I had known three decades ago. That gave me the first three stanzas of a poem about Neda's murder that was intensely personal. (Morisset, 2015).

It is particularly interesting here how, like many others, Morisset turns to religion, or in other words, a world or life-making schema, to enable him to make sense of what he has seen. Returning for a moment to Appadurai's (2015) notion of mediants, he argues that "mediation, media, and materiality" are "mutually constitutive processes" (Appadurai, p. 222). Appadurai goes on to argue that "materiality is the side of what mediation – as an embodied practice – reveals" and that religion is a way through which individuals navigate anxiety about "the relationship between the visible and invisible orders" (Appadurai, 2015, p. 224). Morisset very clearly, and in a way that is strikingly self-aware, turns to religion as a way through which to cope with what he witnessed in regards to Neda, as well as personalize an embodied experience with a woman in Iran, through Neda's trauma, and his trauma of bearing witness to her death. He navigates the materiality of his own experience in Iran, alongside the possibility inherent in the Green Movement, and finally he universalizes Neda. For Morisset and others, Neda was not just one woman who died on the street, her image represented other secular yet religious women like her. Her images captured and made legible the complexity of the Iranian female body and her image was an image of a woman that Western audiences related to, cared about, and placed their own narratives on.

Morisset also provided a sense of why he chose to discuss "cyberspace" and social media in the last stanza of his poem:

> The final verse refers to the role of Twitter and YouTube in the Green Movement's attempts to make the world aware of their attempt to regain lost freedoms. In particular,

> we could not hear Neda's "voice" or hear her "cry out", but we had watched her die and in that death the tyranny of the Iranian regime was evident for all to see. Given the meaning of Neda's name there is bitter irony in this situation that underlines the utter tragedy of her death. So, as I wrote the poem, it seemed impossible that her silent "voice" (or "cry") could be ignored. Later events, of course, proved me wrong. (Morisset, 2015).

Morisset clearly identifies many of the symbolic meanings highlighted throughout this chapter, that were found across platforms, in social media mediations of Neda's death. He notes the parallel between Neda's posthumous voice and her name, hoping like many others did, that her voice would live on through the graphic imagery of her death. Like many others posts, Morisset's powerful conclusions operate on the assumption of Neda as a simultaneous innocent victim and powerful protestor, thus inhabiting and perpetuating many of the conflicting narratives that emerged about Neda's motivations to attend the protest on June 20, 2009.

While, for methodological reasons it was quite difficult to obtain narratives from many of the participants in the various communities I looked at, Morisset's statements about why he participated in Neda's mediation online are indicative of the importance of struggle to protestors, activists, and allies of those suffering. His comments also clearly indicate the suffering he endured in watching her, thus personalizing her story to encompass his nostalgia for his time in Iran. While Morisset concedes that the outcome of the Green Movement, Neda's death, and the overall activist movement in Iran was not what he had hoped or anticipated his narrative nods towards an important process of meaning-making as an important by product of protest and mediation of trauma. Meaning-making is an important act of material bodies engaging with technologies to testify to and narrate their suffering and trauma, even the trauma of witness.

CONCLUSIONS

Neda suffered a trauma the day she was shot in the streets of Iran. Her family suffered a trauma in being able to witness the catastrophic way she died. The public who walked the streets that

day with Neda suffered a trauma in bearing witness to her death. Those who saw her death in legacy media or online suffered a trauma in seeing the gruesome way she died. Those who re-mediated her story and took on their vicarious suffering and empathetic suffering made meaning in digital spaces. These users empirically exemplify the way the digital realm fosters a space for subversive, resistive meaning-making and allows for discursive possibility, while still highlighting the complexity and problematic nature of the Internet to shape, re-tell, morph, and subsume a story according to the social locations, politics, commodification, and desires of the users who are so deeply moved, and often traumatized, by what they have seen online. The individuals that posted after witnessing Neda's death most often did more than simply witness. These users vicariously suffered from Neda's death, leaving them with a void of meaning and a need to mourn what they had seen. They too suffered, viewing in such a way that they felt themselves benevolent actors with a responsibility to respond to what they had seen. Thus they took up the call and mediated Neda making her into a martyr, an icon, an innocent victim, and an angel. While the cases enumerated here are small, the in depth analysis of their content and their interpretation through the unique theoretical lens of this dissertation highlights the ability of digital space to be used to foster processes of meaning-making when life-making schema are shifted or destroyed by traumatic events.

CHAPTER 5

KEVIN OGAR, CROSSFIT, AND ENGAGING WITH TRAUMA ONLINE

INTRODUCTION

As CrossFit is proliferated around the United States, it is both loved and hated. CrossFitters, as they call themselves, offer a ringing endorsement of their sport's ability to make an athlete out of anyone. Critics and detractors offer a scathing dismissal of its extremity as a form of exercise and as a mindset that encourages "beast mode" and full immersion in its subculture (Abbott, 2012). CrossFit, the "sport of fitness" as it is known to its practitioners, is a "broad, general and inclusive fitness" started by Greg Glassman over several decades, but only gained traction in the early 2000s and is now prolific across the United States ("CrossFit: Forging Elite Fitness"; Glassman, 2007). CrossFit is a "for-profit gym franchise … that now has 13,000 licensed operators serving at least two million exercisers…" (Oppenheimer, 2015, np). CrossFit gyms, or "boxes" as they are known more widely, are barren, industrial warehouse spaces in which athletes use "rigs," ropes, boxes and barbells to perform a variety of movements from pull ups to Olympic lifts. Workouts, which are intended to be uniformly performed across the country daily and known as WODs (Workout of the Day), are quick, intense and scalable but there is a certain pride in doing workouts as prescribed, and times and weights are posted on a community white board in order to foster *friendly competition* between participants. CrossFit is more than a workout, it comes with a diet and lifestyle change, as well as with an attitude that helps in creating a sort of composite CrossFit persona. To participate in CrossFit is to participate in the CrossFit mindset, one of mind over matter, unyielding commitment to goals, and a desire to push one's body past the point of fatigue towards an ideal of performance.

There is an element of ritual in the participation in CrossFit and its attendant culture. Cultures, and their respective constructions, happen though various mediated and embodied experiences through time and space. Oppenheimer (2015), in *The New York Times*, notes that "CrossFit – like television, sports fandom and health fads – has become the focus of study by researchers trying to pinpoint what constitutes religiosity in America" (n.p.). This space, that has come to embody what a church does for its parishioners, breeds a culture of adherence, commitment, and an ethical and moral framework all its own (Oppenheimer, 2015, n.p.). In effect, CrossFit establishes a world view for its most devoted followers, As Professor Joseph Price of Whittier College argued to Oppenheimer, a religion is that which shifts the world view of those that adhere to it, in that sense CrossFit is both religious and devotional. CrossFit, outside of the context of trauma, suffering, or witnessing of trauma, cements its ideologies online through sophisticated campaigns, memes, and community engagement in digital spaces. In fact, in popular culture references about CrossFit it is sometimes joked that a workout never happened, if it is not represented online. Hoover and Lundby (1997) enable us to think about this representation and devotion broadly in the context of the religious by recognizing that, "media consumption is rooted in human ontological imagination and practice and media may therefor play a quasi-religious role in everyday life" (p. 7). Being that Glassman considers himself a steward of sorts, it is not unreasonable to recognize the way this offline community would exist online and how, in times of trauma, it might insulate itself both from criticism, but keep, at least some of its practitioners supported and well-cared for. This chapter explores the case study of one instance of CrossFit cementing both its ideology online as well as providing and cultivating a space for one particular trauma sufferer to exist, contend with, and thrive online despite a physical injury. The following sections will first explain what happened to the athlete Kevin

Ogar, and then analyze the way his trauma and suffering were represented via social media, by himself, his followers and vicarious sufferers, and by the general CrossFit community in digital spaces. Kevin Ogar's traumatic accident provides an empirical data set useful in examining trauma, witness, vicarious trauma, and identity construction and maintenance through interdisciplinary lenses, thus illuminating the possibilities, foreclosures, and contradictions of the digital spaces as venues to contend with traumatic events.

THE CASE OF KEVIN OGAR: HOW ONE ATHLETE BECAME A SYMBOL OF HOPE

In late 2014, amateur CrossFit athlete Kevin Ogar of Denver, Colorado was injured performing a "snatch" at a three-day competitive event titled the "OC Throwdown" in Costa Mesa, California when he sustained an injury that critically injured his spine (Curry, 2014). Ogar was, by all media accounts, an experienced athlete and debates soon ensued online and in legacy media if what Ogar termed a "freak accident" was truly an unfortunate mishap, rather than the outcome of an overzealous exercise regimen that leaves its participants prone to injury (Colucci, 2014; Curry, 2014). On social media in the weeks following the incident, news of the injury spread "calling for prayers and positive thoughts, and, in that short time, even helping to raise several thousand dollars to help with impending medical bills for the uninsured lifter" (Colucci, 2014). Other social media and mainstream media accounts called CrossFit to task, arguing that CrossFit may have been responsible for the injury by placing athletes in environments that places high demands on athletes, such as "too much weight and not enough rest" ("Paralysis of CrossFit competitor elicits outpouring, concern over safety," 2014). A four second YouTube video of the injury was widely shared and viewed, yet did little to quell the debate about what happened to

Ogar[3]. The debate between the merits of CrossFit in creating legions of healthy, everyday athletes and the dangers of a "mind over body" mentality took center stage as Kevin Ogar and the attendant community took their traumatic experience online in order to mediate it, share it, and ultimately produce meaning from it. Eventually though, it appeared in social media that the cause of the traumatic incident took a back seat to the meaning that was produced in response to it. Ultimately, Ogar and his community's insistence that this was a freak accident allowed them to use the various affordances of online technologies to weave a narrative and mediate the incident in such a way that it cemented CrossFit's values, and set Ogar himself up as a hero and an inspiration.

Ogar's coach, Matt Hathcock noted in an early interview after his friend and co-worker's injury, that "you can get injured doing anything, playing soccer, football. I'm sure you can get injured doing curling" (Curry, 2014). Ogar, in both media interviews and on social media, embodied a *super-crip* mentality, vowing to be stronger than he was before the incident, and to prove to the community that CrossFit did not cause his accident and indeed CrossFit, and its online community, would cure him and allow him to fit this incident into what he perceived as a "part of God's plan" (Curry, 2014; Takahara, 2015). In fact, Ogar so deeply inhabited the superhero mentality that comes with the constructed notion of overcoming illness, that he was shown in social media wearing Superman garb and was thought to take "the 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' mantra to a whole new level" even noting that with his new "gear" that helps him move, he was "Robocop-esque" and would "have to put on Spandex and fight crime" (Takahara, 2015). Kevin Ogar, while not the only athlete injured doing CrossFit, became a symbol of triumph over trauma and disability, as well as a symbol for CrossFit's ability to help

[3] One iteration of the video has over 570,000 views as of September of 2016. Multiple variations of the video exist, and the video clip has been put into compilations of "CrossFit Fails" (HelpKevinOgar, 2014).

those who suffer overcome physical pain. A CrossFit charity, "Barbells for Boobs," shifted gears for a time from fundraising for breast cancer to crowdfunding money for Ogar's medical expenses. The community, in response to the trauma Ogar underwent, raised over $200,000 in the first 24 hours after the incidence and upwards of $300,000 in just one week after the accident (Takahara, 2015). Aside from the outpouring of support and the parallel questioning of CrossFit's merits in social media, over time very interesting mediations of trauma took place as they relate to Ogar, his story, and other so-called "adaptive athletes" that were inhabiting a narrative of overcoming both online and offline.

Ogar became a marker of inspiration, he became a symbol that could be mediated and re-mediated and, unlike other athletes who were injured in the sport, he became a symbol of the possibility inherent in overcoming illness, disability and trauma. The textual, discourse analysis of the Instagram posts/comments, Tweets, and YouTube videos about Ogar highlights the various ways in which Ogar was, and continues to be, constructed into a marker and symbol of triumph, thus allowing all those who seek self-improvement to presence themselves through Ogar in digital space, all the while contributing to the commodification of his message. The analysis of Ogar's case explored whether or not, in the mediation and re-mediations that produced meaning in response to this traumatic event, subversive work was being done around identities and representations of trauma sufferers, disabled bodies, or othered bodies, while also interrogating what kinds of meaning are made in response to trauma and witnessing of trauma, in what way, and by who.

This analysis looked at the various social media dialogues that took place in relation to Ogar, his mediations of his own experience, as well as the mediations made by those who bore witness and perhaps experienced trauma in interacting with his experiences. This analysis

operated from the perspective of the affordances and playful, mimetic nature of the technology, as spaces for tactical, micro-political expression, as well as from perspectives of identity and power. This analysis attended to the questions of who speaks in digital spaces and with what effect, with an ultimate eye towards how meaning is being produced and how that meaning fits into larger cultural constructs and structural understandings of media and trauma.

#OGARSTRONG: MEDIATION, RE-MEDIATION AND THE MAKING OF A HERO

Kevin Ogar took on a life much larger than that he inhabited before his accident when, after an unexpected physical trauma, the full force of the CrossFit community banded together to start to raise money for the medical care of one of their own. Ogar was quickly turned into a meme, his image was stylized and his face, with its trademark red haired beard, was emblazoned across an adaptation of the Superman logo.[4] The data set in this case includes 72 images, tweets and comments about or by Kevin Ogar. Many users engaged this young man as an inspiration, as a hero, and as a figure that proves, despite tragedy, that CrossFit is an ideology that enables its practitioners to overcome. While the ethos that surrounds the structures and institution of CrossFit is problematic, it is important as a researcher to explore how users are expressing themselves in relation to that ethos. This research interrogated some of the identity politics inherent in representations of trauma, but also recognized that many users may be highly culturally literate, as well as media literate and may in fact participate in the CrossFit community, particularly online instantiations of its ethos, in very self-conscious ways.

Broadly, this research examined how online users cultivated and created meaning from the mediations of their experiences. Further, this theory is based in a recognition that the playful,

[4] Select images from social media are included in Appendix B.

ritual nature of online environments allows for trauma sufferers and vicarious sufferers to remake the social schemas that the traumatic event possibly interrupts, and connect those schemas back to the physical spaces and daily rituals. In mediating an event, and making meaning from it, these online users become part of the creation of culture. Examining online mediation in this way calls attention to the various politics of sharing testimony online. This sharing may be tactical in nature, meant to either solidify a set of strongly held beliefs or, conversely, use media tactics to dismantle some sort of dominant discourse that relates to a specific type of trauma.

