Self and Self-Representation Online and Off

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ABSTRACT

Has the Internet produced new forms of self-expression and even new kinds of selves? It has certainly promoted new forms of self-narration, notably brief, collective, and ephemeral. Identity formation, however, is more resistant to change; identity work proves to be not much different online than off because cultural imperatives for identity coherence operate equally in both environments. Narrative identity is the signature of that coherence. A deeply temporal and versatile technology, narrative is capable of contracting to satisfy daily digital interventions and of expanding to measure the life course that results from increased longevity.

"Writing the Self," the title of this special issue of *Frame*, has a grand ring to it, but the phrase risks suggesting that self—especially when preceded by the definite article—is something thing-like, whereas I prefer to think of self as an awareness of an unfolding process, a name we give to a special dimension of consciousness. Used in this way, *self* functions as a shorthand for the complicated sense we have of our self-experience. The "writing" part of the phrase—if we take it to denote broadly the act of representation in any mode—is more promising. When we "write self," however we do it—and we do it all the time—we track the elusive and shifting traces of the person who bears our name. The *self* part and the *writing* part are inextricably bound together, for when it comes to self, we cannot help but make what we say we find. This is because, neurologically speaking, memory constructs anew our past experience—whether from a moment ago or years ago—in each and every act of recollection.

Pursuing the link between self and self-representation, Philippe Lejeune asserts that new developments in technologies of communication have promoted new forms of self-expression: diary in the case of paper; autobiography in the case of printing. Moreover, he gives technology the upper hand in this dialogic cultural process: "There is no set 'I' that remains identical throughout the history of humankind and simply expresses itself differently depending on the tools at hand. In this case, it is the tool that shapes the craftsman" (248). If Lejeune is right, it is timely to ask whether the advent of the Internet and the social media enabled by it have in fact produced new forms of self-expression and even new kinds of selves.[1] This is my focus in the first part of this essay. My hunch, however, is that while the Internet has brought ease and speed to the way we talk about ourselves, and some new forms in which to do it, performing identity work online is really not radically different from doing so offline. For this reason, self-representation on the Internet cannot be properly understood in isolation from the offline world, and the key to that understanding is narrative. Because more and more of us inhabit online and offline worlds at the same time, the

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1. For some, including—I intuit—the editors of this special issue, the question has already been answered and serves as the point of departure for further inquiry.

second part of this essay features the role of narrative in organizing both of them. In order to highlight the contrast between the characteristic brevity of daily online self-narration and the expansiveness of offline autobiography and memoir, I will consider some end-of-life narratives that probe the larger, existential meaning of a life.

Communication technologies have changed hugely during my lifetime. I date from the days of snail mail and the telephone; television was just coming in when I was in grade school. To compensate for this generational gap, I open this consideration of self in the digital age by looking briefly at the lives of two young men who grew up with the Internet. They used it a lot, and it is also true that it used them.

Betrayal and Suicide at Rutgers

The sad story of two freshmen roommates that ended in disaster for both unfolded swiftly at Rutgers in the early fall of 2010. One of the young men, Tyler Clementi, was gay; the other, Dharun Ravi, was not. On three occasions Clementi asked Ravi for exclusive use of the small dorm room they shared in order to meet privately with a somewhat older man ("M.B."). Ravi had enabled his computer's webcam to operate remotely, and on the second of these occasions (September 19th) he used it briefly from a friend's room across the hall to spy on Clementi and his male companion. Immediately afterward, Ravi tweeted, "Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went into molly's room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay" (Parker 45). Clementi read Ravi's message the next day. Undeterred, however, by Ravi's behavior, Clementi asked Ravi for the use of the room again a day later (September 21st). This time Ravi planned a more deliberate exposure of his roommate. After rigging his computer to accept any incoming calls automatically, he invited "anyone with iChat […] to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12" (Parker 48). Clementi read this tweet and disabled Ravi's webcam before receiving M.B. in the room. Later that night Clementi consulted with others online about what to do, and he lodged a formal complaint about Ravi's invasion of his privacy. The next day (September 22nd), Clementi traveled to the George Washington Bridge where he leaped to his death after posting a

final message on his *Facebook* app: "Jumping off the gw bridge sorry" (Parker 49). As for Ravi, in March of 2012 he was tried and convicted of invasion of privacy and bias intimidation for his role in the webcam spying incidents. This, in capsule form, is Clementi's and Ravi's story.

