THE WRITE MATCH: WOMEN'S RHETOROSOCIALITY IN ONLINE DATING

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ABSTRACT

STEPHANIE SHAWN MORGAN: The Write Match: Women's Rhetorosociality in Online Dating
(Under the direction of Daniel Anderson)

In writing studies, when we discuss sexuality in digital environments, we often focus on less-than-conventional arenas such as sex chat environments, pornography sites, or role-playing platforms. These studies often point out how users harness digital rhetoric to transcend their off-line experiences. In contrast, this study, through content analysis and qualitative research guided by actor-network-theory, this dissertation explores women's experience with online dating and demonstrates the interconnectedness of the biosocial and technosocial realms to posit a rhetorosocial realm that acts on human and nonhuman components of a network, and is acted on in turn.

In Chapter 1, Researching, I discuss the qualitative methods I used to gather intelligence on how the women who participated in my study used online dating and outline my central concern with the interaction between the rhetorosocial, technosocial and biosocial realms . In Chapter 2, Representing, I explore how the technosociality of the online dating site eHarmony polices user experiences by enforcing rhetorosocial constraints that privilege scientific expertise and romantic master narratives to convert single people into stabilized married couples; I also explore how users resist this policing. Chapter 3, Reading, discusses how users' off-line rhetorosocial expectations and desires are modified and enacted in the technosociality of online dating, with implications for

how we understand material expressions of class and sexuality in biosociality. In Chapter 4, Writing, I mine users' self-representations through online dating profiles to demonstrate the operation of rhetorosocial constructions of sexual embodiment and gendered power in technosociality. In Chapter 5, Reflecting, I return to actor-network-theory to frame the rhetorosocial as a "factish," real in its fabrication. In the coda, Responding, I transcribe a group discussion amongst women who use online dating so they may speak back to my conclusions.

DEDICATION

To Tom, my match.

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Without the support of family, friends and colleagues, this very difficult job would have been impossible. Many more people deserve thanks than I can name here.

My husband, Tom, supported me financially and emotionally during the last phase of the writing process. I am especially grateful for his housecleaning, dog walking, and dishwashing skills.

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ABBREVIATIONS

29 dimensions	eHarmony's patented 29 Dimensions of Compatibility
ANT	Actor-Network-Theory
FoF	Focus on the Family
LROB	*London Review of Books*
Triangle	The Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill metropolitan region of North Carolina

CHAPTER 1: RESEARCHING

I first experienced online dating as a somewhat reluctant user. As profound as the experience has been to the material circumstance of my life–having met my husband through Match.com–even after I stopped participating in that role, online dating remained a source of fascination for me. It seemed to throw up questions to which I had no ready answers, about technology, about gender, and about the way we read public and private life. Further, it challenged my assumptions about academic inquiry. What I found challenged comfortable notions of how people, ideas, and things interact on- and offline. Specifically, it led me to coin a term to discuss how intangible, epistemological actants (in Bruno Latour's parlance) exert force in both biosociality and technosociality: rhetorosociality.

As early as the 1960s but more widely in the 1990s, as networked technologies started to slowly and then rapidly proliferate, social theorists began to distinguish between action in what had previously been called "reality" and action in networked or "virtual" locations. These distinctions between what we now refer to as "biosociality" or meatspace and technosociality often relied on the "artificial", "immersive" or "simulated" nature of the technosocial.[1] These and terms like them are ways to mark off technosociality from biosociality, consigning "truth" and "the real" to the biosocial. After

[1] The philosopher of education, Michael R. Hiem, outlines seven commonly accepted characteristics of virtual reality, some of them mirror the terms I highlight here. The thrust of his argument, however, is that these characteristics confuse the epistemological challenge of technosociality, rather than adhere to a traditional paradigm of real/not real. Michael R. Hiem, The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).

all, virtual reality sounds as if it is virtually, or almost, reality but not quite. Following this logic, one might have argued online relationships are not actual relationships and online actions are without material consequence. Popular culture's take on the separateness of technosociality is depicted in a now-classic The New Yorker cartoon showing two canines sitting in front of a computer. One explains to the other, "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog."[2]

Of course, defining the distinctions between biosociality and technosociality was a doomed project from the beginning. Theorists have questioned the relative realness of technosociality and biosociality while largely preserving their opposition. Sherry Turkle, for example reframes the two positions into "screens," adopting the computer monitor's field of view as a metaphor for the "computational nature" of identity.[3] For Turkle, what happens online is as significant to online life as it is to offline meatspace in thinking through one's understanding of self. I agree with Turkle in this valorizing of the off-line experience complemented with the preservation of a momentarily useful, admittedly messy and ever-shifting line between biosociality and technosociality.