Particularly striking in the social media engagement around Ogar's accident is the fervent support of what is broadly termed "The CrossFit Community." For example, one Twitter user tweeted shortly after the accident that "The CrossFit Community isn't letting him go through the struggle alone," that tweet was "favorited" 21 times and "re-tweeted 51 times (Kruvant, 2014). Ogar even made a video where he sits in front of the "Ogar Strong" logo of his face and the Superman crest and speaks directly to his supporters via YouTube. One user, @KillCliff, an active participant in the CrossFit community online, noted this particular quote of Ogar's from that video, "Some people…don't get the community aspect of it, and I've felt the full force of what the community can do for someone" (Cliff, 2014). The same quote was tweeted by user @CSpealler and commented on by user @eakinwale and each of those posts was "retweeted" and "favorited" between 16-50 times. In the aftermath of the accident, there were numerous photos, posts and hashtags employed in order to raise money for Ogar and to garner social support. The visuals that were a part of this data set, particularly in narrativizing Ogar as a hero, instantiate the event as the challenge necessary for Ogar to overcome to find a sense of his most authentic strength. Using various stylized images of Ogar's bright orange hair, multiple memes

were produced, multiple images were artistically altered, and many users from the individual level to the level of corporate sponsors joined in the movement to both support Ogar, his new found physical challenges, and CrossFit more generally. Ogar soon became more than just an injured athlete, many athletes after all are injured during CrossFit events and workouts. Ogar took on a particular persona of spokesman, advocate, and most central to this research, trauma sufferer turned adaptive athlete. His apparent ability to overcome his injury was hailed as an inspiration to athletes and non-athletes. His attitude was lauded as the reason why he embodied the values of a superhero. His ability to keep performing as an elite CrossFit athlete despite his wheelchair was taken as proof that any affliction could be overcome, and thus Kevin Ogar transformed from amateur athlete and Whole Food's employee to online inspiration.

While I have shown the "likes", "retweets" and "favorites" of some Tweets to highlight the popularity of all things Ogar, even when posted by Ogar fans and not Ogar himself, the true value of this case study is not in the numbers. A qualitative discourse analysis of the texts in question illuminated the way Ogar, his supporters, and vicarious sufferers, fellow CrossFit athletes and other adaptive athletes utilized and deployed constructed meanings around what it means to be sick and to suffer as part of a narrative of overcoming and triumph. Tactical media use can create fissures in dominant discourses by creating micro-political resistance. Interestingly enough, it seems that within the CrossFit community in particular, media is used in micro-political ways to enforce and solidify the overarching discourse that makes CrossFit trustworthy as well as enforce what is discussed in this dissertation as a "super-crip" mentality around ability, illness, and overcoming. More than anything the posts on Instagram and Twitter echoed the message of #OgarStrong by sharing the image of the Ogar Strong logo that was painted in his home "box" or gym alongside mediations of prayers, sharing of digital love, and

hashtags including #believe, and #CrossFit. “Emojis” of praying hands and hearts dominated his public feeds in the months after his accident. Many users went back to caption pre-accident images on Instagram, which Ogar had initially hashtagged with the tough guy logo #stayhardtillthegraveyard, to articulate their sorrow, their prayers, their faith, and their absolute and unwavering belief that this traumatic event would be overcome. Multiple users coined Ogar their hero – a hero that they could, notably, reach out to on social media. Ogar seamlessly inhabited the space of a hero and that of the “super-crip” garnering inspiration from other injured individuals at the rehab hospital in Denver, Colorado, and by positioning himself as an inspiration.

Working from a feminist disability studies and crip theory lens, crip theory provides a framework to account for bodies that are not legible in the dominant social discourses, even those discourses that circulate around trauma. The ideology of the super-crip is often employed, though not always deliberately, in order to make that disabled body legible by the dominant discourse. The super-crip defies odds in order to emerge stronger than they were before the trauma that left their body outside of the confines of the constructed notions of normal. A notable example of the super-crip in popular culture is Oscar Pistorious who, before the murder of his girlfriend, was known predominantly for being a Paralympian and Olympian who was not held back or hindered in any way by his physical disability. Swartz (2013) notes that some feminist disability studies advocates argue that “the super-crip narrative takes agency away from Pistorious himself, positioning him instead as a cipher in a story of heroic overcoming of the odds” (p. 1158). While Pistorious inhabited this identity, it is arguably the mediated representations of him that allowed him to position himself against the norms of disability in such a powerful way. This is very much akin to how Ogar was positioned by vicarious sufferers

who went online to take on the tragedy of what happened to him and position themselves as a part of his narrative of overcoming. In fact, users even took his constructed image offline into CrossFit gyms around the country, where elite athletes donned t-shirts with Ogar's name and a superhero crest as they did workouts in his honor. Ogar's injury was taken as a sign of what could happen and a sign of what a community could fix through its support and mediation. Even the posts and images that depicted Ogar among other paraplegic patients at the local hospital showed very little indication of embrace of the positionality of a newly disabled body. Instead, one post of Ogar and his friends in wheelchairs was captioned with the familiar hashtag, #gohardtillthegraveyard. While Ogar noted that he was humbled by the inspirational stories of the other patients, the comments by and large perpetuated messages that Ogar must stay strong, stay positive, and even stay "badass." In addition to the pure digital content, many brands from athletic gears to coffee created Ogar branded items to both raise money and help establish that CrossFit as a community, and Ogar as an athlete and inspiration, are quite powerful and stronger than just this instance of trauma. Craig Hospital, where Ogar had been a patient, also made a video of Ogar to highlight what was possible for paraplegic patients after their injuries. While Ogar is undoubtedly strong and a phenomenal athlete, his positionality as a superhero functions to articulate disability as something that must be overcome.

Gender is a central component that was constructed around Ogar. With many posts evoking Ogar's cisgendered, masculinist strength as a reason he would overcome his injury, it is notable to see how Ogar's maleness allowed him to be constructed as a superhero figure. Beyond the overt articulations of maleness including close up images of flexed muscles and deliberately placed shadows in animated images of Ogar's face meant to accentuate strength and foster a sense of ominousness, the language in the posts, even when posted by users who read as women,

is male-centered (@favthistweet, 2014). From calling Ogar "dude" and "bro" repeatedly, to the consistent comparisons of Ogar to military warriors, Ogar's gender allowed him to be constructed into a pillar of strength that would not allow disability to indicate a lack on his body as it does in many mainstream cultural constructs. Rather, Ogar's maleness and his cripness come together to allow him to become super-cripped and allow him to reify and re-mediate, in a new way, the CrossFit ethos. Within the CrossFit community, Ogar and vicarious sufferers who witnessed his injury do not interrupt the dominant ideology of what CrossFit is and does. They do, however, use the affordances of the digital to reinforce what CrossFit is and they take advantage of polymediatic, digital spaces to insulate themselves from mainstream critiques of CrossFit and their newly minted and mediated understanding of and overcoming of disability.

Kevin Ogar: Road to Recovery

Beyond the legion of Tweets, comments, and images that articulated the messages of being and becoming super, of strength, of power and of overcoming the physical and emotional particularities of Ogar's trauma, two pieces of media stood out and will be the focus of the remainder of this analysis. The first is the video that was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, "Kevin Ogar: Road to Recovery," in which Ogar notes the power of the CrossFit community. He says, "I've felt the full force of what the community can do for someone – I've felt the full force of that love and that community. I've had some social media posts but this is my first big changes to say thank you. I don't think people realize how much kind words mean coming from a complete stranger, it has made it so much easier for me" (CrossFit, 2014). While the video was posted to the official CrossFit YouTube channel, it was produced by Twitter user @KillCliff and served, in its captions alone, to espouse the importance of CrossFit as a community, but also included trademarked CrossFit marketing logos: "The Sport of Fitness" and "The Fittest on

Earth" (CrossFit, 2014). This simultaneous testimony of trauma and recovery and marketing video from CrossFit sits squarely in Centeno and Cohen's (2012) argument about neoliberalism. They note, "the political world of neoliberalism may be best understood as being based on increasingly asymmetrical power" (p. 326). Considering the vast power inequalities present in a space such as the Internet where ownership is abundant but often overlooked by users, and the similar ownership structure and power differential within the institution of CrossFit, it is important to situate these communities within that political environment and consider questions of how fulfilling these communities can truly be, while being controlled by commodifying structural forces. However, even if an experience is commodified, as Ogar's very clearly is, that doesn't necessarily strip it of its authenticity and importance as a part of lived experience.

In the video Ogar sits beyond simple, all caps white text that states "I became a paraplegic" followed by the statement across his face and chest that says, "I lost my legs, not my heart" (CrossFit, 2014). Ogar acknowledges the difficulty of his new physical ability and then notes that "CrossFit is gonna come in handy, because when you find something that you're bad at, you destroy it, you force yourself to be good at it. That's what CrossFitters do and that saved my bacon here" (CrossFit, 2014). Images of Ogar working out and performing physical therapy form a montage as Ogar discusses the process of rebuilding his physical prowess. Then, as he sits among other paraplegics, his voice over makes a powerful statement, evoking the nature of his devotion to CrossFit, his genuine belief in the ethos that guides this community. He states: "I didn't hurt myself doing CrossFit, CrossFit saved me from months of rehab … the mental strength to push through has been more beneficial than anything going into this" (CrossFit, 2014). Ogar is genuinely grateful in the video, his emotions have all the markings of authentic engagements with the digital media and it would indeed be difficult to argue that his physical

strength and the force of the community around him did not facilitate his recovery in some way. That said, it is important to recognize that Ogar also became an important marker of how CrossFit already promotes itself.

Before delving into the second media artifact that was a particularly striking example of the way trauma inhabited the CrossFit community, it is important to provide some specific evidence as to how CrossFit uses digital spaces more generally to establish its unwavering ideology, as well as how it convinces gym members to perform the labor of creating and maintaining the CrossFit culture on the company's behalf. Upon exploring broader online content produced in favor of CrossFit, it becomes clear how the myth of "mind over body" becomes firmly cemented in CrossFit culture and how Ogar became such a powerful symbol to perpetuate this myth. In order to contextualize the power of the #OgarStrong image and hashtag it is important to place it in the context of the larger CrossFit media sphere. Several memes, which for these purposes will be categorized as general CrossFit memes, gesture towards the degree of fierceness, toughness and sheer determination needed to perform CrossFit workouts, as well as the status that certain CrossFit athletes seem to grant themselves. CrossFit, as the self-described "Sport of Fitness" uses memes and online discussions to firmly cement itself atop the fitness hierarchy (CrossFit, 2014). These memes, for these purposes categorized as motivational memes, are generally created by and for CrossFit athletes and use various signifiers to cement a certain belief about how far one can push their body in order to overcome limits that are, as indicated by the images, purely mental. Here we see regular CrossFit practitioners granting themselves a degree of moral and physical authority and expertise. We also see recognized CrossFit athletes and competitors using their status as CrossFit *celebrities* to perpetuate notions of mind over body and the attitude that one can and must push past the point of exhaustion to

some form of excellence or even God-like achievement of physical perfection and strength. Here, meaning is produced, solidified, and perpetuated. Each CrossFit athlete that perpetuates this message also capitalizes on the format and affordances of the digital in order to progress and shift this message to fit with their unique notions about what they do each time they participate in CrossFit.

Aside from those images that serve to cement the position of CrossFit at the top of the fitness hierarchy, there are those that purport to motivate CrossFit practitioners through very specific messages that push an ideology of mind over body. [5] Myth, in these images, operates to infuse the images with power and authority giving them an influence that extends beyond dedication to just a sport. For the purposes of clarity, I will evaluate several images, ending with a powerful image that extends to the larger analysis of this case study: how trauma was dealt with through the overarching ethos of CrossFit. The first image is of a shirtless man, a recognizable yet unnamed (in the meme) figure in the CrossFit universe, in the process of moving a very heavy barbell, the text reads, "There will come at time where you will reach the point of exhaustion and you will want to give up. The question is will you?" By showing a capable and physically fit man in the process of motion, while asking the question about giving up, the image indicates that this man answered that question and chose to continue forward with his exercise regimen past the point of exhaustion. He is captured in a subjunctive, as if moment, one that implores the viewer to imagine what comes next, and this meaning is perpetuated by the text on the image (Zelizer, 2010, p. 11). Regardless of the viewer's knowledge of the subject's prominence in the CrossFit community, the man in the image is presented as powerful, referential and strong. His fitness is one that, as perpetuated through the tropes of the meme,

[5] While these images are not discussed in detail here, examples of images that cement the hierarchy of CrossFit over other forms of fitness are available in Appendix B.

ought to be imitated. If amateur athletes and gym-goers want to reach his status, his level of fitness, exhaustion cannot enter into our imaginary. The limits placed on the imaginary of what is and is not acceptable in the universe of CrossFit serve to establish a sort of ritual, in which hard work is valued above all other values. If images are to be seen as Morgan articulates them as appealing to and relying on the body, "provoking fear, envy, pride, desire, obsession, rage" than we can recognize their power (Morgan, 2008, p. p. 96). This image evoked that power quite effectively, using its semiological markers to motivate practitioners to try to meet and surpass the level of this elite athletic figure.

The next image comes from a website called FitPhreak.com and was shared widely in social media. It is the back of a woman whose hands are at her head, her red sports bra, the only vibrant color on the page, leaves her muscular back exposed and the text reads "No, your legs aren't that tired. Yes, you can breathe. Keep Going." Separating the athlete's power from their physical body is a powerful gesture that enables one to think about the way, in the everyday, CrossFit develops a mode of thinking through mediation. Solidifying its message through everyday tactics, such as working out and memes, ensures that if and when CrossFit's guiding principles are called into question, there are already legions of followers ready to make and re-make meaning in digital spaces, and in response to life's contingencies. Recalling the way tactical media operates, it is clear that representations made in, through, and by media imbue everyday interactions inside and outside of the CrossFit "box" with a certain power. CrossFit, in establishing its ethos so powerfully, is attempting to buck any mainstream ideologies that would argue against its prowess. CrossFit develops a discourse all its own and ingrains it into both the physical and mediated realms. CrossFit, in this way seamlessly inhabits the third space of digital communication. CrossFit sets up a tactical world-making schema, available to selective digital

users in polymediatic spaces, that can be deployed at times of extreme trauma. Rather than seeing the schema of the everyday broken down by trauma, CrossFit almost pre-creates a framework that can be deployed during times of suffering or pain, even pain that is self-inflicted through exercise. Returning to the image of the woman with her back to us, in articulating that the physical body cannot feel pain in the everyday, there is an inherent argument that no degree of physical pain can demean the mental strength that CrossFit enables one to cultivate. Ogar too evoked this message in his YouTube video "Kevin Ogar: Road to Recovery."

Gender again plays an important role in creating bodies that can be taken up by viewers and digital users. In the image of the woman with her back turned, the woman, unlike the man in the previous image, remains faceless and nameless, as something to aspire to. She, in her physical superiority perpetuates the myth that working past exhaustion will produce positive results and cements the culture of CrossFit. Her namelessness and facelessness actually further the cultivation of this myth in the way that they allow any practitioner to imagine themselves as that woman. The erasures of her face and her gaze in effect erase her womanhood, replacing it with a universalized, male-centric understanding of strength. She is a woman but she can be anyone willing to overcome their disability, their lack, hers being caused by her gender. Her face could be anyone's, thus despite its superior position among athletic endeavors, CrossFit also establishes itself, albeit falsely, as the sport of the people, an everyman's sport that with enough dedication can be the sport of any average person. This image can be put in contrast with another image of a very muscular woman in black and white, again her face not showing, her head in her hands, her body in a position that indicates fatigue and exhaustion. Next to her we see that hands of a coach (likely male hands) or some other "motivator" and over them in red and white text we read. "True Strength often rises at our weakest point. Courage awakens." This image, unlike the

other two, serves to reinforce the notion that CrossFit is a human endeavor but one with superhuman potential. Even CrossFit idols, icons and elite practitioners reach the point of fatigue, exhaustion, and weakness. The difference is that individuals commemorated and idealized through memes work past that point and summon a courage that "awakens" something in them allowing them to surpass their human exhaustion and reach a mythical level of greatness.