Why had these two young lives taken such a disastrous turn when the formative period of discovery and consolidation of adult identity in college was just beginning? In an article that he wrote for the *New Yorker* in February, 2012, a month before Ravi's trial, Ian Parker investigates this painful story of miscommunication online and off. In the three weeks they lived together, they "barely had a conversation" (43). Parker concludes: "In person, [Clementi] and Ravi had maintained a wary coexistence, and it was built on not discussing what they knew and said of each other online" (47). And they were online a lot—this is what fascinated me in Parker's reconstruction of their story. Both men used the Internet and all its resources constantly, logging in to social media and various forums at any hour of the day or night. Each of them had checked out the other online before they met at Rutgers: Ravi had Googled Clementi's username to see what he could turn up, and Clementi, for his part, knew that Ravi had seen his postings on *Justusboys*, a gay-pornography site. When they started college in the fall, online and offline activity were intimately entwined in their awkward encounters. Parker gives this account of their first moments alone together in their Rutgers dorm room once their respective parents had left them to settle in:

> As Ravi unpacked, Clementi was chatting [on instant messenger] with Yang [a female friend]. "I'm reading his twitter page and umm he's sitting right next to me," he wrote. "I still don't kno how to say his name." […] "You should just start a conversation," Yang wrote. 'Like … hey, how the heck do I pronounce your name?' … [Clementi replies], "That's too funny/your giving me scripted conversations." (42–43)

Where, exactly, is the Clementi-Ravi story unfolding? The instant messaging between Clementi and Yang that fills the silence between Clementi and Ravi in their small room challenges any easy demarcation

of boundaries between online and offline worlds — the one is "sitting right next to" the other.

Although Internet communication plays a dark and decisive role in this story, the content of the various messages and posts — the social insecurities about what to say and do, how to be — comes across as normal teen talk. Note the hesitations, the embarrassed pauses, the nervous laughter, the self-consciousness in this characteristic instant messenger exchange between Clementi and Yang after Clementi had read Ravi's "Yay" tweet from the first spying episode:

> Yang: I would feel seriously violated.
> Clementi: When I first read the tweet
> I defs felt violated
> but then
> when I remembered what actually happened…
> idk
> Yang: um
> Clementi: doesn't seem soooo bad lol
> Yang: dude
> Clementi: hahaha
> Yang: not only did he peep
> he told the entire world about it
> Clementi: yah
> Yang: you okay with that? (46)

It is striking how skillful this practiced pair are in finding ways to register tone, to capture affect in their instant messages. If the speaking voice is missing, they do a good job of making up for its absence — Yang's "dude" reply to Clementi's "lol" makes me feel I can hear her say it.

There is also nothing novel about the identity issues at play in this story. Online resources, however, did provide Clementi with a chance to talk them through, overcoming an offline shyness that might otherwise have been inhibiting. This benefit was offset, however, by Ravi's blundering, demonstrating the online world's potential for harm. The identity concern Clementi is wrestling with here — an online outing

to anyone who might tune in to Ravi's tweet — might well have played out differently were it not for the speed and open-ended nature of the Internet channels of communication that Ravi used. Ravi may have been proud of his tech smarts, but he was in way over his head, setting in motion a series of events that spiraled fatally out of control.

Brave New Digital World?