Talking only about "biosociality" and "technosociality," however nuanced or conditional the discussion, still does not go far enough to help us understand how human actants perform rhetorically in online dating. I posit the rhetorosocial as a means of making meaning through interaction. In this approach, the rhetorosocial can both overlap the bio- or technosocial realm, while maintaining the possibility of having some autonomy, as a third circle in a Venn Diagram.

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[2] Peter Steiner, cartoon. New Yorker 5 Jul. 1993: 61.

[3] Sherry Turkle, Introduction to the Twentieth Anniversary MIT Press Edition. The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit (1984; Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 2005) 2.

If academic acknowledgement of rhetorosociality has been slow coming, attention to online dating has been only slightly more generous. Monica T. Whitty, the prolific Australian research psychologist now writing from Northern Ireland, is the acknowledged scholarly expert in Internet relationship behavior, particularly as it relates to identity and deception. The interdisciplinary collection of essays she co-edited with U.S. sociologist Andrea J. Baker and U.S. rhetorician James A. Inman, Online M@tchmaking, represents the most comprehensive single compilation of knowledge about online dating. Online M@tchmaking, published in 2007, is admirable in its depth but says little about online dating as both a text to be read and a platform to think about gendered human conditions in a larger context.

This dissertation grows out of my frustration at the paucity of critical attention paid to online dating practices and the women who employ them. Essentially, my intent in this chapter is to urge the taking up of online dating as a feminist project not only because it offers us rich primary material, but because it offers its own critique of accepted scholarly methodology and what we understand about the dialectics that shape our discussion: body and mind, technical and biological, normative and pathologic, oppressive and democratic, public and private.

Despite much attention in composition studies and elsewhere to identity and technology, Internet dating remains largely uncharted territory. Boxed in by dichotomies through a collusion of academic fallacies, women's rhetorical practices in and through Internet dating have been rendered invisible to academic audiences. In light of my interest in demonstrating the existence of the rhetorosocial operating with online dating

as a way to make women's rhetorical practices visible, I think it worthwhile to briefly discuss those obscuring fallacies.

Fallacy #1 Women who use Internet dating web sites and personal ads, or other assistive technologies in their search for partners, are abnormal.

Historically, academic work has marked women's use of personal advertising as sexually aggressive and thereby abnormal, defective or hysterical. An early example of this bias is Arthur MacDonald's 1895 study, Abnormal Woman, a Sociologic and Scientific Study of Young Women, Including Letters of American and European Girls in Answer to Personal Advertisement,that pathologizes his subjects through a study of anthropometrics. Put another way, he theorized a correlation between physical characteristics and deviant behavior.[4] Many contemporary psychological and sociological examinations still follow MacDonald's lead, using newspaper personal ads, Craig's List Personals forms, and membership services to troll for subjects.

Some research has even suggested that a disproportionate number of online users would be stigmatized should their sexual interests be known biosocially.[5] This suggestion is not out of context with the ways heteronormativity marginalizes unmarried individuals, especially women. The virgin/whore paradigms we often dismiss as relics of the days

[4] MacDonald is not alone in his early account of women and personal advertising. British, French and German investigations from the early days of print newspapers exist detailing prostitution, mail order brides from the settlement of the U.S. west, and other "lonely females."

Arthur MacDonald, Abnormal Woman, a Sociologic and Scientific Study of Young Women, Including Letters of American and European Girls in Answer to Personal Advertisement (London, 1895) ii.

[5] M.W. Ross, "Typing, Doing, and Being: Sexuality and the Internet," Journal of Sex Research 42.4 (2005): 342 -353.

before women joined the work force survive in the romanticizing of monogamy, shaming those who divorce as a failures and the incompleteness narrative we attribute to single people who must be "still looking" or "just haven't found the right one."