The final image regarding CrossFit more generally analyzed here is one of a woman who is a prolific and successful CrossFit competitor. Her face is turned down as she squats behind a weighted barbell. Her arms are flexed and the shadowing of the image clearly highlights her vast musculature. Across her body and the image, the text reads. "It's just you against you." Here we see multiple gestures in meaning-making. First, the woman again has her face turned away from the viewer, this allows a viewer to see themselves in her image. Through this, the image "indulge[s] passions," cementing an emotional and visceral connection to this image and an identification with the subject (Morgan, 2008, p. 97). Perhaps even more specifically, this image allows for an embodiment of the subject. As Barthes indicates, "the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (Barthes, 1982, p. 12). The woman's physical prowess, dominance, and superiority is displayed in the way in her muscles are lighted on a dark background. She is a beacon of light, using her ability to overcome her own challenges to embody greatness in the most physical sense but also as a point through which other can find motivation. Her image moves others to action through its exemplary strength. Her image is iconic and audiences acquire her and embody her movements, idealizing them in the process. Zelizer (2004) indicates that the visual "best tell[s] a story be strategically catching things in the middle. It depicts for its onlookers a moment in an event's unfolding to which they attend while knowing where that unfolding leads…strategically freezing it at its

potentially strongest moment of meaningful representation" (p. 158). The woman, importantly, is mid movement, she is preparing, perhaps physically and mentally, to overcome the barriers that stand between her and greatness, these barriers, of course, represented by a barbell.

Sontag (1979) further helps audiences recognize this motivational and captivating relationship between viewer and subject in her discussion of the acquisitional nature of the photograph, "But a photograph is not only likes its subject, an homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it" (p. 155). The text over the woman's body furthers this process. The woman is not only acquired and sacrilized through the aesthetic techniques of the image but also seeks to be acquired by audiences so that they can use her image to motivate themselves. The images tell viewers to do as she does and you too can reach her level of greatness. This message runs parallel to the message that also comes forth in this image, which creates a distance between the physical prominence of this woman and the everyday CrossFit athlete.

With this framework of how imagery and digital media so fluidly operate to idealize and cement ideologies of CrossFit, it is notable to see how Ogar became a perfect figure to represent both physical strength, but more centrally the possibility of the "mind over body" ethos. CrossFit, in its meaning-making on digital platforms, had already given users a framework through which to overcome and re-make their worlds. CrossFit tells its participants that CrossFit will give them the strength and fortitude to re-make themselves regardless of the challenge. Particularly during a time of trauma, it is notable how the narrative espoused by Ogar and his supporters was taken up by institutions and sponsors as well as individual athletes. In earlier mediated environments where access to social, digital formats was more limited, scholars thought that trauma must be shared regardless of the possibility for vicarious trauma because it

opens the text up to larger social and political meanings (Kaplan, 20015, p. 125). Ogar, in sharing his trauma in an environment that allowed users to speak back to him in their vicarious suffering, created an ideal environment for the production of meaning and giving meaning to his suffering. For Ogar and CrossFit, his suffering was framed in a way that enabled him to counteract the feelings of "insecurity, helplessness, and meaninglessness" that the wounds of trauma inflict (Walsh, 2007, p. 208). A particularly interesting instantiation of this framing is found in a second video that was widely shared and professionally produced. The video titled, "Kevin Ogar talks about #OgarStrong Trust" includes Kevin Ogar discussing the mental strength given to him by CrossFit post-accident, a mental strength he maintained by being able to continue to participate at his CrossFit gym. He discusses the way #OgarStrong, as a movement helped him to get stronger faster. The YouTube clip, produced by Reebok and posted to their YouTube channel, ultimately ends with Ogar discussing finding a way to help other injured individuals who perhaps did not get the support that he did. Before the film gets to its charitable purpose and the uplifting music begins to rise, Ogar discusses with Reebok executives what it was like to design a custom shoe for Reebok that both enabled Reebok to capitalize on the #OgarStrong movement and use its imagery, but also enabled Kevin Ogar to fundraise for his Trust for other athletes (Reebok, 2014). The dual function served by this video, its mediations and re-mediations of CrossFit's notable imagery of gyms and equipment, the mediation and re-mediation of the stylized Superman-esque #OgarStrong imagery, and its cross-promotional yet inspirational format, fit cleanly into what Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) discuss as the possibility for neoliberal logic to be both structurally unequal while allowing for moments of agency. Importantly they note that it is important to situate commodity activism, which this is a clear example of, "within its larger historical contexts, its emergence over time revealing the

vexed and contradictory means by which individuals and communities have marshalled the ideological and cultural frameworks of consumption to challenge, support, and reimagine the political and social dynamics of power" (p. 3). Ogar, after his accident, by virtue of the nature of the technological tools and digital spaces he and his supporters inhabited, reacted to his trauma by tactically engaging with the myth of CrossFit and harnessing his trauma into a form of commodity activism that both produced cultural meaning around CrossFit and raised funds for other trauma sufferers.

While it is clear that the myth CrossFit perpetuates is problematic and that Ogar's un-critical and fervent support of the sport that left him injured is possibly an example of the depth of an ideology that is exploitative, there is a certain power to the way he responded to the trauma in his life. Both Ogar and his community mobilized in digital spaces after an extreme traumatic event and effectively silenced, or perhaps won over, critics of CrossFit by steering the conversation towards a sense of community and ideas of mental strength. By effectively taking the focus away from Ogar's injury in particular and placing it back on the community in general, these users shifted the dialogue of trauma from that of testimony for education, awareness and activism, to testimony for a very specific purpose. As Madianou and Miller (2013) argue with their theory of polymedia, new media affordances can be used by specific users, in specific ways, relationally with other media, to serve certain purposes with relatively low cost to the users. Members of the #OgarStrong movement use Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube in conversation with one another to produce meanings around athletics, ethics of wellness, and trauma.

Notable in all of this is that Ogar declined to respond to multiple attempts to contact him to solicit a narrative to provide his perspective to this research. While Ogar is quite vocal about his trauma via his various social media channels, requests to talk to him through his personal

contact information, social media, his previous CrossFit "box," and his charities were met with silence. This is perhaps an indication of the marked boundaries of the online space. Polymedia tells us that users carefully select the media frameworks that most suitably address their needs at a particular time. For Ogar, digital media such as Instagram and YouTube allow him to share his message widely, make meaning in a communal format, without fully knocking down the boundaries around his narration of his tragedy. In coping with trauma, the distance afforded to users by the digital technology allows for largely unquestioned curation of their trauma testimonies as well as a relatively safe, bounded space through which to produce micro-political meanings. Interpersonal interactions with a researcher outside of social media formats might cause users to have to call into question their newly formed meaning-making schema, thus dismantling that which they have produced online and potentially re-traumatizing sufferers. While Ogar did not articulate why he would be unable to provide his testimony about why he posted his trauma online via a digital narrative, the silence is a worthwhile data point, in that it in some way highlights the desire to keep digital expression in the as-if space that is fostered through online interaction.

CONCLUSIONS

It would be simple to conclude that Ogar and the CrossFit community are oppressed by the overarching mentality that is embedded in the myths and rituals that make CrossFit so effective as both an exercise regimen and way of life. While that critique is perhaps appropriate and can be clearly displayed in many of the examples used herein, it is important to also recognize how this case highlights the way users inhabit complex spaces between agency and structure, between the online and offline, and between the physical and the narrative during traumatic events. This case

is particularly interesting because trauma operates differently by virtue of the constructed nature of the CrossFit community overall. Ogar inhabited the ideology of the super-crip in a way that doesn't force him to call into questions the world-making schema he held dear prior to his accident. In fact, while trauma serves to dismantle those ways of knowing, Ogar doubled down on his belief system utilizing the already deeply ingrained CrossFit ethos to deal with the contingency of his life. One CrossFit practitioner noted in *The New York Times* that "there is something raw and vulnerable that happens to you when you go into the CrossFit gym…A workout can bring you to your knees, so to speak" (Oppenheimer, 2015). Ogar was brought to his knees by his injury, but based on the discourse that dominated his every day and the everyday of all his supporters, CrossFit had already brought him to his knees and taught him how to rebuild himself.

Ultimately, the nature of the online enabled Ogar to inhabit these conflicting spaces so seamlessly. He was simultaneously a sufferer, a hero, a symbol of a larger myth, a brand, and an athlete. He suffered in a way that was legible to larger audiences by inhabiting the super-crip framework and he suffered in a way that was legible to CrossFitters. The nature of memes, of social media and the possibilities of re-mediation enabled Ogar to be a symbol for all those suffering with a desire to overcome their social and physical positions. This suffering in viewers was caused either from bearing witness to his injury or from other ailments of everyday life. He became the superhero that his memes, images, and branding portrayed him to be and through a complex series of community engagements with media, those meaning-making gestures effectively gave Ogar and his followers voice. Couldry (2010) notably argues that "people's voices only matter if their bodies matter" (p. 130). Ogar's voice was not erased from the mainstream by his trauma, in fact his trauma was obscured by the sheer legibility of his body and

the representations of him as an ideal, almost super human sufferer. In effect, working from a feminist disability studies framework, Ogar's representations serve to reify notions of what it means to be sick in dominant discourse. Sickness, trauma, suffering are all things to be overcome. It is possible that after trauma people find legibility and voice in the media in subversive ways. Ogar clearly found a voice in the media, so did his legion of supporters and vicarious sufferers, but their engagement with media was hardly subversive. Indeed, Ogar cemented ideologies around strength, recovery and trauma that often leave out disabled bodies, and perhaps his mediations silenced or erased other disabled bodies that view their disabilities or any traumas they have experienced in different, less normative ways. While the #OgarStrong movement may have inspired many, and the good it produced cannot be extracted from the analysis of it, it served to reify a belief system that erases forms of suffering and expressions of trauma that do not fit within the mind over body ethic. Ogar used media tactically, the movement in his name effectively took advantage of the affordances of digital media, and in this space he is a hero, yet his representation created a culture of foreclosures on non-normative bodies indicating that, for the purposes of this research, the very tools that hold possibility for fissures in dominant discourses, can also simultaneously cement the discourses and ties that bind them.

CHAPTER 6

THE BATTLE WE DIDN'T CHOOSE:
ANGELO MERENDINO AND MEDIATIONS OF GRIEF, DISEASE, AND THE TRAUMA OF BEARING WITNESS

INTRODUCTION

Angelo Merendino (referred to here as Merendino) describes his wife Jennifer as "not only the most beautiful woman I had ever met, but she was full of life and had a way of making you feel like you were the only person who mattered" (A. Merendino, 2011). His wife died just five months after he married her on December 22, 2011 at 8:30 PM (Ibid). In his own words, of his relationship Merendino writes, "our star didn't shine long, but man did it shine bright" (Ibid). This case study followed the mediations of the trauma of Jennifer Merendino who was diagnosed with and died of metastatic breast cancer in 2011. This case study also highlights and traces the trajectory of the mediations of the trauma of Angelo Merendino, Jennifer's husband, a photographer and artist, who mediated Jennifer's story via photojournalistic style photographs. Following her death, the story of Jennifer's illness, of Angelo's grief, and their mediations of cancer, death and love became "viral" sensations that were mediated and re-mediated across platforms in digital spaces, thus leading various digital users to express their own traumatic life experiences as they were read through Jennifer and Angelo's story, as well as to express their vicarious and empathetic suffering in bearing witness to the trauma of Jennifer, Angelo and their family.

"The Battle We Didn't Choose" is the title of the blog that expressed the mediation of Jennifer's death and Merendino's grieving process. Merendino (2011) began the blog to share

the story of his wife and their love, saying that "by sharing our story, our love story, something beautiful has begun to grow out of something so horrible and unfair. If we don't share our experiences how can we learn, grow and survive?" Though the blog is where Merendino began posting about his wife, the mediations of their particular trauma extended far beyond just his blog. For example, this story first came to my attention as both a digital consumer and scholar via Facebook in 2013. The Facebook post, which will not be shared due to privacy concerns, linked to an article on the content curation site, ViralNova. The article, true to the style of such click-bait, social media, curation sites read, "This guy's wife got cancer, so he did something unforgettable. The last three photo's destroyed me" (ViralNova, 2013). The ViralNova post highlighted a series of images Merendino took of his wife Jennifer.[6] The photos are black and white, journalistic style representations of Jennifer and Angelo together, with family, in various moments of daily life and of treatment and they progress to portraits of Jennifer from the beginning of her diagnosis until her burial. While a clear progression of disease can be seen, the photos, as curated by ViralNova, have no captions aside from the title, which hangs upon every image in the slide show format on the website. With just that caption the user and digital viewer is able to put their own meanings onto and into Jennifer and Angelo's story. Jennifer's particularities fade and she is subsumed by the markers of her disease: her bald head, her frail frame, her tired face.

While the testimony provided by Merendino in this photo story of his wife is anything but playful, the playful nature of the online environment, coupled with the way the digital realm allows for re-mediation across platforms and over boundaries, allowed for Merendino's photos and thus his testimony to go viral. Kraidy (2013) notes that "the body is the medium through

[6] Portions of the photo story as it was found on ViralNova appear in Appendix B.

which struggles for power, identity and legitimacy are physically fought, socially constructed and ideologically refracted" (p. 289). In considering bodily trauma, such as cancer, and how the body and our understandings of it shifts when under duress, it can be concluded that the struggles fought on the body and with the body become even more important. This combined with the way trauma shifts the way an individual or collectivity understands the world and dismantles previously held meaning-making processes, makes the process of cultivating authentic meaning after traumatic events particularly poignant. Mobasher (2006) building off of the work of Alexander et al. (2004) highlights that the trauma process "must go through a meaning-making process whereby negative meanings are created and attached to some event so that members of the traumatized group accept the claims and feel their identity is threatened" (p. 102). Given the need for trauma sufferers to go through a meaning-making process in order to make their suffering legible to themselves and others, it is no surprise that digital platforms enable spaces for the exploration of meaning and identity around the traumatic process that is cancer. Emotions and meaning are socially constructed, as are ways of organizing and making sense of the world, so much so that emotional responses to traumatic events are constructed, and can be reconstructed, or in the case of the mimetic, playful nature of the Internet – emotions, ways of knowing, and ways of making sense of the world can be re-mediated (Jaggar, 2008, pp. 381-382). Memes allow users to take hold of certain content, place their own meaning into the content, and build upon the original meaning. Memes, and mimetic gestures online, allow users to presence themselves in the way Couldry (2012) argues individuals do to "manage their presence (and presence to others) over time" (p. 49). Thus, this case study explored the way Merendino, in photographing his wife and her traumatic experience, enabled this process of meme-ing trauma to take place and take hold. The following sections will first examine

Merendino's own mediations and re-mediations of his experience over time, followed by an examination of various posts about Merendino's story. These various posts constituted users witnessing Merendino's testimony as well as caused the users to suffer vicarious trauma through their empathetic witnessing.

ANGELO MERENDINO: HIS MEDIATIONS AND RE-MEDIATIONS OF JENNIFER'S TRAUMA, AND HIS OWN TRAUMA

While Merendino's mediations are the primary subject of this research, it is important to note that Jennifer Merendino had a blog of her own and was an active agent in advocating for herself, her care, and felt it important that her husband take and share her photos (Merendino, 2014; J. Merendino, 2011). Jennifer's blog made use of the images Merendino had taken of her and attempted to provide medical and life updates without the sterile language of much of the other material Jennifer found on the Internet relating to breast cancer (Ibid.). Articulating Jennifer's agency and her self-awareness in sharing her suffering is important, particularly when examining possible critiques of the Merendinos' story being part of an overly commodified, neoliberal, digital environment. While it may be true that the story of their trauma and suffering is part of a neoliberal system of commercialization online, that does not prevent it or diminish it from being an authentic and powerful engagement with newly formed and forming communities, and with trauma and suffering that has possibility and power for shifting the way identity, illness, suffering, and ability are represented in media spaces.