To lay out some current views of digital identity, I draw on a multi-disciplinary collection of essays edited by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. In her survey of postmodern identity theory, Helen Kennedy revisits debates in cultural studies about the concept of identity. She cites the work of theorists such as Stuart Hall and Gilles Deleuze for whom "the problem with identity is that it implies stability and stasis" (31), in contrast with their postmodern view of identity as fragmented and fluid. Such either/or polarities — identity as either fixed and stable or fragmented and fluid — strike me as inadequate to address the complexity of identity experience; they fail to capture how identity can change over time and yet in some way remain recognizably the same.

More pertinent — and revealing — to a consideration of identity in the digital age is Kennedy's discussion of anonymity, which seems to Sherry Turkle and other media commentators to offer users an opportunity for identity experimentation online. Kennedy's own research on ethnic minority women using the Internet in the UK, however, points up the disconnect between the theories she is reviewing and the identity experience of ordinary people, people like Clementi, Ravi, and their friends. She found that her subjects "showed no signs of wanting to hide their gender and ethnicity and so 'benefit' from the possibility of anonymity that cyberspace offers them" (33).[2] Kennedy urges academics not to lose sight of "the real struggles of real people" (39). As the Rutgers story reminds us, "online" and "offline" may be crude markers when it comes to understanding the continuum of self-experience today.

Media theorist Rob Cover offers another forceful corrective to postmodern views of the Internet as a space of untrammeled freedom

for identity experimentation.[3] Investigating the representation of subjectivity on *Facebook*, Cover discerns not freedom but constraint: "the social networking tools of subject performance provide limited scope for playing out an identity in accord with anything but the most simplistic and simplified discourses articulating only the most limited normative choices" (66). Cover's analysis of social media is informed by Judith Butler's theories of performative identity, "based on the idea that identity and subjectivity is an ongoing process of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being, whereby becoming is a sequence of acts that retroactively constitute identity." "Online social networking behavior," Cover argues, "is as performative as 'real life' acts, and just as equally implies a stabilized core inner self behind the profile" (56). Moreover, when we engage in identity work online, we are responding to "an older, ongoing cultural demand that we process our selves and our actions into coherence, intelligibility, and recognizability, and thus disavow the instability of identity" (56–57). For Cover, this online identity work "is, effectively, not dissimilar from the identity work of having a conversation whereby a subject relates narratives of selfhood, desire, experiences, recent actions, and tastes." Embracing Foucault's view of "a disciplinary society of surveillance," Cover reads identity practices both online and off as rule-governed: "we police each other's subjecthood for coherence […]. Conflicting or unrecognizable selves narrated outside the restrictive norm or stereotype demand explanation" (59). For Cover and Butler, it is the cultural imperative for coherent identity, not postmodern theory and its celebration of fragmented identity, that is calling the shots online and off.

If Internet identity is not distinctively different from identity offline, but continuous with it and subject to the same cultural pressures, what can we say of the forms that express it online? To pose the question in this way risks suggesting that one can distinguish between self and self-expression, whereas in fact identity and its representation are

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2. Lisa Nakamura's treatment of race in connection with online identity confirms the limitations of conceiving of the online world as a space where offline identity factors can be set aside.

3. See, for example, Smith and Watson, who note that "for some commentators online identity, as virtual, seems unbounded, purely a matter of choice and invention among avatars, rules, and subject positions" (82–83).

mutually interdependent. Because we construct our selves whenever we engage in self-narration online or off, the qualities of identity and the properties of its representation are two different faces of a single phenomenon of self-experience. I pose the question nevertheless to highlight the forms of Internet expression, and some of them are novel. In the day of the "selfie," a huge amount of self-expression is pouring out online. While the *Facebook* profile is doubtless the most characteristic form of identity expression on the Internet today, it is by no means the whole story. How to bring the huge and expanding variety of personal narrative forms on the Internet to heel? To sort them out, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose a useful distinction between two kinds of online sites: "protocol-driven" sites, which "have elaborate formats, driven by algorithms that dictate how users organize what they tell or present themselves," and "user-authored" sites, which "observe some protocols" but are "looser and may be minimal" (89). If *Facebook* is the archetype of the protocol-driven site, the *Six-Word Memoir* may stand for the user-authored site. Laurie McNeill's investigation of this popular feature of the online "blog-a-zine" *Smith* parallels the findings of Cover concerning *Facebook*. Users may be authors of their "mini-memoirs" (144), but McNeill demonstrates that the online space they occupy turns out to be just as rule-governed as the protocol-heavy *Facebook* page. Online narrative forms turn out to be constrained by generic conventions in much the same way as those offline.