While frequently depicting women using online dating, popular media has coded women in cyberspace in troubling ways. Perhaps reacting to the masculinization of cyberspace, books and films often depict the Internet as a dangerous place for women users. Women looking for romance on the net often end up the victim of identity theft or physical violence. I am thinking here of early representation of women and the web such as The Net, in which Sandra Bullock's character is stalked and her identity stolen after an interaction with a sexy stranger in a chat room, as well more recent representations such as an episode of Cold Case that first aired in November 2006 telling the story of a pathetically homely woman, drawn into a murder/insurance fraud scheme with a beautiful con-man she finds through a dating service (coded as an online site) who is eventually murdered.[6] The female user of digital technology, no matter how expert, is a readily available damsel-in-distress.

Feminist scholars, particularly those in composition studies and the social sciences, countering the myth of the Cybertopia, have devoted considerable attention to the ways women are silenced online. Investigations of cyber rape, the dominance of men on discussion boards, and women's depreciation of their technological literacy[7]--though

[6] The Net, dir. Irwin Winkler, perf. Sandra Bullock, Columbia Pictures. 1995.

"Lonely Hearts," Cold Case. CBS, 9 Nov. 2006.

[7] I am thinking here particularly of the work by Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan's "Women on the Networks," Susan Romano's "The Egalitarian Narrative," Ebben and

useful and important in their own right--perpetuate a focus on women's vulnerable autonomy online.

Fallacy #2 Interesting use of technology happens on the "frontier."

Technology studies has long considered its focus the "what is next."[8] This ideological bent has made for an obsession with charting new developments in the technological frontier, pioneering, and adventurous (public) experimentation. The language of this obsession gives away its gendering of technology and the web as a masculine space.[9] In this obsession, masculine metaphors diminish not only women's computer use, but also the perceived orientation of women's lives. The standard for understanding innovation and remarkable practice is one of, again, masculinized ideas of products built or destroyed, competitions won, rather than one that privileges a process of "dailiness."[10]

On the other hand, scholars have cast women's practices online as inherently subversive "work." For example, Donna Haraway replaces "labour" with "robotics" and "Family/Market/Factory" with "Women in the Integrated Circuit" in the shift from the "comfortable old hierarchies" to a cyborg "woman" that defies essentialized naturalistic

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Kramarae's "Women and Informational Technologies", and Gossett and Byrne's "'Click Here.'"

[8] Charles Moran, "Technology and the Teaching of Writing," A Guide to Composition Pedagogies, eds. Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick. (New York: Oxford UP, 2001) 223.

[9] Cynthia L. Selfe, Technology and Literacy in the 21st Century: The Importance of Paying Attention (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999) 20.

[10] Linda Wagner-Martin, Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994) 453.

coding.[11] These instances demonstrate how Haraway accounts for woman's experience through a Marxist framework that understands all activities of daily living as work. This classification fails to acknowledge women's rhetoric on internet dating sites because 1.) it falls into the trap of corporate metaphors of computer use, such as "desktop," "workstation," and "folders," and 2.) it fails to account for the playful stance (however serious that play might be) that women adopt when computing for "personal" means. [12]

Fallacy #3 Identity is fragmented and discontinuous.

Online dating is an unsexy topic for scholars in the humanities for myriad reasons, but one of those reasons is that online daters are unsexy. As a group, they are looking for permanent, monogamous relationships. They are mostly white, mostly middle class. (Caveat: Demographics are changing and site-dependent.) They are, in many ways, what the U.S. mainstream looks like. After deconstruction's problematizing of Western rational thought, the humanities as a field became interested in subversive, marginal, or liminal practices. The purpose of these examinations was to not only catalogue the spectrum of transgression but also to better grasp the nature of oppression.[13] Further, it

[11] Donna Harraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," The Harraway Reader (New York: Routledge, 2004) 21.

[12] Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard J. Selfe, Jr., "Politics of the Interface: Power and Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones," College Composition and Communication 45.4 (1994): 480-504.

[13] See Judith Butler's concept of performative gender which names mimesis as the primary engine for identity and Michel Foucault's demonstration of the genealogy of epistemes that exert disciplinary power through modern institutions.

Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990): 24-27.

became difficult to understand the value of defining common, central or "conventional" when the premise of investigation implied that it did not exist.

For these reasons, critical rhetoricians are suspicious of the kind of conventional rhetoric that espouses the virtues of The American Dream--nuclear family life, middle-class respectability through hard work and honest dealing, and democratic equality. We are rightly suspicious of this kind of talk because we understand that the playing field is not level, that industry and government have a stake in creating an obedient public of consumers, and that "mainstream" ideas and practices are hardly neutral in their conventionality. What we sacrifice when we ignore these discourses, however, is a grasp of how those forces inform every decision we make, both public and private. While we have granted that capitalism has a stake in promoting (re)productive family units, we have not fully explored the complicated role networked technologies play in that coercion.

As a field, critical theory is more comfortable talking about sexuality online as *sex*, rather than the process of finding a partner, awkwardly and anarchically using terms like "courting" or "dating" that conjure up images of the 19th century or 1950s, respectively. We have explored ideas of gender identity and "gender fucking" widely, perpetuating an understanding of biosocial identity and technosocial identity as only loosely related. I am thinking here of the ample attention given to the Julie Graham case study on which scholars still meditate.[14] Further, we have explored "prosthetic" or

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Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (1975; New York: Vintage, 1995): 141-165.

[14] A disabled woman who participated in counseling, sex, and friendships in CompuServe forums was revealed to be a male psychiatrist in cyberdrag. For a compelling retelling of

cybersex[15] as a transgressive practice defying heterogeneous notions of self-hood and embodiment. In the effort to postmodernize biosociality as "just another screen," we have lost sight of a practice that relentlessly pursues (if does not necessarily achieve) continuity between the technosocial and the biosocial. Even Wysocki and Thalken's content analysis work on sadomasochism postings to Alt.com, a site dedicated to non-normative sexual practices, acknowledges that while many different purposes brought users to the site, "the most common reason was to meet people who had the same specific fantasies and desires so they could ultimately meet face-to-face."[16]

Feminist studies has explored political activism on the web, constructing ideas of positive or useful work online as inherently political yet discretely impersonal. Courtship, romance, and the partner-seeking intention are slippery concepts that literary and composition studies have largely shied away from, suggesting an implied distinction from the technosocial pedagogical and rhetorical work we have studied prolifically in our discipline's evolution from ancient philosophy to its contemporary incarnation. When we talk about it, we slide into a language that safely distances the writer, objectifying the could-be subject. When we are concerned, we say we are concerned with "constructions

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this incident from the 1990s see Allucquere Rosanne Stone, The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age (Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 2001) 65-82.

[15] I refer, by way of example, again to Stone's exploration of sex and gender fucking in MOOs (p. 45-57) but also Keith Dorwick's forthcoming work on gay chat rooms. Though she doesn't take up sexual practices, Jacqueline Jones Royster performs a similar theorectical move in her exploration of African American women's literacy with a focus on elite women in Traces of a Stream.

[16] Diane Kholos Wysocki and Jennifer Thalken, "Whips and Chains? Fact or Fiction? Content Analysis of Sadomasochism in Internet Personal Advertisements," Online Matchmaking, eds. Monica T. Whitty, Andrea J. Baker, and James A. Inman (New York: Palgrave, 2007) 193.

of love narratives." This distance suggests companionate choices as either too individualized to be discussed or as too rooted in a Kantian model of socially constructed taste to be interesting.

Despite our intellectual suspicion of universalizing theories of identity, many (dare I say most?) academics experience a good deal of the same desires, expectations, and practices as Internet daters. We buy food and pay taxes, marry, raise families, attend meetings, drive cars, fight colds, and watch television. For many academics, considering online dating involves the embarrassment of recognition, a recognizing of our own "personal" to which we have learned to be strategically, if uneasily, blind while at the office. As David Bleich has pointed out, academic language polices a kind of privacy; one operation of this policing is the way subjective genres like "life writing" are bracketed off from objective, more "scholastic" work which itself is protected within the insular academy.[17] Within that personal blind spot is an acknowledgement of our own embodiment, an embodiment that acts and is acted on by material forces of everyday life. This stance looks back rather than forward because it ignores the refiguring of social roles over the past century. In her call for a reformulated universal respect for others, Seyla Benhabib has demonstrated how cultural changes have intensified the debate over public and private configurations, bringing formerly private issues like childbearing and caregiving into political discourse.[18] Acknowledging online dating as a worthy subject for study implicates us in making visible our own practices, desires, and blind spots.