The ViralNova piece that introduced Merendino to me was a series of 31 black and white photographs. I have selected three for in-depth examination here. The first was the fifth photo to appear in the aforementioned photo story. In it we see Jennifer's hand grasping a call button that is affixed to a hospital bed, in what is clearly a hospital room. Her face is out of focus but the

grimace in her expression is unmistakable. Jennifer still has some hair, though her previously long hair has been cut into a pixie. Blankets cover her up to her chin but you can see the sleeve of her shirt coming out from under her covers, as she reaches her grip around the call button. Her thumb rests on the button and the detail of her hand is highlighted as the focal point of the image.[7]

Figure 1 (ViralNova,2013)

This image provides a sense of the artistry and composition that Merendino achieved when taking pictures of Jennifer. The next image that helps to highlight the powerful visual testimony provided by Merendino, in his images, is an image of Jennifer and Merendino himself, his face obscured by his camera, as she braids the head scarf that covers her bald head. In the forefront of the image is Jennifer's blurred facial profile in the camera lens, in the background we see Jennifer and Merendino standing close together, her gaze at her own reflection. Merendino, in

[7] Though none of the previous case studies include in-text the images being analyzed, given the primarily visual nature of this particular case and the centrality of Merendino's images, it is important to understanding this analysis that the reader be immersed in the images. Additional images appear in Appendix B.

the way that he is obscured from view enables focus to be on Jennifer. Here, while Jennifer has clear markings of cancer in that her hair has since been shaved, she has a scar from what can be assumed to be a chemotherapy port under her clavicle, and she wears a scarf over her head, looks relatively healthy.

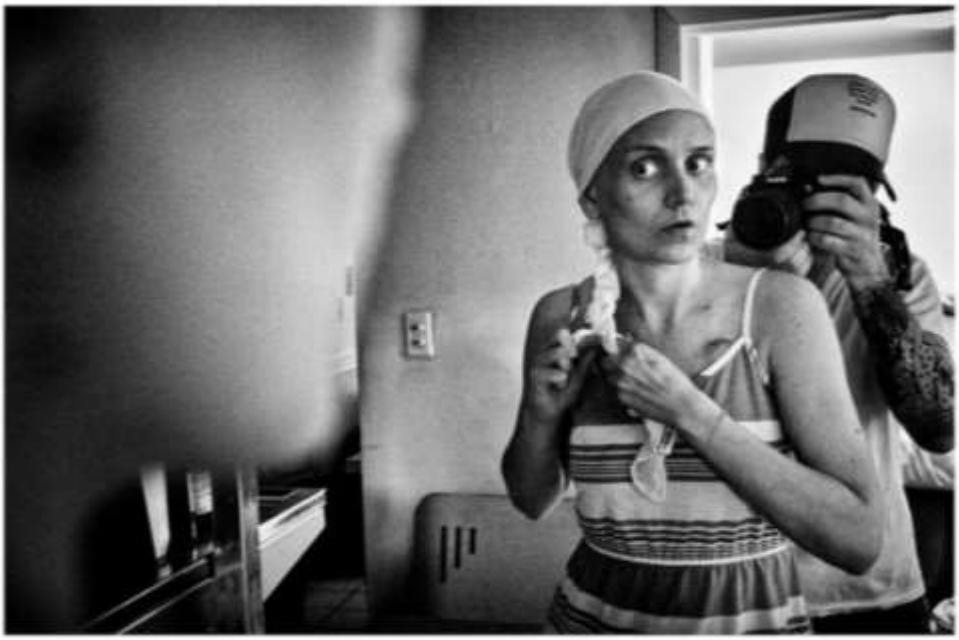

Figure 2 (ViralNova, 2013)

The final image from the photo story that will be used for examination here is one of an empty bed, possibly in a living room of Merendino's home, with the pillow haphazardly placed in the middle of it. It is, as a part of the photo story, a marker that Jennifer has died, leaving a clear void in both the photo and establishing the grief Merendino was experiencing.

Figure 3 (ViralNova, 2013)

Barthes (1982) concept of *punctum* is vitally important to a discussion of these images. Barthes asks, "to whom does the photograph belong?" (Ibid, p. 13). This question is central to recognizing the way these images of a particular person went on to narrate and testify to the suffering of many cancer patients and others who identified with the feelings, the content, and the suffering they depict. For Barthes, seeing a photo is a process, to see is "to do, to undergo, to look" (p. 9). In the images Merendino took, there is *punctum,* or that which captivates, takes the seer from being in harmony with the image, it is a detail that attracts and distresses, it is a "sting, speck, cut, little hole," it is what is most poignant about the image (Barthes, 1982, p. 27). The punctum works to establish an intimate relationship with an image and when examining mediated images of traumatic events, the punctum works to allow viewers of the image to bear witness, feel empathy, and even suffer themselves in what they've seen. Digital users, then, have a platform through which to communicate their witness, empathy, or suffering and place their own meanings into it. This process works because, as Sontag (1979) notes,

> the force of photographic image comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality – for turning it into a shadow. Images are more real than anyone could have supposed (p. 163).

The material reality of Jennifer's suffering is interpolated through the material reality of others who suffer, as well as the reality of suffering in viewing, thus causing users to feel a responsibility, need, or desire to make meaning out of the difficult thing they have experienced, felt, or seen. The two-way relationship that material bodies form with digital mediants, particularly visual mediants, is highlighted in the way Jennifer's suffering acquired viewers, and allowed viewers to place their own suffering on her.

Merendino described the process of mediating his story as important to giving meaning to and help others make sense of a horrible event (Merendino, 2011). He says of the photographs, "our hope was that if our family and friends saw what we were facing every day then maybe they would have a better understanding of the challenges in our daily life" (Ibid.). He goes on to note that after posting the images online, "The response was incredible…some of these emails came from women who had breast cancer. They were inspired by Jennifer's grace and courage...that's when we knew our story could help others" (Ibid.). Since his wife's death Merendino has given a Ted Talk ("influential videos from expert speakers" in order to build "understanding of the world" (TED)), written a book about his story, and created a non-profit called *The Love you Share* (Merendino, 2013). The life Merendino's story has gained online is indicative of the way communities form around illness, trauma, and in witnessing. In sharing his story, Merendino allowed others to cope and created the sense that his suffering served a purpose. In other words, he made meaning around his suffering. In Merendino's first Ted Talk in 2013, he focused on Jennifer's nearly four year struggle with breast cancer that started in 2008 and lasted until her

death in 2011, and their shared desire to shed a more realistic light on what it meant to battle cancer (Merendino, 2013). His talk featured him, in a simple purple shirt and black tie, standing in front of a large screen that projects images of Jennifer in both sickness and in health. Merendino narrated and testified to his story with Jennifer through anecdotes about their relationship, about her illness, through stories about their parents, and through sharing her legacy. This powerful mediation of his suffering, shares that suffering with others, and highlights how communications media, in this case the digital videos available online via YouTube, transform the social processes of grieving while being socially shaped themselves.

In yet another Ted Talk in 2014, Merendino discussed the power of social media in cultivating messages, creating community, and allowing something good to come out of something difficult. In this second talk Merendino silently comes to the stage, places a camera on a stool, and with heavy breaths, steps out to start speaking. As a light shines on him he opens with the line, "chances are, everyone who is watching this has been effected by cancer in some way" (Merendino, 2014). He articulated much of what is being theorized here around social and digital media and traumatic experience. Merendino identified the way his life-making schema collapsed when Jennifer fell ill, as well as the way the experience of illness as a trauma shifted his ability to relate to non-traumatized subjects around him. He says, "we went from feeling like the world was our oyster, to feeling different from most everyone in our life" (Merendino, 2014). He went on to identify and articulate the reasons he chose to share his experiences with his wife. He acknowledged that, in experiencing trauma and thus his life-making schema shifting, even those closest to he and his wife didn't know how to act around them. As a photographer, Merendino saw the opportunity to use social media (via a Facebook page) to update his family and use images to lessen the distance between his experiences with Jennifer and their offline

community. He also discussed his own trauma, positioning his trauma as a response to detractors that accuse Merendino of exploiting his wife's tragedy for capital gain. He identified the time after Jennifer's death as the "worst time of my life" and held up his blog as a space through which he could release negative and difficult thoughts from his head. Merendino stated multiple times that his blog gave him a voice and that telling his story through social media gave him a way to use his voice. Merendino saw first-hand how articulating and mediating trauma can offer a productive space that is akin to community:

> Social media is a voice we can use…I'm not a social media lobbyist…but our story is a great example of how content on social media can create dialogue and it can create a community to provide support during difficult times and what is great about it is you don't have to share your most personal feelings, you can share whatever you want (Merendino, 2014).

Merendino's self-awareness and articulations of authentic experiences of grief, trauma, and community are part of an articulation of his voice. His recognition of his need for voice and his ability to articulate it through his photography and social media, highlight the way digital platforms position users as agents who curate and cultivate a degree of sharing around suffering that doesn't not intercede on their simultaneous need for distance caused by their need to remake meaning around life, death, and trauma. Couldry (2010) argues that "voice as a process – giving an account of one self and what affects one's life – is an irreducible part of what it means to be human; effective voice (the effective opportunity to have one's voice heard and taken into account) is a human good" (p. vi). Merendino acknowledged that without digital media his story would not have been shared the way it has been, he also seems to acknowledge his need, at a base human level, to articulate voice.

Merendino (2014), in several ways in the various talks he gave and blogs he wrote, points to the sense of community he gained from going online to make "sense of what makes no sense."

He said that an "online community, a kind of support group formed…not just support for me, people see themselves in these photos" (Merendino, 2014). I argue here that this sense of community is made possible by the type of space that users cultivate and inhabit in the digital space. Notably, Hoover & Echchaibi (2012) argue that there are "new digital environments for creating and nurturing forms of community bonds beyond the new social spheres of home and work." This space is not only a space to cultivate community, but in that new digital environments, users negotiate "the meaning of cultural objects" and discourse in meaningful ways (Willett, Robinson, & Marsh, 2009, p. 64). When considering the traumatic events that Merendino faced and mediated, it is clear that he used the cultivated community space, made possible by the third space of the digital realm, to negotiate his innate need to "share and translate such traumatic impact" (Kaplan, 2005, p. 1).

I briefly identified and discussed the neoliberal critique that Merendino contends with when negotiating how and where to share the story of the trauma he endured, as well as in sharing his wife's traumatic experience posthumously. Previous chapters have discussed the way that traumatic experiences and the mediations of them are commodified in several ways, and given that Merendino has responded to this criticism, it is worthwhile to attend to it here. It can be argued that in simply sharing content online users participate in a neoliberal discourse that subsumes their authentic expressions with neoliberal, capitalist ideals. For example, Dean (2009) argues that "new media technologies strengthen the hold of neoliberalism" and position people in an "imaginary site of action and belonging" (p. 48; 43). Others, however, complicate the branded neoliberal, digital space as holding the simultaneous possibility for authentic engagement and meaning-making alongside neoliberal ideology. Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser (2012), for example, argue that while neoliberalism and commercialism can dilute and hollow out activism and

dissent, innovative forms of media and culture have the potential to act on social, political and other landscapes in meaningful ways (p. 3). Given this, Merendino sits on a precipice where he has embraced a commercialized environment in order to facilitate what he perceives as a greater, more meaningful purpose – that of highlighting the reality of cancer, and in effect, coping with trauma.

Though Jennifer wanted her husband to take her pictures and consented to his doing so, her blog did not receive the same wide recognition that his did after her death. Gender thus becomes a useful marker for analysis as to why Merendino's version of their story took off in a way Jennifer's never did while she was alive or after her death. While the majority of the posts in this case were not examined in depth based on gender, it is worthwhile to consider the way a male representing a female who has since passed, gained recognition and allowed for meaning-making online. Cohen-Rottenberg (2012) note that "the wondrous elicits admiration or astonishment by framing a disabled person's activity as extraordinary" and that cultural representations tend to "communicate the explicit message that being normal is both an unquestionable right and unquestionably right" (p.6-7). Feminist disability studies argue that identification as a woman in society means that society automatically assigns a component of lack the person identifying. Feminist disability studies dismantle the automatic, ascribed sense of lack or disability marked by womanhood. That said, to dismantle that discourse means acknowledging its existence. Jennifer, in suffering from cancer, was doubly disabled by normative, dominant, deeply gendered discourses thus making her suffering illegible to publics in the way it was presented. As her suffering was mediated and re-mediated by others, digital users could position Jennifer as a victim of cancer, specifically breast cancer, a gendered cancer,

and thus symbol of that which must be overcome, a positionality she was unlikely to espouse herself during her valiant fight with breast cancer.

RE-MAKING, RE-MEDIATING, AND MEME-ING: HOW THE MERENDINOS' STORY BECAME A COMMUNITY'S STORY

In order to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the content that was posted in response to Merendino's photographs, I selected 12 random comments, posts, blogs, or images that were found on public profiles on YouTube, Twitter and WordPress. While this section will not go into an examination of each of them, I highlight themes and identify several examples that highlight the level of engagement with the Merendinos' images. In many of the posts, however brief, users "meme" Jennifer's story in the sense that it enabled and compelled them to share their own trauma around cancer, death or other types of tragedies. For example, one user, V80657, commented on Merendino's original Ted Talk saying that the story that was shared gave them hope:

> On March 2, 2014, I lost my next-of-kin brother, although not the love of my life, or love at first sight; his loss devastated me: for he was my lifelong brother, friend…went to private schools together, public high school together, roomed together in College; I loved him, and I still do, even though he is gone. Angelo's story dwarfs my story of grief, yet provides me hope that a life of purpose can and will be meaningful again. Thank you Angelo Merendino. My love & respect, admiration goes out to you (V80657, 2014).

This user spends a considerable amount of their post articulating their own trauma in order to ultimately posit that in witnessing Merendino's trauma he was able to see hope in his own suffering. While this may not amount to coping with his own trauma, this post points to the way users identify their suffering and make that suffering legible. Walsh (2007) argues that trauma inflicts a sense of meaninglessness, and that community formation, or in this case a user's sense of community in his digital bond to Merendino, can help in recovering from trauma (p. 208).

Other users focused not on the disease and the tragedy Merendino mediated, but instead articulated a renewed sense of love and were inspired by the love they witnessed in the Merendinos' story. While some users chose to see just the love story in this articulation of loss and cancer, others saw both tragedy and love mediated in this story and, thus, re-mediated Merendino's emotions through their own experiences and their own desires for themselves and others. For example, one user, Jessica Hamilton, in part of her comment on YouTube said that, "this has truly changed my look on everything in life <3" (Hamilton, 2014). While commenter Lisa Lockworth said that she would be "squeezing this story. So sweet, like a treasure. Seizing every second" (Lockworth, 2014). These brief excerpts from these comments articulate the level of witness in digital participation. They stand as examples of the way users become empathetic witnesses to what they engage in via various social media platforms. While the level of witness of these two commenters may not have risen to the level of vicarious suffering, in their witnessing they came away as active viewers and participants in a community of care and participated in creating the narrative around Merendino's experience thus engaging in a "socially significant experience" (Orgad, 2005, p. 5).