Where do the rules for producing the *Six-Word Memoir* come from? Some are provided by the site itself. According to McNeill, "the site's design and activities […] indicate particular norms in place that guide memoirists in what they choose to narrate and how they should engage with other writers" (152). By commenting on particular memoirs, the community of users complements the site's built-in controls on life writing behavior, helping to "groom new members and police violations" (154) of community norms. McNeill shows how the Internet inflects the playing out of genre in a novel fashion, setting up a requirement "to show and tell and read and respond to online lives" (151). In this way Internet life writing becomes a collective act, in comparison with the individualistic aura that typically accompanies memoir offline. McNeill makes a convincing case that new forms of life writing are emerging in

response to "the needs of the digital life narrator." "I call these forms 'auto/tweetographies,'" she writes, "short installments of life narrative, which share moments, experiences, and lives in miniature, and which will be updated or replaced regularly […] with new material" (149). In this view, digital life writing is likely to be brief, collective, and ephemeral.

Narrative and Technologies of the Self

Brief, collective, and ephemeral — McNeill may be right that the "auto/tweetographies" she describes do indeed satisfy the needs of the digital life narrator, but if they do, that may be cause for concern. As novelist Zadie Smith sees it, "When a human being becomes a set of data on a website like *Facebook*, he or she is reduced." For Smith, a huge gulf separates "People 2.0" — the socially networked selves of users online — and her traditional idea of the "Person 1.0" — "a private person, a person who is a mystery, to the world and […] to herself." Smith worries that "2.0 people [may] feel their socially networked selves genuinely represent them to completion" (59–60). Are Smith's misgivings about Internet identity justified? A major factor contributing to the impression that social networking identities are flat or reductive may be the diminished role given to narrative in creating them, in contrast to the offline world where narrative remains the dominant identity technology.

Before addressing the role of narrative in the creation of identity online and off, it makes sense to ask what we mean by *technology* when we speak of technologies of identity. Michel Foucault's expansive conception of "technologies of the self" is instructive. Foucault sought to identify "specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves" ("Technologies" 18), and he focused on Stoic and Christian practices of self-examination by way of illustration. Driving his investigation of the technologies of the self was a large-scale question that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century: "What are we in our actuality?" ("Political" 145). Exploring narrative's role in writing self today may point the way to answering Foucault's bold question.

Julie Rak and Anna Poletti, the editors of *Identity Technologies*, launch their collection with the claim that "the idea of narrative may not fit what identity formation looks like in digital media" (11). To support this view they subscribe to a narrow understanding of narrative as product, specifically a text of some kind. To the contrary, narrative is much more than text; it functions as an identity practice, about which I will say more presently. Moreover, recent work in neurobiology suggests that narrative may be in fact a mode of perception with the result that self may be said to exist inside the *narrative* matrix of consciousness.[4] Happily, the editors' limited view of narrative is countered by many of their contributors. Smith and Watson, for example, conceive of their "toolbox" for online self-presentation as a series of approaches to "online personal narrative formats" (72). Again, Aimée Morrison asserts that "there is no question—particularly since the introduction of the Timeline interface—that *Facebook* and its users are producing life narratives" (127). And for Alessandra Micalizzi, the Internet is both an identity technology (219) and a narrative technology (220).