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[17] David Bleich, "The Collective Privacy of Academic Language," The Private, the Public, and the Published: Reconciling Private Lives and Public Rhetoric, eds. Barbara Couture and Thomas Kent (Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2003) 79-93.

[18] Seyla Benhabib, Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics, (New York: Routledge, 1992) 89 -120.

Specifically, this study asks scholars in rhetorical theory and cultural studies to account for an embodiment of conventionality, one that may defy ideas of strategic, fragmented identity.[19]

As Susanna Paasonen and others have implicitly or explicitly acknowledged, the "intellectual center for cyberspace theory," particularly as it relates to identity and technosocial relationships, is formed by the works of Sherry Turkle and Allucquere Rosanne Stone, among others.[20] Turkle and Stone craft a picture of a user whose technosociality is as alive as his/her biosociality, in fact is just "another screen" of existence.[21] In these layered yet disparate screens, or "identity factories," the user performs or plays multiple floating, fluid selves.[22] Indeed, Paasonen draws from Lisa Nakamura's position that the lexicon of Internet use –"surfing," "visiting", "going to," – is an embodied, tourist experience during which the self is "in" the Internet but "returns."[23]

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[19] Judith Bulter, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," The Judith Butler Reader, ed. Sara Salih (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) 120-125.

[20] Susanna Paasonen, "Gender, Identity, and (the Limits of) Play on the Internet," Women & Everyday Uses of the Internet, (New York: Peter Lang, 2002) 21.

Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert E. Rodman, "Race in Cyberspace: An Introduction," Race in Cyberspace, eds. Beth E. Kilko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert E. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000) 1-14.

[21] Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) 14.

[22] Stone, War 181.

[23] Lisa Nakamura, "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," The Cybercultures Reader, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (1995; New York: 2002) 712-721.

Turkle and Stone draw heavily from Butlerian notions of identities generated through performance.[24] However, as Paasonen points out, Turkle and Stone's conception of identity and the "play" which creates it flies in the face of the conception of a postmodern centerless self mimetically made and inextricable from the hegemonic forces Butler conceives.[25] Paasonen writes: "Since being gendered (raced, classed) is a precondition for thinking, living and making sense of the work, the individual cannot take up any identity position s/he pleases. In this context, notions of 'free play' and 'choice' appear as 'not only foreign, but unthinkable and sometimes even cruel.'"[26]

To better explain this self that is not only multiple but actively adopting (if not inventing) identities, Paasonen traces the epistemological archeology to mid-twentieth century social theorist Erving Goffman's work, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, which separates "persona" from "character." Goffman represents social interactions as a form of drama, performed by individuals who play roles and want to impress others according to normed scripts on a shared stage.[27] Paasonen argues that, for Goffman, the marks of identity (race, class, gender, nationality) are given but, for Turkle and Stone, these marks can be embraced or shod at will. Although I fully embrace neither Bulter's nor Turkle and Stone's models of selfhood as Paasonen presents them–and I often

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[24] Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990) 128-140.
[25] Paasonen 25.

Judith Bulter, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1993) 121-142.

[26] Paasonen 25.

[27] Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959; New York: Penguin, 1990) 17-25.

conflate “self,” “persona,” and “identity”--their paradoxical usefulness to developing a concept of rhetorosociality is two-fold. First, as Paasonen points out in the context of individual homepages, “mainstream uses” of the Internet for women are rarely destructive to conventional gender concepts and rely on “codes of interpretation” that harken a shared knowledge.[28] Second, the friction between the Butler and Turkle/Stone models occurs because while we talk about the technosocial and biosocial as being separate experiences, they significantly overlap.

As Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen, editors of the volume Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet point out, by 2002, feminists had established that gender does matter on the Internet and it is time to start thinking about “where to go in feminist technology studies.”[29] Mine is a tardy response to Consalvo and Passaonen’s call. My intention in this dissertation is to write a theory of conventionality, working from a sense of convention straight from the dictionary: “a rule of conduct of behavior” laid down through use.[30] I am positing a theory conventional behavior, of [women’s] bodies acting in space, through the lens it applies to internet dating: that is, I am trying to make visible practices that have only been defined against, rather than defined. In this undertaking of making visible, of defining, I will refute the fallacies outlined above, challenging standard practices in rhetorical studies to confront and take account of women’s bodily experiences.

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[28] Paasonen 31.

[29] Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen, introduction, Women & Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency & Identity, Digital Formations ser. 8 (New York: Peter Lang, 2002) 1.

[30] “Convention,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 11th ed.

Taking online dating seriously means we will have to examine how we mark out what is fodder for scholastic work. Some of this examination will involve revisiting old questions and posing new ones: How do we establish "what counts" in academic work? How can feminist work in the academy service women's lived experiences? How can theory service practice and practice inform theory? How do we heal our notion of the fragmented self to write what might be a theory of conventionality, of women's bodies acting in space? How can we make visible practices that have been defined against, rather than defined? Ultimately, how can we envision a feminist rhetorical methodology that allows women who use Internet dating to speak for themselves?

To address these questions, I am posing a rhetorosocial approach that imperfectly blends the biosocial with the technosocial. We have long talked of the biosocial as if it is separate from the technosocial, as if even the earliest humans were not defining themselves and their surroundings through the technology they employed. By positing this rhetorosocial realm as it works on and is worked on by the users of online dating, I anticipate illuminating the ways rhetorics, public and private, technical and biological, shape literate production and consumption at our contemporary moment.

Contributions to the Study of Computers and Writing

James Paul Gee persuasively argues that studying video game play is not a waste of time because video games can teach us, among other things, how users establish agency for themselves, learn, and apply what they have learned in other environments. To put this simply, video games show us how consumers can turn into producers.[31] This conversion, from user to creator, is what we in writing studies (and in the larger

[31] James Paul Gee, What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 2.

educational matrix) strive for: to help student writers become expert crafters of language. Studying online dating serves a similar goal. Through attention to how users write themselves into the online dating platform, interact with the technosocial selves of others, and adapt through learning, we may be better armed to prepare contemporary college students for the increasingly networked literacy tasks of the future.

In addition, the experience of adult expert writers can expand the conversations framing technology, literacy, and learning beyond the traditional 18 -22 year-old college composition student. For instance, we have come to understand women's interests in technology as initiated by men.[32] While the nine collaborators' experiences hardly offer a statistically significant challenge to that theory, they all pointed to other women–mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, friends, teachers, camp counselors–as nurturers of their computer skills. Some of these women are what Jennifer Bowie and Heather McGovern insightfully called "daughters of the revolution," not "digital natives" but early students of networked and digital technologies of the 1990s.[33] From whence computers and writing journeys will be immediately determined by these women and their male counterparts.

As a revolutionary daughter myself, I feel the burden of applying critical attention to these new and not so new technologies, if for no other reason than to continue to

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[32] Jane Parenti Blakelock, Jena Maddox Burges, Gail E. Hawisher, Cynthia L. Selfe and Janice R. Walker, "Inspiring Women: Social Movements and the Literacies of Technology," eds. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher, Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erhlbaum, 2004) 161–182.

[33] Jennifer Bowie and Heather McGovern, "Daughters of the Revolution: Females born in the '70s and '80s, Writing, and the Digital Revolution," Computers & Writing Conf., Texas Tech. U, Waco, 26 May 2006.

explode the myth of "better living with computers." To paraphrase Cindy Selfe and Gail Hawisher, all the implications for gendered literacy (technical and otherwise) thrown up in this project are the purview of writing studies.[34]

An Interpretively Innovative Literature Review

Heeding the call from Krista Ratcliffe to frame my reading as that kind of "eavesdropping" dissertation writers perform in literature reviews, I am attempting to apply "tactical rhetorical listening" to the diverse and sometimes niche academic literature that touches women's writing in online dating. Krista Ratcliffe's theory of hearing (and reading as hearing) asks us to approach texts with the intention to understand the speaker (writer) and remain in an open stance.[35] In the case of this dissertation, I have attempted to interpretively innovate from the groundwork of many disciplines and theoretical approaches that can inform how we understand the complex tasks that women perform in online dating. Some of the listening work I have performed has been that of amplifying faint tracks and muffling louder ones, sampling many to craft harmonious and useful background music against which to play my exploration of women's rhetorosociality in online dating.