On Twitter many users posted images from Merendino's photo collection of Jennifer (these images can be downloaded via his blog or various other social media sites). These images were most often self-portraits of Jennifer and Merendino together, with new, unique captions placed on their images, thus re-mediating them and shifting their original meaning to include the original but build on it in creative, *playful*, mimetic ways. One particularly poignant post highlights the way users iconize and give meaning to central figures in traumatic events by making them eternal. Originally posted in Turkish and translated here by Google Translate, the post captioned an image of a clearly sick, bald Jennifer with her husband sitting in a garden of

some sort, with a text that roughly translates to, “Angelo Merendino, husband to Jennifer, who had cancer, Jennifer will never be alone” (@darkcastle19, 2015). This text seems to imply that Jennifer, even in death, is shrouded by the love of her marriage. Just as users did to Neda Agha Soltan in Iran, digital communities gave Jennifer an eternal life, not just through her husband, but through her suffering. Other posts from the same user appear in Turkish, captioning the photos from Merendino’s story with what the user believes they portray, and throughout their posts, which appear 4 years after Jennifer’s death, the user memorializes Jennifer and appears to translate her suffering into an eternal life, one that exists prominently in the digital realm. As recently as October of 2016 users were invoking Jennifer’s image as a symbol of heroism for “World Breast Cancer Day.” One user, originally posting in Spanish (translation provided by Twitter), captioned a photo of a bald Jennifer putting on a mascara with a compact mirror blocking part of her face with a motivational call to arms, urging cancer sufferers forward in their battle, remarking that “sometimes all that is left are words and missing embraces” (@roelpsico, 2016). Users from around the world re-mediated Jennifer’s story and what is striking about these various re-mediations are the calls to action and language of battle that s inherent in them. It is as though users read Jennifer’s death as a sacrifice in a communal battle against cancer, suffering, and disease. It is also interesting to note that users posted in multiple languages, from all part of the world. The primary storytelling tools used by Merendino and other vicarious sufferers were images, and the images of suffering that circulated portrayed, cultivated, contested, and cemented various ideologies about and understandings of cancer and disease, and the bodies that are marked by those forms of pain.

Working from feminist disability studies, these photos simultaneously cemented socially prominent discourses of cancer and disease, as well as provided a more realistic, potentially

subversive perspective to cancer and suffering more generally. These photos on one hand can be read as positioning cancer sufferers as necessary fighters and articulating their suffering through a lens of wellness, overcoming, and what it will mean to return to normal. Alternatively, Merendino, in most of his mediations of these photos, indicated that he wanted to provide a more realistic view of cancer, thus these photos potentially subvert cliché notions that cancer can and should be overcome and that illness looks and behaves a certain way. Regardless of how users read these photos, as powerful imagery they contributed to cultivation of meaning and memory around disease, suffering, and trauma.

Photography is a means through which stories that are important are cemented. Benjamin (1969) divorces this form of memory from what we traditionally know of memory, using Proust's term, *memoire involuntaire*, to describe the act of "spontaneous recollection" (p. 202). This involuntary memory, does not indicate the reality of life, rather it describes an interpretation of life from the one that lived it (Ibid.). Remembering socially constructs life and with it, ideas about rejuvenation. This is the process in which "things that normally just fade and slumber consume themselves in a flash" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 213-14). These flashes, that are a product of our inability to fully engage with the true potential of our lives, function to create a new reality in which "the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily" (Ibid.). Thus, Benjamin conjures up memory as an active process, one in which there is a certain degree of theatrics. Memory is a performance of the past and it is a manifestation of an active engagement with the past; the present constitutes our understanding of the past and allows us to negotiate future possibilities based on these performative memories (Benjamin, 2006). Photos, as memory objects function as tools through which the theatrics of memory operate. This is clearly seen in the case of Jennifer

Merendino's images. Her story, though known in part to viewers and digital users, is always incomplete, but those users, particularly those who actively engage in the social media dialogue with her husband and others, participate in an active process of remembering Jennifer, thus making and re-making her into an emblem of their suffering and positioning her as a subject that allows them to hope.

The final example brought to bear in this case study is a blog post by a WordPress user named pinkyflaminki, or known on Twitter as Jess Gooch (@jsgooch). The post titled "Loss through the eyes of love was retweeted by Angelo Merendino on October 20, 2014, roughly three years after Jennifer's death. In this post, pinkyflaminki notes that it took her almost a year to pen this post in which she tells her readers, "when you have a picture, I think you often don't need words. What you see versus what you read can be incredibly powerful" (Pinkyflaminki, 2014). Pinkyflaminki comments that she had no introduction to the photos upfront so she regarded them with a "combination of hope and fear." Despite her clear dismay at the ending to Jennifer's story she chose to close her blogpost with Jennifer's words, "love every morsel of the people in your life" (Pinkyflaminki, 2014). Urging her readers to look at the images of Jennifer and providing an endorsement of the charity created in Jennifer's honor, Pinkyflaminki highlights how personal this story became to those who looked at these photos and participated in these communities. Throughout this blog post are clear markers of vicarious suffering, at one point the author claims that Jennifer's death was "the truth that I didn't' want to see was looking back at me" (Ibid.). The markers of this user's grief and suffering at the death of a stranger are indicative of the powerful online environment that situates users in between their personal realities and the realities of others. They are also indicative of the way the contingency of images that force the subjunctive view, force viewers to become a part of the continuing trajectory of a

story. As Zelizer (2012) notes, photos "target the cusp of impending action – about to win, about to kiss, about to set sail, about to separate, about to fight…a single moment in action can only be used by the visual" (p. 2).

CONCLUSIONS

Re-mediations, memes, captions, or re-tellings of stories can create, maintain, or change meaning online and offline. The Internet, particularly in the case of traumatic suffering, has been shown to take passive sufferers and enable them to make themselves into active media prosumers, engendering new points of significance and fostering the potential for change. Users in communities that loosely form around traumatic events encode cultural information and give way to evolving meaning, thus providing a space through which individuals can perform and play with dominant discourses around illness, trauma, and suffering as they relate to their identities, and recreate, re-mediate, and shift cultural ideas. When looking at the powerful images that spurred communities to form around the death of one woman with cancer, and her grieving husband, it is important to recognize the way Merendino's own mediations of his suffering and of his late wife's suffering interacted with the grief others felt. This grief was experienced either through similar experiences of suffering related to their offline, material bodies, experiences bearing witness to the suffering of others in offline social worlds, or most interesting to this discussion and powerful in regards to this dissertation, the suffering incurred by bearing witness to Jennifer and her husband's suffering. In watching Jennifer die, even after the fact, empathetic witnesses became vicarious sufferers, and took to social media to show solidarity with Merendino, but more importantly to express their own feelings of grief and to cope with their own trauma: the trauma of looking.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

I came to this research because of my life's experience and in conjunction with that, what I had seen in mediations around the world. I wanted to understand the spaces of suffering that, by virtue of the affordances of digital media, people inhabit in varied and innovative ways. Along the path of my research, I had the privilege and misfortune of inhabiting these spaces myself due to an unforeseen illness, forcing me to engage in a complex negotiation between what I experienced in my everyday life and what I observed as a cultural critic and analyst in my scholarly work. As a Feminist researcher, I often situate myself in my work to enable my audience to better recognize the content I speak into, and it was in fact my own interests that led me to choose the various case studies contained in this dissertation. My social location enabled me to participate on the periphery of the digital spaces examined here, and my suffering made my participation legible to the community actors. In 2015 I wrote about my experiences mediating my own trauma through digital media for the Center for Media, Religion and Culture's group blog, in order to capture the way mediations, in the way they are encountered online, operate as a part of the cultural fabric of people's lives. At that time, I observed that if researchers and audiences took a close look at the issues at the heart of mediation, there could be a clear recognition that the content, the interactions, and the expressions are often part of deeply personal experiences that enter into conversation online. These interactions are part of a complex web of meaning production and it is through these digital interactions that meanings take hold and expand beyond just the individual user who posted them.

In order to examine the possibilities inherent in various digital platforms from a critical lens, this dissertation employed trauma as a powerful catalyst of user engagement. In forcing users to confront meaning head on, traumatic events highlight the possibilities and foreclosures of digital expression. Chapter one of this dissertation introduced the topic as one that valued story-telling, though often in short-form, as a primary driver of trauma sufferer's online engagement. In articulating traumatic events in ways that feel and seem authentic to online communities, users are able to negotiate meaning and in turn identity in potentially subversive ways, thus creating fissures in dominant discourses and *the way things are.* Chapter two highlighted driving questions of this research and examined methodological limitations to current research paradigms as they relate to quickly changing digital platforms. The central questions that animated this research were

- *Are people utilizing online platforms and mediations through technology to cultivate meaningful spaces through which to contend with trauma? If so, how?*
- *How does direct user suffering, direct trauma, witnessing, vicarious trauma or empathy impact online interactions?*

As the case studies bear out, people did functionally utilize various digital media to make sense of and contend with traumatic events, most centrally through finding or engaging with others who have witnessed the same event or have has similar experiences, as well as through re-mediating traumas in order to build upon and extend the meaning of certain events, experiences, and feelings. Online interactions after traumatic events tended to highlight the way disparate communities and individuals can come together around a collective sense of suffering to negotiate meaning as individuals and as groups. Particularly important to these instances of online expression were not the outcomes of them, but the processes of negotiations and the

processes of mediation. Chapter three provided an in depth examination of relevant literature from across fields to highlight the complex level of interactions of meaning-making that take place online, and identify how many of the gestures trauma sufferers make online are historically constituted and legacies of previous modalities and forms of media. Chapters four, five and six provided empirical data from three relevant case studies. These case studies highlighted the way digital media affords its users certain types of expression at certain times of life, thus facilitating micro-political acts of resistance that allowed for new meanings, or shifting forms of existing meanings, to emerge.

TESTING THE THEORY: FINDINGS, LEARNINGS, AND PROVOCATIONS

The theory developed in chapter three uses feminist disability studies and cultural studies to assess what is meaningful and how that meaning is manifested through digital media when traumatic events dismantle ways of knowing the world. This theory focuses on embodied suffering that may or may not lead to the "cripping" of bodily space through a reclamation and re-articulation of the body according to new or changing conceptual boundaries around identity. Within these narrations of suffering and trauma, there was no judgement as to what was meaningful or subversive, rather meaning and authenticity were measured based on a qualitative analysis of the way users positioned themselves in relation to dominant, normative constructs around their traumas. Meaningful points for analysis, stemming from the theory developed in chapter three, were whether users saw sharing as a part of their process of coping, whether articulations that enabled sharing led to formation of community, and if digital gestures allowed users to imbue their suffering with purpose, most often that purpose being a sense of triumph over the suffering. The theory built upon Madianou and Miller's (2013) argument that polymedia is a space through which communications technologies are defined relationally, with users

understanding that various technologies have certain degrees of affordance that can be deployed in order to take advantage of the various social and emotional consequences of engaging on one platform over another. While users deliberately made choices about what to share and in what digital space, their testimonies and posts took on a trans-temporal, trans-spatial quality, most often using visual imagery to bring other users into a double-consciousness with what they were looking at. Thus, the digital users constituted meaning in the images and the images spoke back to digital users, shifting the meaning they produced even further. All of these expressions are useful and salient expressions of voice, as users sought to presence themselves in meaningful ways to other sufferers, in order to cope, to share, to overcome, or to simply make meaning for themselves. In these spaces users rarely posted or produced new content, rather they re-mediated what is already in circulation, re-captioning it or shifting the meaning given to the visual, thus pushing and progressing the possibilities for discourse through their small micro-political, everyday tactics. All of these gestures analyzed by this theory are situated between pure forms of authentic engagement and complicated neoliberal ideals. Importantly, the case studies highlight that despite the commodification of suffering, the digital spaces examined are not devoid of authentic meaning-making, thus arguing that neoliberal ideologies do not fully foreclose upon possibilities for authentic interactions and feelings.

Each of the cases examined have various commonalities and differences when it comes to bearing out the primary components of this theory. All three case studies indicated that people do in fact turn to digital technology to cultivate meaningful spaces that either do not exist offline or are too difficult to presence oneself in through offline spaces. The case studies also highlighted that there is no meaningful difference, when it comes to digital meaning-making, between direct sufferers and vicarious sufferers/witnesses. In each of the three case studies the users who posted

contributed to a collective meaning-making process in which one user's posts existed in relation to other users' posts. The relational nature of the posts about trauma allowed for the re-mediation of the suffering of others, thus enabling new meanings to form. The case studies all displayed the way the playful nature of the digital space becomes important in allowing people to inhabit their suffering in new ways, that don't force them to fully disclose themselves beyond their comfort level. Common to all case studies as well, was a sense that everyday gestures of sharing, speaking, writing, meme-ing and even something as simple as liking another user's post, were tactical gestures in producing meaning around suffering. It is also notable that all case studies featured sufferers who were largely legible to dominant discourse. Merendino, Ogar, and Agha-Soltan all read as Caucasian in images, they present as relatively middle-class and mainstream. Thus, as accessible "victims" they inherently reinforced dominant ideologies around who audiences can look at with sympathy and empathy. In looking at representation there must be, as there was in each of these cases, a recognition that cultural context changes meaning. In many ways these three sufferers subverted meaning thus creating change, but by virtue of their ability to inhabit normative structures of who is eligible to suffer, their stories perhaps silenced other notable stories that emerged from similar traumatic events.

While there are commonalities around the way the digital operates for each of these cases, there were notable differences between them. Neda Agha Soltan was unique in that her story was not mediated by a family member or close friend, rather her suffering was directly mediated through the suffering of a traumatized witness to her death. In filming and posting her death, Hejazi and his friend shifted the course of Neda's suffering, making it legible in certain ways, to certain witnesses. Her trauma was not just hers, it was cemented in the political history of the Iranian nation, and thus meanings produced in relation to her death cannot be fully

removed from that context. Users who posted about Neda did seem to consistently invoke her suffering as their own, indicating the power of the visual in instantiating suffering and causing the suffering to spread to witnesses. Given the inability for Neda to overcome the circumstances of her death, digital users were forced to give her an immortal life through the digital, a gesture not seen in the other cases. Neda could not overcome her suffering or cope with it through the act of sharing, and as a person in exile neither could Hejazi fully overcome his suffering. Thus users detached Neda's suffering from her body, and Hejazi's suffering from his body, in turn placing their suffering on an idealized version of the Iranian nation.