So why do Smith, Watson, and the other contributors bring narrative into play in their consideration of online identity? If online and offline worlds are as intimately connected as the Rutgers story suggests, then this move is predictable and indeed inevitable because of narrative's primary role in constructing identity offline.[5] Shortly after the acquisition of language, children are trained by parents and caregivers to produce brief narratives about their experiences. Through this "memory talk" they are introduced to the narrative practices of their culture; they learn that they are expected by others to be able to talk about themselves following certain basic conventions. By the time we reach adulthood, we know how to produce on demand a version of our life stories that is appropriate to the context. In this way we become players in a narrative identity system: our self-narrations confirm to others that we possess normally functioning identities. When

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4. See Eakin, "Travelling."
5. I should note that in presenting narrative identity I am describing the situation that exists in U.S. society. I suspect that this reading applies equally to a large number of societies in the West.

individuals lose their narrative competence, however, as the result of age or injury, we can become aware of the extent to which the apparently spontaneous and easy exchange of personal stories in our social encounters is organized as a rule-governed system. We monitor the self-narrations of others for lapses, and when autobiographical memory and narrative competence fail, we may judge the self of such an individual to be fundamentally compromised or damaged. In the narrative identity regime, narrative rules function as identity rules.[6]

This brief account of the narrative identity system we inhabit dovetails with Rob Cover's and Judith Butler's views of identity performance that I discussed earlier. They stress the cultural demand for identity coherence, and I would add that the display of narrative identity functions precisely as the signature of that coherence. Summarizing Butler's theory of performance, Cover writes: "the self is performed reiteratively as a process in accord with a discursively given set of norms, stabilizing over time to produce the fiction of a fixed, inner, essential selfhood, which retroactively produces the illusion that there is a core doer behind the deed" (58). It is narrative that enables us to capture these endlessly reiterated moments of identity performance, creating what Ulrich Neisser has called "the extended self," the self existing across time (36).

Narrative is deeply temporal, and we need to ask what happens to it in digital circumstances. In an Internet environment of posts and updates, Laurie McNeill points to the miniaturization of life writing, as in the case of the *Six-Word Memoir*. This reduction may be symptomatic of a larger shift.[7] Philippe Lejeune believes that the Internet has created "a profound change in life itself wrought through its relationship with time" (249), eroding our ability to fashion narrative identities. To illustrate the drift of postmodern thinking that would support this view, he cites the work of sociologist Hartmut Rosa, who asserts that the conditions of existence are changing so rapidly that parents no

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6. For a discussion of "memory talk," see Eakin, *How* 102–6; for a discussion of the narrative identity system, see Eakin, *Living* 22–31.

7. For an extreme reading of this change, see Rushkoff, who contends that we live today in a "postnarrative world" (31).

longer have relevant experience to transmit to their children. As to the
children who inhabit this fast-changing world, Rosa claims that they
can no longer "develop even the outlines of a life project," and so the
possibility of forming a narrative identity becomes obsolete (250–51).
After flirting with this radical assessment of narrative identity's future,
Lejeune concedes that it may be exaggerated. More specifically,
in the case of life writing, while the diary and the letter have been
transformed by Internet practices, autobiography — life narrative's long
form — continues to flourish much as it has in recent decades. Taking
up Lejeune's doubts and Rosa's reservations about narrative identity, I
want to answer them by examining a series of end-of-life narratives that
demonstrate why writing self in autobiography continues to matter in the
digital age, and in new ways.

Narrative, Time, and the End of the Story

The Internet is not the only force transforming our relationship with
time. Advances in medicine are promoting longevity, so it may be
challenging to sort out whether our operative sense of time and of the
course of a life is contracting or expanding or both at once. "People
2.0," such as Laurie McNeill's digital life narrators, may be posting
what they are doing right now and what they did today, while Zadie
Smith's "Person 1.0" may be thinking, "What have I done with my
life?" and "What am I going to do with the rest of it?" I suspect that
most of us operate in both time frames and play both roles — "People
2.0" and "Person 1.0" — but it is "Person 1.0" who claims my attention
now, and narrative in its longer forms. In *Being Mortal: Medicine
and What Matters in the End*, Atul Gawande observes that for most
of human history "the natural course was to die before old age" (32).
Now, however, we may expect to live long enough to face our endgame
at an advanced age, and our adult children may have to face it with us.
Hartmut Rosa's notion that parents no longer have relevant experience
to transmit to their children misses this existential situation between
the generations altogether, and I want to look at some relational
autobiographies that precisely target it, illustrating as they do so the
ability of narrative to respond to changes in our life circumstances.

Gawande indicts modern medicine's failure to grasp the problems of aging as more than a set of bodily conditions to fix. Chapter by chapter, he traces the inevitable decline as we age from comparative health and independence to dependency. The key to managing this process successfully, he believes, is maintaining a degree of autonomy as our physical and mental powers diminish. "Whatever the limits and travails we face, we want to retain the autonomy — the freedom — to be the authors of our lives. This is the very marrow of being human" (140). Gawande understands autonomy in narrative terms: "For human beings, life is meaningful because it is a story." Unlike the "experiencing self […] absorbed in the moment," the "remembering self" is invested not just in recalling "the peaks of joy and valleys of misery but also how the story works out as a whole […] And in stories, endings matter" (238–39). Following from this narrative perspective on aging is Gawande's stress on what he calls the "hard conversation," provoked by the felt sense of an ending looming into view, never more so than when our hand is nearly played out. This is when we should be given the opportunity to express our wishes about dying to our caregivers and to those we love.

Gawande had several of these frank confrontations with his father. The first of them is especially memorable, triggered by an MRI scan that revealed a tumor growing inside his father's spinal cord: "This was the moment when we stepped through the looking glass" (194). Father and son share this recognition, and in the father's remaining years they navigate together decisions about treatment and eventually about hospice and palliative care. In Gawande's view, the deeper meaning of a life resides in identifying sustaining purposes outside ourselves, and in his father's case, there were several — a college he had founded near his native village in India, his charitable work for the Rotary Club — that contributed to a sense that his life's value extended beyond himself. The father believed that he was part of a larger story, and the son shares in this belief. In the moving epilogue, Gawande relates the burial of his father's ashes in the Ganges: "I felt that we'd connected him to something far bigger than ourselves, in this place where people had been performing these rituals for so long" (262).

In *The Final Reminder: How I Emptied My Parents' House*, psychoanalyst Lydia Flem shows how the death of parents is intimately linked to our sense of our own mortality: "We knew that it was inevitable, but, like our own death, it seemed far away, in fact unimaginable" (1). For Flem, this loss brings a new, heightened sense of vulnerability, for "there is no longer anyone behind us." Moreover, because our parents are the repositories and guardians of our early lives, their ending can signal our own: in burying our parents, "we are also burying our childhood" (2). This apparent break in the lifeline between parents and children often sets in motion an auto/biographical project of narrative repair.[8] This is the case with Flem. Going through her parents' effects, room by room, closet by closet, drawer by drawer, overwhelmed by feelings of transgression as she invades what had been their privacy, she uncovers papers that document her parents' lives during the Second World War and the Holocaust, in particular her mother's participation in the Resistance, her capture by the Nazis, and her eventual survival at Auschwitz. This was the untold story (known to Flem only in fragments) that had darkened her childhood. Determined "to assume the history that had preceded my birth," she writes, "I wanted to release myself from a past that had remained trapped in their lungs and had prevented me from breathing freely" (57). Now, in speaking these unspeakable things that her parents had wished her not to know, in writing this book, Flem has the chance to exorcize them. This is her version of the "hard conversation," this one between herself and her readers. The telling of her death-centered story — "death is coiled up in us" — proves to be life-enhancing, "a rite of passage, a metamorphosis" (118), crucial to working through her bereavement.