Though both Ogar and Merendino's suffering was invoked by witnesses and sufferers online, the levels at which their suffering was extrapolated to broader offline communities was on a smaller scale. For Ogar, his suffering did not become the suffering of an entire nation, but it did become the triumph of a powerful subculture, which became apparent in the way Ogar's story helped CrossFit promote what being strong can do for you in the face of trauma. Ogar, however, after being released from the hospital and given back control of his social media, was able to curate his message and set important boundaries around it, thus insulating it from any broader critique (though there were no signs in the data that users directly critiqued Ogar, rather they critiqued CrossFit as a whole). There was a level of detachment from the original sufferer in Merendino's case as well. Jennifer's suffering was detached from her body after her death, and after being mediated and re-mediated all of the suffering the couple endured was detached from her husband as well. Merendino's suffering became emblematic of cancer sufferers and their families, and users invoked Merendino's suffering to in turn testify to their own health or other tragedies. Further, in watching Merendino, users became traumatized articulating a fear around loss of health and loss of life that is perpetuated in dominant discourse. In these articulations

users subverted normative frameworks of health and death by making the claim and hope that death can be meaningful if it is mediated.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS RESEARCH TO MEDIA STUDIES RESEARCH: USING TRAUMA AS A WAY TO HIGHLIGHT WHAT INTERNET PLATFORMS CAN ENABLE

The three case studies highlighted disparate incidents of trauma on embodied subjects that were mediated through digital spaces, and offered a sense of the complicated negotiations taking place in digital spaces regarding identity formation after life's meaning-making schema are dismantled. The empirical data's primary contribution to scholarship is an innovative and flexible theory of trauma and media, that takes a feminist view of meaning and discourse and places that in conversation with media and trauma studies. This theory bridges a complex framework built from cultural studies, feminist disability studies, and poststructuralism, all with a uniquely media studies lens. Using various posts, comments and images from various social media platforms as points of analysis, the case studies sought to examine the flexibility of the aforementioned theory to account for distinct types of trauma, in order to facilitate the building of a theory that explains some of why social media has come to enable such a diverse set of uses for various, loosely formed communities.

The case studies, though not similar in form or in social groups affected, highlight the way users engaged on social media at that particular time. The traumas that befell Kevin Ogar, Angelo Merendino, and Neda Agha Soltan were quite different, and yet many gestures and modes of meaning-making were consistent across the mediations that arose in response to the suffering and trauma of these individuals, and the suffering and trauma of those online users and audiences that bore witness to their traumatic events. In each of these cases, the trauma was ascribed to different bodies, in different ways and for different reasons. Despite that, the cases

highlight the way the third spaces, as-if spaces, enabled by polymediatic digital platforms allow users to enter self-reflexively into bounded spaces, to navigate their traumas collectively. In the case of Neda Agha Soltan, while Neda's body suffered trauma in her death and the graphic nature of it, the location of the trauma, as it was articulated online, was on the body-politic of the Iranian people and its allies. For Kevin Ogar, while he was the person who was paralyzed, the trauma fell on his community, witnesses to his injury, and those whose disabled bodies are forced to navigate the complicated web of ability and disability, most notably the idea of the super-crip. For Merendino, while he suffered the loss of his wife Jennifer, and she suffered a painful death from cancer, the trauma befell the entire community of disease sufferers and the empathetic witnesses and vicarious sufferers that saw Jennifer's suffering and were moved by it. In fact, the way the question of who suffers becomes discrete and undefined is indicative of the possibility inherent in digital space. It is hard to separate types of trauma and even harder yet to distinguish who really suffers in a modern, mediated paradigm of trauma and tragedy. That users can embody another's' trauma, thus shifting it away from the body of the material sufferer, and blurring the boundaries between who is eligible to suffer, is a relevant finding of this research. Suffering in digital spaces unhinges that suffering from one particular body and allows it to be claimed and re-mediated by a variety of users for a variety of purposes.

The cases highlight the complex negotiation of meaning that occurs when life's experiences place an individual's way of knowing their world into question. In each of these cases, digital social platform users, who either experienced or witnessed traumatic events, articulated their testimonies in various ways and according to many unspoken, yet somehow socialized rules of engagement in these platforms. Building off of the mediations of others, users took hold of the playful nature of the online and "meme-d" their traumatic experiences, thus

allowing others to re-mediate them. Users that bore witness to traumas studied here, across platforms, seemed to internalize those traumas and speak through them, often articulating some difficult life event from their own lives through the language of the traumatic event they witnessed and engaged with. In this process, digital users participated in short-form storytelling and testimony, where they simultaneously subverted certain discourses around identity and trauma, while often reifying and cementing discourses around certain communities, identity, wellness, and ability.

This concomitant expression of meaning that is neither wholly subversive nor wholly resistive is a helpful articulation of the complexity of coping with trauma and the complexity of narrativizing that trauma in a world that seeks to heal trauma in order to return suffering subjects back to status quo normalcy. This normalcy operates within discourses of power that are often gendered, classed, and ableist. However, the digital realm allows user to avoid status quo normalcy by deeply inhabiting trauma, and in conjunction difference, with others and across traditional boundaries and borders. This process in fact starts with traumatic events. Trauma forces individuals and communities to reexamine meanings that were previously assumed. Janoff-Bulman (1989) posits that "work with victims suggests that people generally operate not the basis of important assumptions that generally go unquestioned and unchallenged. Stressful life events, which may dramatically challenge these assumptions, thereby serve to illustrate the otherwise tacit or implicit nature of these fundamental beliefs" (p. 114). When traumatic events cannot be accounted for by these implicitly held, fundamental beliefs, trauma sufferers, or victims as Janoff-Bulman calls them, must account for this vulnerability through a series of behaviors that include "self-blame, reinterpretation of the victimization in a positive light, denial, and recurrent intrusive thoughts" (Ibid., p. 121). Through this process of accounting for

vulnerabilities, digital users can engage with certain communities, via certain social, digital platforms in order to find a sense of congruency between their previously held beliefs of invulnerability and their new found, often negative feelings of vulnerability (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, p. 123). The negotiation of trauma often leads to individuals and communities shifting away from the traumatic event and focusing on positive traits such as strength, self-knowledge, an ability to better focus on priorities, and deeper understandings of life enriched by the lessons learned from experiencing and surviving a trauma (Ibid., p. 130). On the Internet, particularly on social media platforms, digital users take advantage of the affordances of the platforms to negotiate the previously held meanings and beliefs, and the current disjunctures, they feel as a result of living through or witnessing a trauma. It is in this process that meaning is made. The unique space of the digital, a space that allows users to pick and choose which facets of their experience to share and mediate, enables new meanings to take hold. It is in this space of new meaning production that there is immense possibility for social and cultural change in regards to identity, particularly as it relates to notions of power, ability, and other identity markers that are questioned, fought for, and often devalued by dominant discourses.

While Ogar's use of digital media after his injury served to inscribe and re-inscribe CrossFit's ideals and ideologies and mainstream notions of overcoming illness, rather than subvert or question them, the other two case studies displayed an alternative view of suffering and trauma. Further, granted that Ogar's mediations of his trauma, and his community's mediations of their trauma, tended to reify presently held dominant beliefs, the process through which users engaged in that meaning making, is a process that offers potential for creating subversive meanings or mainstream, normalized meanings. While both Neda Agha-Soltan and Jennifer Merendino (and by extension her husband Angelo) became symbols of their respective

traumas that could inhabit dominant discourse, they also subverted various constructs of what it is to be an idealized victim in many ways. They, in their mediated suffering, served as indications of the true complexity of varying identities and modes of expression in online mediation. They were both privileged and constructed symbols of the types of individuals whose trauma is clearly legible to society, yet, the engagement users had with them also served to open up space, however small for new and alternative meanings to emerge. It is in those meanings that we see deliberate, tactical expressions of voice that engage trauma, traumatic suffering, and begin to create fissures in constructs around trauma and testimony in very interesting ways.

In assessing the counter-hegemonic possibilities implicit in digital platforms, it is important to recognize degrees of change, while not dismissing micro-political acts as meaningless because they do not arise to the scale of systemic changes in dominant discourses. This research sought to examine whether ambivalent spaces that were cultivated through digital media fostered possibilities for micro-political transformation. The various communities studied, in their allowing for individuals to share, cope, contest, maintain, or respond to mainstream representations of various kinds of trauma were disruptive in nature. Despite the concern of various scholars, such as Sunstein (2014), about group think in digital environments, this dissertation has highlighted the complexity of group gathering places in digital platforms and highlighted that communities that form around trauma are less likely to lead to dangerous group-think for various reasons. Individuals in the online communities examined via the three case studies in this dissertation, as well as other communities that form around traumatic events, come together to find a space for expression of *distinct* and *changing* outlooks that are not shared by mainstream audiences. The anonymity and relative distance fostered by the technologies both facilitates this experiment in meaning-making for users but also protects them from whole

heartedly buying into a specific and particular mentality. The way digital users in the three case studies used the playful, as-if spaces of the Internet to articulate meanings that run counter to dominant ideologies, in particular around trauma, health, wellness, ability and other identity factors, led to creation of meanings that are productive in the immediate and short term negotiation of an individual or collectivities identity. Digital users that have encountered extreme trauma developed meanings that were a part of a circulation of ideas that, in their ambivalence and ephemerality, emerged and served their purpose without fully interrupting large scale structures of oppression, yet were still significant meanings to analyze.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are various articulations of and opinions about what the Internet is capable of achieving through its users. Specifically, for my research, social media and digital communication across new media platforms are contested, complicated spaces of both structural oppression and possibility for agency. While my dissertation does not identify and elucidate a clear understanding of what the Internet ultimately can do for society on the whole, it enters the debate from the location of how this technology uses and is used by sufferers of trauma in significant ways. Importantly, the Internet spaces explored herein, social media spaces such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and blogs, are treated in this research as depositories for short-form, immediate testimony and narrative. Regardless of whether these spaces oppress or liberate their users in regards to dominant discourses, ultimately they are spaces for stories to be shared and meaning to be made. Trauma shifts the way individuals conceive of their worlds. Trauma takes the constructed worlds around people and often shatters them, causing the sense-making schema individuals may have used their entire life to be forced to shift and change. Digital media provide a unique format for individuals to explore, through acts of mediation and re-mediation, their

existing sense-making schema, as well as explore the processes of having to re-make them, as well as the possibilities to create new ones. This, then, is a project of identity politics, as users engage digital media to reorient themselves and their shifting physical, mental and emotional landscapes to the world around them.

Trauma, broadly defined, is a powerful lens through which to encounter digital media subjects who use media, in part, to dissect, explore, articulate and mediate their lives when their world-making schema fall apart. Trauma, though, is not the only thing that can make life seem contingent upon an unknown future. Future iterations of this research, as well as uses for the theory developed as a part of this doctoral research, include various possibilities for examining cross-cultural flows of information in digital space, particularly across constructed national boundaries, between home cultures and diasporas, and among various sub-cultures within national boundaries.

One specific iteration of this research takes the theories that are built in this project and deploys them to explore online mediations and relationships between Iranians in Iran and the Iranian diaspora. Speaking to and across borders and boundaries is a complicated process that can be examined through the various forms of mediations that people communicate through. With changing technological landscapes, communication across, through, and within various socio-political boundaries has shifted, increased in speed, and enabled an as-if environment changing not only how individuals make meaning, but how they make memories on an individual level, collective level, cultural level, and about other cultures. As a part of my work for the Center for Media, Religion and Culture, I have worked on several projects that enable scholarship to account for how users engage media based on various identity markers. My work, just as the work at the Center does, attempts to conceptually locate and describe, as well as

analyze, the communicative moment in which we live and how it impacts religion, politics, gender, power, race among other factors, all from a distinctly media studies perspective.

The theory of trauma and digital media that I work on has possibilities beyond just trauma, it has potential in helping scholarship account for social disjunctures that social agents grapple with through digital media. In short this theory revolves around how digital users use social and digital technology to express meaning and make meaning during contingent, subjunctive times of social, personal, political or collective trauma or substantial change. From this theoretical frame research can begin to see how this theory may apply to broader contexts, such as how users in Iran and in the United States engage in digital media production in ways that produce both culture and meaning across national boundaries, that are increasingly fluid and constantly changing. Depending on specific identity and social location, it could be argued that for some Iranians living in Iran and Iranians in the diaspora, deeply invested in the fate of a country that, no longer exists as they knew it, life is always contingent. Consider Iranian women, for example, their bodies extend to their digital, curated identities, ever shifting, and ever protesting or embracing various levels of Islam and the West. The ability for women to inhabit both Western ideals of beauty and Islamic moral, visual, and behavioral constructs highlights the way women fluidly inhabit a hyper-mediated context, mediating themselves into narratives of geo-political power struggles. While both religious and secular women sought to oppose repression under the Shah's regime, they did not find reprieve in the heavy handed, patriarchal theocracy in modern Iran, thus over time they engaged in building hybrid identities both online and offline, and through their mediations they develop uniquely modern and culturally distinctive mannerisms, ways of knowing, meanings, and ways of remembering. I hope to deploy my evolving theoretical project to new digital environments to find out how meaning is

constructed online and how that meaning is deployed to help users make sense of the world around them.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A:

RECRUITMENT LETTERS, INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, AND INFORMED CONSENT:

Recruitment Letter for Narratives:

Dear Social Media User:

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Samira Rajabi (me), a doctoral candidate at the University of Colorado at Boulder's College of Media Communication and Information. I am a researcher working toward my PhD and studying the way communities form online, specifically after encountering, hearing about, reading about, or seeing footage of an instance of trauma in their social network, or shared by someone on their social network.

I contacted you because I am looking at four stories that were addressed and discussed online and you commented on one or all of the stories:

- The story of Kevin Ogar and his injury sustained during the OC Throwdown and the subsequent response to his injury online.
- The story of Angelo and Jennifer Merendino and their images of Jennifer's breast cancer treatments as part of Angelo's website/project titled *The Battle We Didn't Choose* and the subsequent response to her illness and the images on social media.
- The story of Neda Agha-Soltan's death, which was captured on cellphone video and then spread across social media, and the response to this event on social media.
- The 2014 death of Brittany Maynard in accordance with "death with dignity" laws and the YouTube videos that were a part of the "Compassion and Choices" charity, as well as the social media response to them and to Maynard's death.

I am using your public data (without using your name) as a part of my research and I wanted to hear from you. I was hoping you would be willing to describe your involvement and interest to me in greater depth. Before doing so I would like to inform you of your rights to absolute privacy and share an informed consent with you and ultimately obtain your permission to include thoughts and motivations in my data. No names or identifying information would be used in the final products and your information would not be shared without changing the identifying information, of course, this would be discussed in further detail before any data collection takes place.

By participating in this research you could be shifting our understanding of how and why individuals use social media to narrate their lives in relation to traumatic events. While these are difficult things to discuss, they are important to understanding how the various technological tools available to us affect our lives.

If you are interested in participating please reply to this message or email me at Samira.Rajabi@colorado.edu or call me at (303) 547 0043.

Thank you,

Samira Rajabi

Doctoral Candidate

University of Colorado at Boulder

Recruitment Letter for Interviews with Ogar, Merendino, and Hejazi:

Dear _____:

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Samira Rajabi (me), a doctoral candidate at the University of Colorado at Boulder's College of Media Communication and Information. I am a researcher working toward my PhD and studying the way communities form online, specifically after encountering, hearing about, reading about, or seeing footage of an instance of trauma in their social network, or shared by someone on their social network.

I contacted you because I am looking at stories regarding traumatic experiences that were addressed and discussed online. One of those stories is yours. I am interested in finding out why individuals go online to talk about difficult and serious things and why that online engagement is (or sometimes is not) meaningful to users.

Your story is one of the central case studies of my research because I personally found it powerful and saw that so many other Internet users did as well. I felt moved by your story, I want to understand why. Your story shifted the discourse on social media for a period of time and I would like to understand how and why that happened.

In addition to your story I am looking at the following cases:

- The story of Kevin Ogar and his injury sustained during the OC Throwdown and the subsequent response to his injury online.
- The story of Angelo and Jennifer Merendino and their images of Jennifer's breast cancer treatments as part of Angelo's website/project titled *The Battle We Didn't Choose* and the subsequent response to her illness and the images on social media.
- The story of Neda Agha-Soltan's death, which was captured on cellphone video and then spread across social media, and the response to this event on social media.
- The 2014 death of Brittany Maynard in accordance with "death with dignity" laws and the YouTube videos that were a part of the "Compassion and Choices" charity, as well as the social media response to them and to Maynard's death.