Not everyone is up for the "hard conversation," the facing of our mortality, that Gawande urges and Flem enacts. For *New Yorker* cartoonist Roz Chast, it is her parents' refusal of the "hard conversation" that provides the title for her family memoir, *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?* Chast's attempts to get her elderly parents to talk about their last wishes are futile — "It was against my parents'

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8.   For extended treatment of this literature, see Miller.

principles to talk about death" (4). Chast admits that she had done "a pretty good job at avoiding all of this" herself (22). She hated Brooklyn and her parents' apartment where she had spent an unhappy childhood. An only child, she had felt excluded from her parents' "tight little unit" (7), and the caption she supplies for a photo of the three of them when she was twelve tells it all: "Just a few more years, and I am *outta* here" (180). Her father emerges as sweet, weak, and passive, overpowered by her domineering mother, an assistant elementary school principal who was proud of telling other people off with "a blast from Chast" (34). Now, as her parents age into increasing dependency hastened by falls and dementia, Chast is reluctantly drawn back in to cope with their collapsing lives.

The book she writes chronicles step by step their repeated hospital stays, their move into an assisted living complex (leaving behind an apartment crammed with the hoarded accumulations of a lifetime), and their eventual decline and death. Chast spares us nothing, nor does she spare herself, owning up to the difference between what she thinks a devoted daughter should feel and what she really does feel. Her skill as a cartoonist—her ability to compress, to focus, to highlight—makes the entire memoir an unforgettable and surprisingly funny "hard conversation" about contemporary death and dying. Chast had hoped to stage last words with her mother in which they might somehow bridge the lifelong distance between them, but her mother's indifference is devastating. When "the conversations had been reduced to almost nothing" (210), Chast recorded her mother's protracted dying in a remarkable series of ink drawings. There is no color in these sketches, only the date, and sometimes a brief notation. Her mother's mouth, which Chast had feared growing up, the formidable source of the "blasts from Chast," remains the focal point of these images, a dark portal beyond language. This is Chast's unflinching version of the "hard conversation" she had never succeeded in having with her parents while they were alive. In order to tell her story, Chast stretches the cartoon, a very short form, to cover the span of a lifetime: the cartoons, which offer close-ups that distil the essence of a situation or a state of mind, are embedded in a prose matrix, passages written by hand, and supplemented by photographs. The media blend, none of it drawing on

the Internet, is at once familiar and startling, making this memoir one of the most original in years.

This essay approaches the Internet and narrative as key identity resources; we are likely to draw on both when we write self in the digital age. I am skeptical, however, that the Internet offers the brave new world of selfhood promised by some postmodern identity theory. To the contrary, Rob Cover persuades me that identity work is performed in much the same way online and off; both environments are governed by the same cultural demand: that we display coherent identities. Narrative, I argue, is the signature of that coherence. That this should be the case is hardly surprising given the importance we attach to cultivating narrative competence in early childhood. As a result, in most cultures everyone is wired for narrative, so much so that the loss of narrative competence due to injury or dementia is routinely interpreted as a loss of identity.

When we go online, we bring to the keyboard this narrative endowment and our lifelong experience as players in a narrative identity system. Accordingly, when I speak of the Internet and narrative as identity resources, I do not mean to suggest that they share an equivalent function. The Internet is indeed an instrument of change, shaping the needs of the digital life writer in ways that Laurie McNeill describes, whereas narrative *measures* change. It remains the primary motor of most self-representation because it permits us to track our lives and selves in passing time.

The late Mark Strand captures our existential situation in a remarkable poem, "The Continuous Life":

> Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
> With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest
> Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
> Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
> It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
> You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing
> To prove you existed. (21)

For Gawande, Flem, and Chast it is narrative that measures and honors the space in between those "two great darks." Their stories show narrative's power to give such answers as we can to Foucault's question about what we are in our actuality. Narrative's force as a meaning-making technology shows no signs of flagging in the digital age.

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BIOGRAPHY

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