As you know, you are central to these stories. I was hoping you would agree to me using any private online data (Facebook or other private sites) and agree to an interview to discuss what happened to you. Due to the public nature of what happened to you I will not be able to discuss your case confidentially but will provide you with an informed consent so you are fully aware of how this research will be used and know your rights.

By participating in this research you could be shifting our understanding of how and why individuals use social media to narrate their lives in relation to traumatic events. While these are difficult things to discuss, they are important to understanding how the various technological tools available to us affect our lives.

If you are interested in participating please reply to this message or email me at Samira.Rajabi@colorado.edu or call me at (303) 547 0043.

Thank you,

Samira Rajabi

Doctoral Candidate

University of Colorado at Boulder

Guiding Questions For Narratives:

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Below are sample questions to provide an idea of the scope and type of information that this research seeks to find. The nature and extent of the questions may be minimally altered to fit the specific research context and data collected.

Sample Questions for Narrative guidance:

Please write a narrative that describes your participation in the mediation of the case study in question. Please describe your level of participation in the case study and how you participated.

For example, what social media did you use to discuss this issue? Why did you use social media as opposed to some other form of communication? Was this participation meaningful to you? Did you spend a lot of time thinking about, engaging with, or producing content (posts, videos, shares) around this subject?

Please consider your emotional connection to the subject matter. Was it difficult to participate in relation to this topic? What did you consider before and during posting/commenting/sharing about this topic?

These questions are meant simply to guide your narrative about your participation in the case study at hand. More important than answering the questions provided is you providing an account of your participation. If you feel you have pertinent information about your participation that does not fit into these questions or is related to some other notions not considered here, please feel free to share that. This should be a free flowing sharing.

Sample Questions for Interview subjects (Ogar, Merendino, Hejazi)

1. Why did you choose to put this trauma online?
    a. Was it put online for you by someone else? Did they have your permission?
2. Was it difficult to engage with a traumatic experience via the Internet?
3. How, if at all, did engaging with communities online facilitate your healing?

4. What was your interest in social media prior to this event?
5. What is your interest in social media now?
6. How do you conceive of social media's power?
7. Is it important to you that people know your story/or the story you posted about?
8. How do you feel about the continued attention to the trauma you experienced?
9. How often do you engage the community online that was a part of the mediation of this trauma?
    a. Why do you engage them, or why not?
10. What is specific about the social media platform or means of expression that led you to sharing your story (or having your story shared for you)?
11. If given the opportunity would you share via social media about a traumatic experience again?

Informed Consent Sample

Online Communities and Trauma Dissertation

Samira Rajabi

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

NARRATIVES OF ONLINE PARTICIPATION AND/OR INTERVIEWS

Please read the following material that explains this research study. Signing this form will indicate that you have been informed about the study and that you want to participate in the study. I want you to understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits – if any – are associated with the study. This should help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Samira Rajabi, a doctoral candidate in the University of Colorado at Boulder's College of Media, Communication and Information, 478 UCB Boulder, CO 80309-0478. This project is being done under the direction of Professor Stewart Hoover, College of Media, Communication and Information. Samira Rajabi can be reached at (303) 547 – 0043. Professor Hoover can be reached at (303) 492-4833.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This research study is about what happens to instances of trauma such as illness, accidents, violence, etc, when they are dealt with online, specifically via social media. This dissertation aims to understand how people feel about seeing serious and traumatic content online and why some users are compelled to respond and participate in community discussions and community formation around that event/content. This research hopes to find out what is special, if anything, about the mediation of traumatic events in an online context, and understand what effects and outcomes these posts/images/events have on users at multiple levels of involvement. This research wants to understand how and why online communities form around certain people who have experienced some kind of difficulty in order to recognize the positive and negative ways that social media tools can and are being used.

You are being asked to be in this study because you have participated in one of the three case studies being examined here already. You have either participated in a public forum such as Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube, or you participated on Facebook and previous consent was obtained to examine your private data. You have either created, posted or commented on content regarding one of the following three cases:

1. The accident of CrossFit athlete Kevin Ogar at the OC Throwdown and the subsequent online response.

2. The viral images of Jennifer Merendino, a woman who died of breast cancer, as presented by her husband, Angelo Merendino through various media channels, and the social media response.

3. The YouTube video of the death of Neda Agha Soltan and the content produced through other online channels as a result of her death and the political situation in Iran.

4. The 2014 death of Brittany Maynard in accordance with "death with dignity" laws and the YouTube videos that were a part of the "Compassion and Choices" charity, as well as the social media response to them and to Maynard's death.

Your experience as a consumer, producer and commenter on these sites is essential to understanding how these events enable community formation, bring individuals together, and allow users to cope with trauma and witnessing of traumatic events. By participating in this study, you are adding your voice to the scholarly discussion about social media, the importance of online expression, having a voice during times of trauma among many other things. Your contribution will allow this scholarship to make a nuanced and complex analysis of a social space that is growing and changing and has never been researched in this way.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We will make every effort to maintain the privacy of your data. Due to the nature of this topic and the need to collect data about traumatic events or the witnessing of traumatic events online or offline, confidentiality is a main priority. Your name will never be used during this research unless you wish to be addressed by your name in private correspondence between yourself and the researcher. Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym in all data collection and that pseudonym will be used throughout the writing process of the dissertation document. Personal information about where you live, your family, etc will never be used during this process, and your contact information used during this process (email, Facebook links, etc) will never be given to anyone or included in the written dissertation document.

Other than the researchers, only regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the University of Colorado at Boulder Institutional Review Board may see your individual data as part of routine audits.

PROCEDURES

Taking part in this study is completely **voluntary**. You do not have to participate if you don't want to. If you don't consent the information you have posted online in private settings such as on a friends Facebook page, will not be collected as part of the data. You may leave the study at any time with no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Description of Procedures:

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to:

1. If you were a person who had a relevant degree of involvement mediating one of these case studies online, you will be asked to respond in writing to a variety of questions in the form of a narrative. This narrative of your experience will ask you about why you had interest in the case study and why you decided to use social media to interact with these case studies. You will be contacted through the direct messaging service on Facebook (or whatever other social media medium I have contacted you from), I will provide you with a secure email address to send your narrative to and further contact will take place through email if email access is available to you.
2. Depending on the content and depth of your narrative you may be asked to participate in further interviews either in person, via telephone, in writing or via skype. You will be

able to choose which interview format you are most comfortable with. This interview will offer a safe, confidential environment for you to discuss the importance of these case studies to you and for you to describe the nature of your involvement whether it be very minimal or very substantial.

Description of Data Collection Methods:

Sample questions to help you guide your narrative will be provided to you via a secure and private email address. These include questions about why and how you participated online in relation to one of the three case studies. Your information will then be analyzed by the researcher and may be quoted. All identifying information will be removed and only the researcher will see the full narrative. Participation in the interviews in part 2 of the procedures will simply ask for more detail regarding your participation in the mediation of the traumatic event online. Agreeing to part 1 of the procedures does not mean you will be asked to participate in part 2, nor does it require you to participate in part 2.

Time Commitment to Complete Research Procedures:

If you only participate in part 1 you will be asked to spend one hour writing your narrative.

Participated in part 2 of the research will not take more than one hour of your time. Participation in all levels of this research is a total commitment of 2 hours.

Research location:

Part 1 of the research will take place exclusively via the Internet so you will be in a location that is comfortable and safe for you. If we are to meet in person for interviews for part 2 of this research would take place in a neutral, academic setting in the city in which the participants currently reside.

Audio Recordings:

If you are asked and you agree to participate in part 2 of the research and your interview is not in writing, the conversation will be audio recorded. These tapes will be used for transcription and data analysis and will be transferred to Samira Rajabi's external hard drive for storage. Only Samira Rajabi will have access to these tapes, all identifying information from them will be removed, and they will be used for transcription purposes only.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are some potential risks if you take part in this study.

These may include: Revisiting a traumatic experience of witnessing a traumatic experience that causes a resurgence of difficult or uncomfortable memories or thoughts. Other discomforts may arise and if they do you can alert Samira Rajabi and/or end your participation at any time. These risks are really only for part 2 of the research procedures as they ask you to describe your experiences. If you are asked and agree to participate in part 2 of the research contact information for local therapists that specialize in trauma and witnessing trauma will be available in the event you wish to discuss your experiences with a professional. You can collect this information and these resources from Samira Rajabi at (303) 547 – 0043 even after your participation in the study has ended.

BENEFITS

The major benefit of participating in this study is your contribution to the furthering of important research. To my knowledge no research on trauma and its mediations online has taken place and you permitting your online posts to be used will allow your unique voice to be a part of a burgeoning analysis of how social media operate. This approach will provide a practice based account of how social media is used and why users choose to participate at varying levels.

SUBJECT PAYMENT

Your participation will entitle you to a $50.00 payment via a Visa gift card.

ENDING YOUR PARTICIPATION

You have the right to withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) or refuse to participate in any procedure for any reason. Refusing to participate in this study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions regarding your participation in this research you should ask the researcher before signing this form. If you should have questions or concerns during or after your participation, please contact Samira Rajabi at (303) 547 -0043.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them -- confidentially, if you wish -- to the Institutional Review Board, 3100 Marine Street, Rm A15, 563 UCB, (303) 735-3702.

AUTHORIZATION

I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I know the possible risks and benefits. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can withdraw at any time. I have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 5 pages.

Name of Participant (printed) _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____.

(Also initial all pages of the consent form.)

I am consenting to parts 1 and 2 of this research

_____ Yes, I would like to participate in parts 1 and 2 of this research.

_____ No, I would only like to participate in part 1 of this research.

If you answered yes to the previous question:

I am consenting to be audio taped during the participation of this research.

_____ Yes, I would like to be taped during my participation in this research.

_____ No, I would not like to be taped during my participation in this research.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE DATA FROM CASE STUDIES

Case 1: Neda Agha Soltan

The following are samples of data collected on the anniversary of Neda's death. The samples that appear are from Twitter and Flickr.

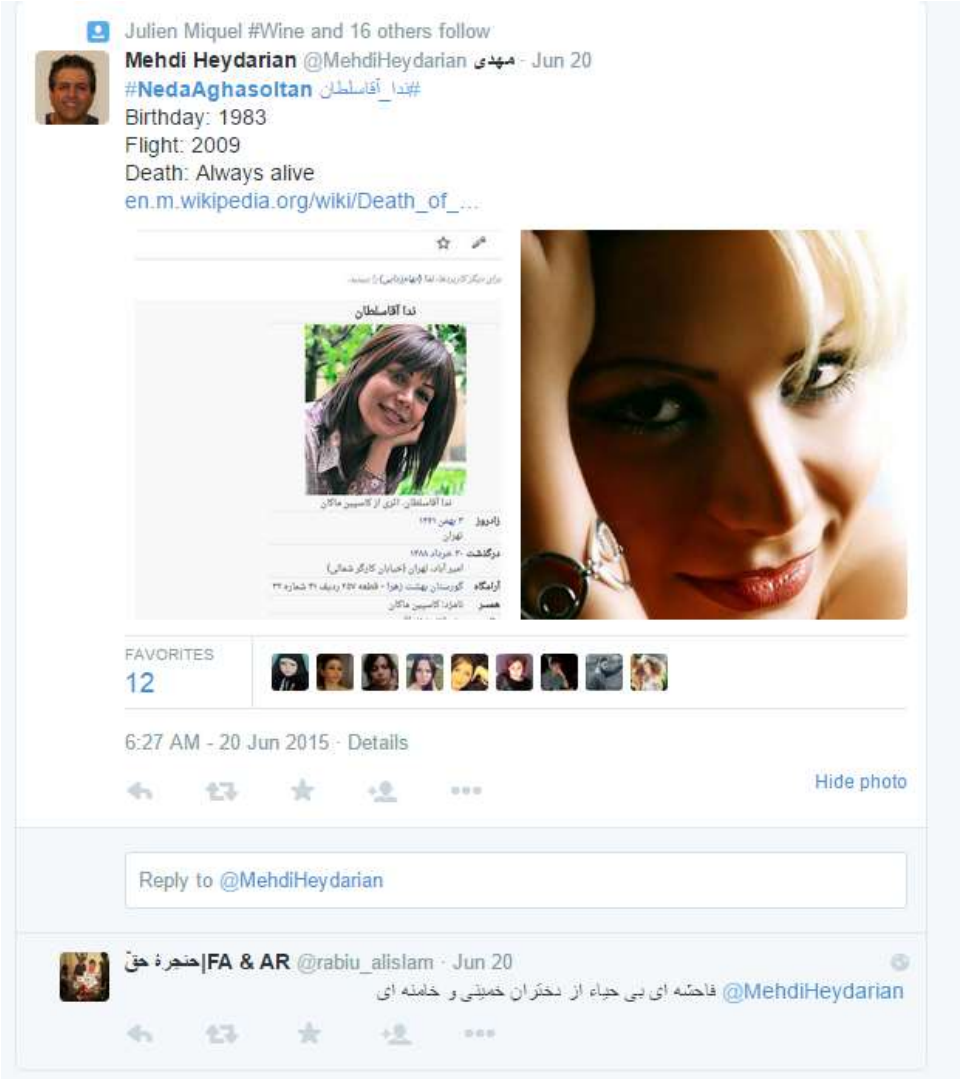


Figure 4 (Heydarian, 2015)

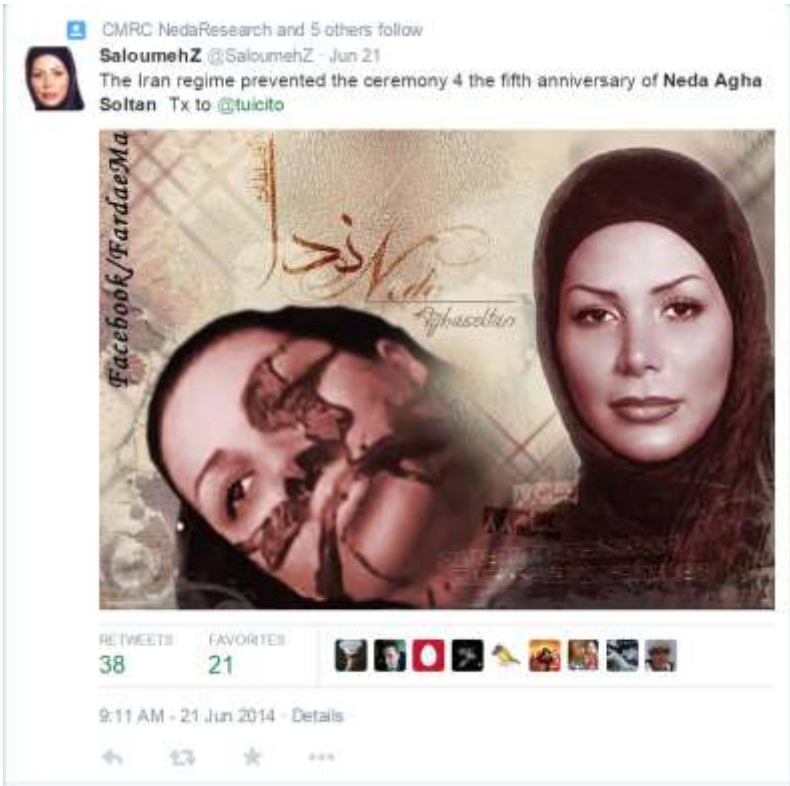


Figure 5 (@SaloumehZ, 2014)

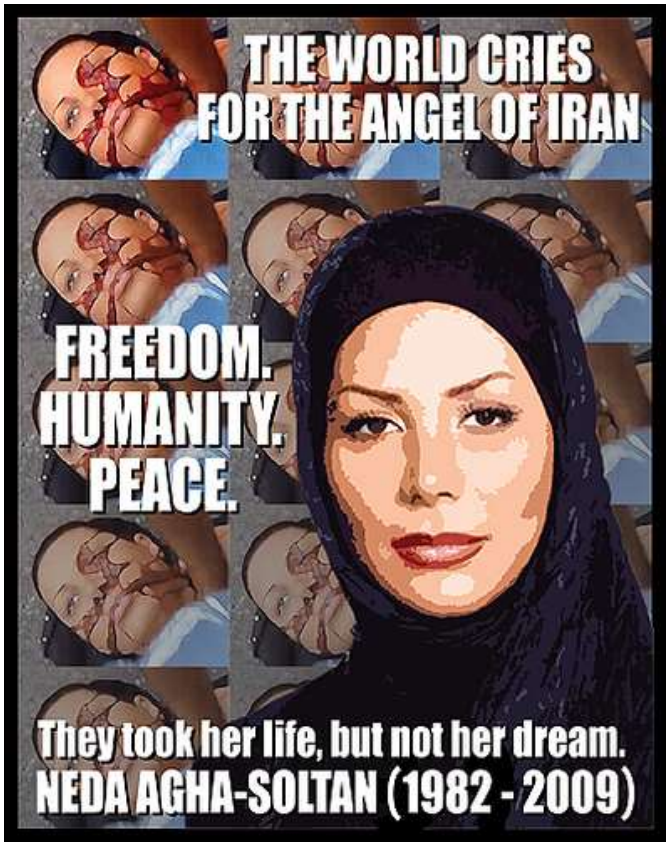


Figure 6 (AtomicJukebox.vom, 2009)

Case 2: Kevin Ogar

The following are samples of the data from the case of Kevin Ogar. The samples come from YouTube and Instagram.

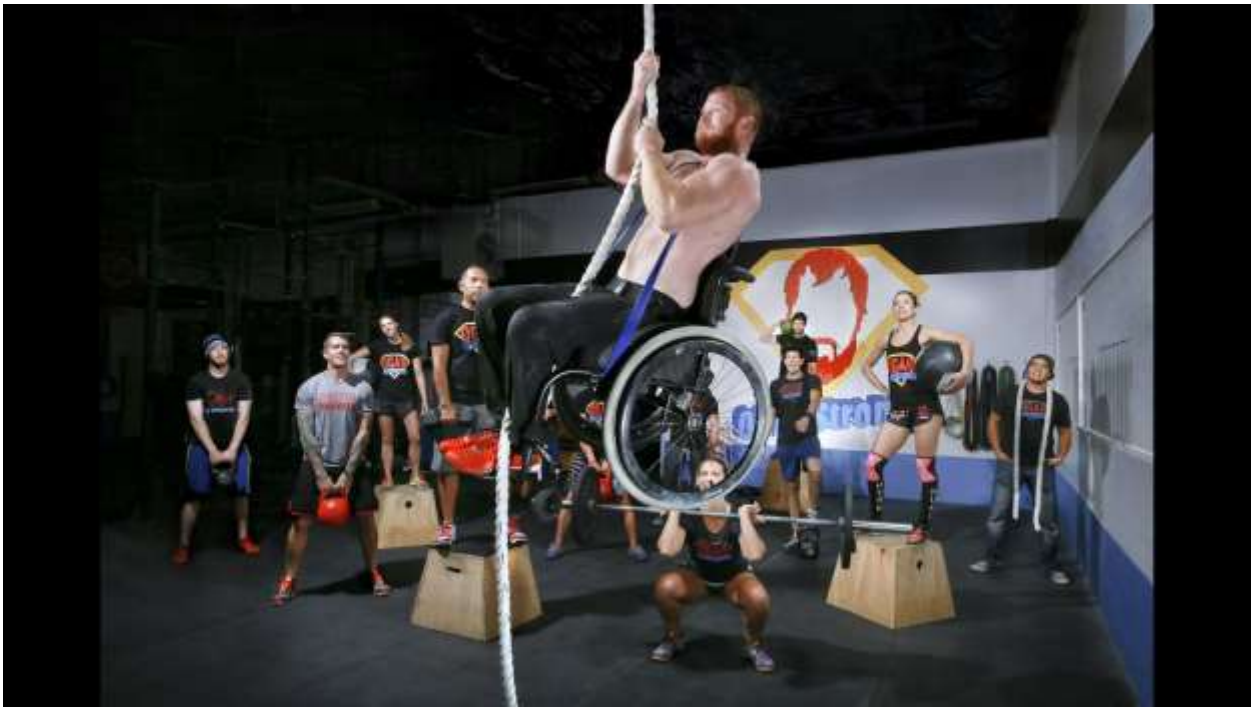


Figure 7 (CraigHospital, 2015)

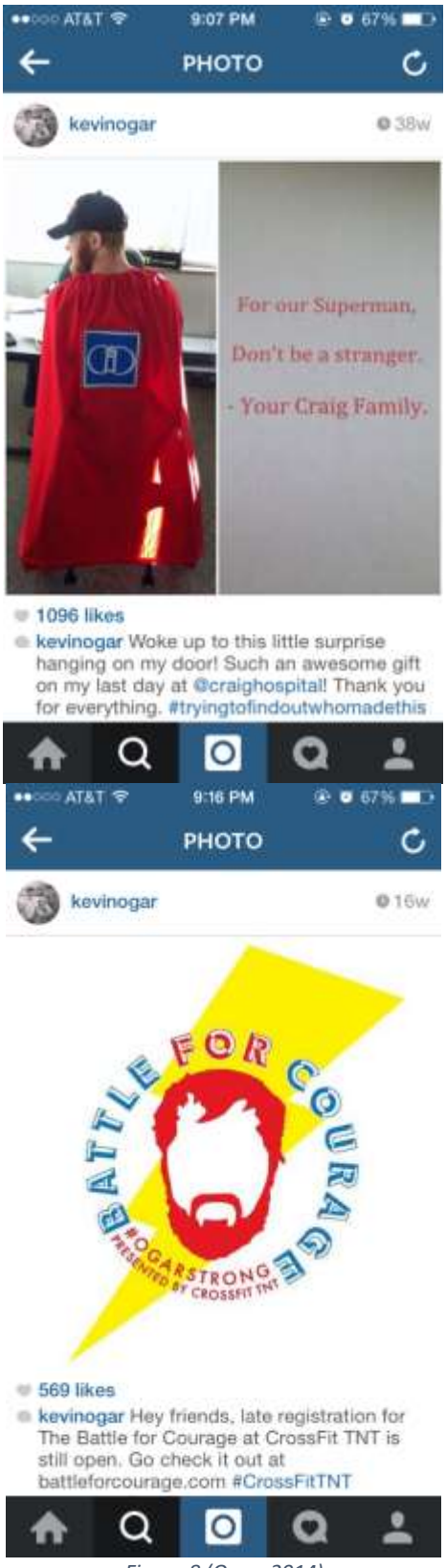


Figure 8 (Ogar, 2014)

CrossFit Images Referenced in Chapter 5:

The following images came from Twitter and Google Image Search.

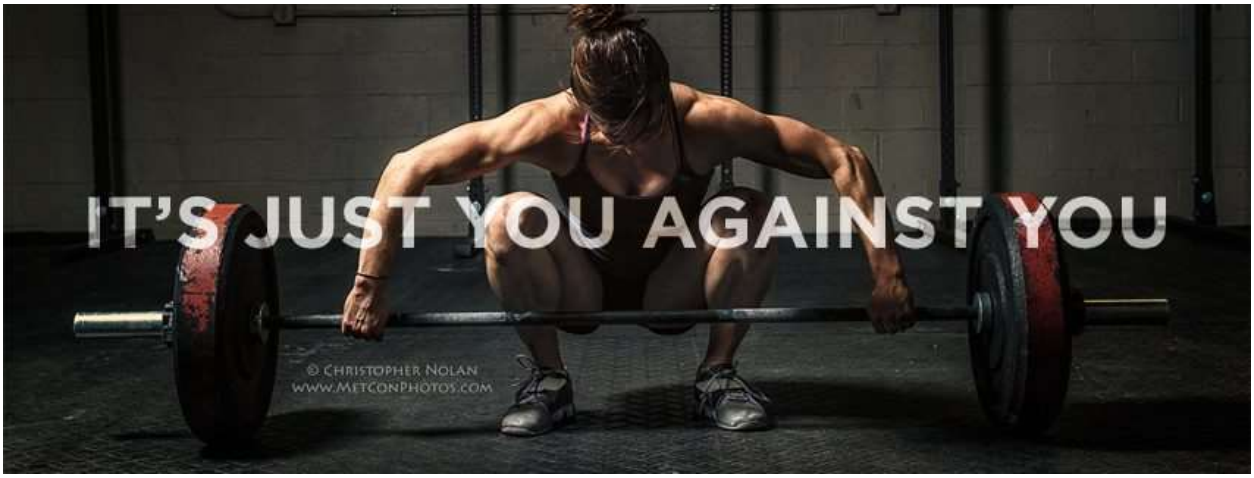
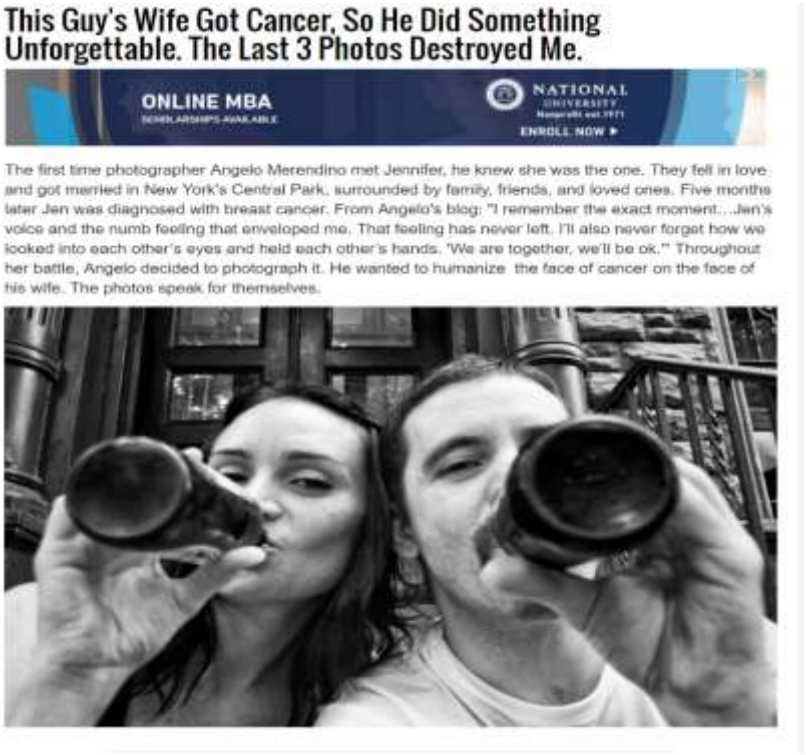


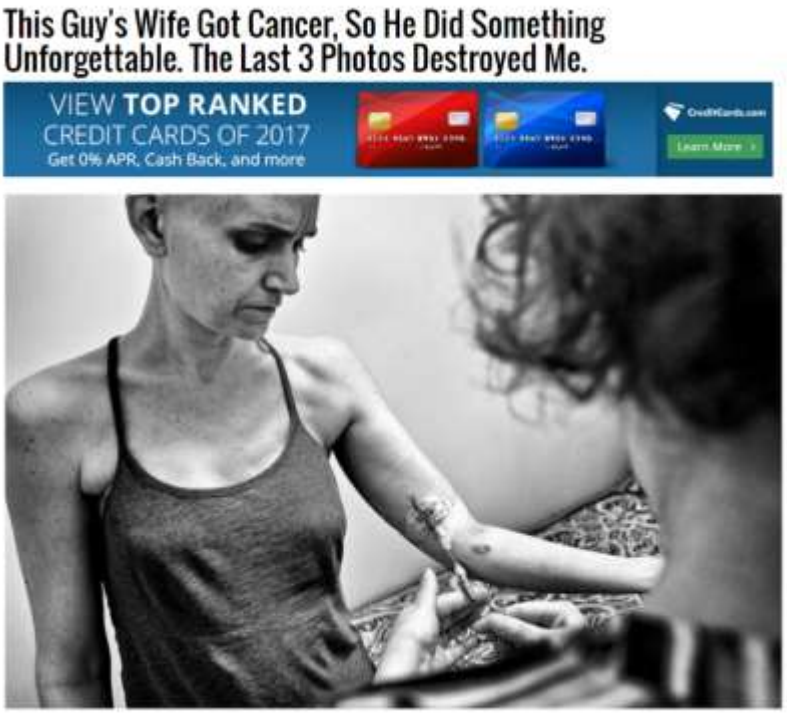
Figure 9 (Nolan, 2012)

Figure 10 (FitPhreak)

Case Three: Angelo and Jennifer Merendino

The following are samples of images from the photo story slide show that appeared on the website ViralNova.





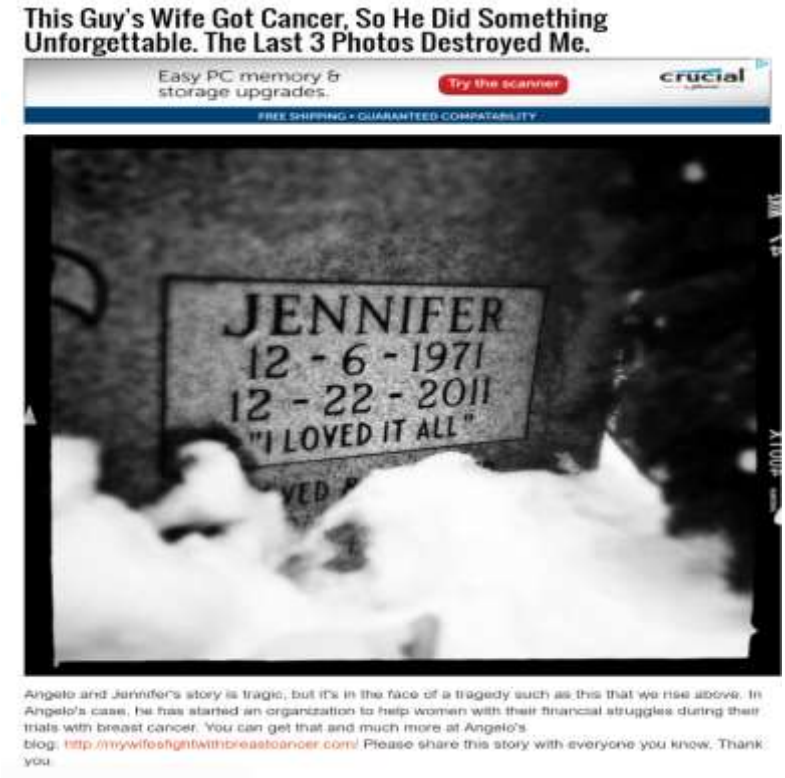


Figure 11 (ViralNova, 2013)