In contrast to the paucity of scholarship exploring women and online dating, academic writers have taken the measure of how users perform/play with identity and shore up agency in online environments. Three excellent and typical early examples of this kind of attention are Gareth Branwyn's "Compu-Sex: Erotica for Cybernauts" from 2000, David F. Shaw's "Gay Men and Computer Communication: A Discourse of Sex

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[34] Selfe and Hawisher, Literate 1-12.

[35] Krista Ratcliffe, Rhetorical Listening, Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms ser. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005) 3-21.

and Identity in Cyberspace" and Dawn Dietrich's "(Re)-fashioning the Techno-Erotic Woman: Gender and Textuality in the Cybercultural Matrix," which both appear in the 1997 collection Virtual Culture, which has been reprinted several times, including in 2002. Branwyn describes compu-sex as "a curious blend of phone sex, computer dating, and high-tech voyeurism."[36] Detailing the various forms of compu-sex, he shows how users collectively write a story of fantasy and sexual satisfaction, while using elaborate identity verification rituals in attempts to ground the exchange in the biosocial. Shaw takes as his starting point Barthes' assertion that the discourse of love can be best understood as the lover's absence to analyze gay men's formation of identity and desire through Internet Relay Chat (IRC).[37]

Like the majority of early work on identity and sexuality in digital environments including Branwyn, Shaw understands sex acts as the primary locus for defining online identity vis a vis sexuality, particularly for the marginalized if through nothing else than what Steven G. Jones calls "the ritual sharing of information."[38] Dawn Dietrich's "(Re)-fashioning the Techno-Erotic Woman: Gender and Textuality in the Cybercultural Matrix," refines this to show how individuals and organizations can reconstitute the

[36] Gareth Branwyn, "Compu-sex: Erotica for Cybernauts," The Cybercultures Reader, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (1996; New York: Routledge, 2000) 396-373.

[37] David F. Shaw, "Gay Men and Computer Communication: A Discourse of Sex and Identity in Cyberspace," Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety, ed. Steven G. Jones (1997; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002)133-145.

[38] Steven G. Jones, "Understanding Community in the Information Age," CyberSociety: Computer-mediated Communications and Community, ed. Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995) pp. 10 – 35.

subject position "feminist" within cyberspace, and therefore enact change on and offline.[39]

The popular journalistic genre of "woman-meets-Internet" writing is now too big to offer a succinct overview of here. In addition, there are perhaps even more texts in the "adventures of an online dater" memoir variety. To focus on the contributions of my collaborators, I have largely omitted these and other popular texts from this analysis, with the exception of a few anecdotal examples, but Audacia Ray's Naked on the Internet proved very useful to my thinking about women's sexuality online in terms of rhetorosociality. Ray explores women's agency from both sides of Internet "sexploration," describing her own and other women's experience as feminist, sex-positive producers of cyberporn as well as the many dimensions of women's gendered work online, in relationships, earning money, and seeking (and providing) reliable health information. Ray's work is unique because, while emphasizing examples of empowerment like the woman-owned and -run Survival Research League, she situates her information, pointing out how one woman's opportunity could be another woman's exploitation.[40]

In a more traditional scholarly vein but with similar results, Nina Wakeford has also tried to redefine cyberspace away from a masculinized zone where women can only participate as the "harassed female" by illustrating how online collectives of women and girls are also outside of the realm of gender marketing forces that are decidedly anti-

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[39] Dawn Dietrich, "(Re)-fashioning the Techno-Erotic Woman: Gender and Textuality in the Cybercultural Matrix," Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety, ed. Steven G. Jones. (1997; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002) 169–184.

[40] Audacia Ray, Naked on the Internet: Hookups, Downloads, and Cashing in on Internet Sexploration (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007) 56-80.

feminist.[41] In 2011, we might code arguments like those made by Wakeford, Dietrich, and Shaw that point out how technology has lead to a form of "progress" away from a patriarchal hegemony as pitching a somewhat utopian view of cyberspace. However, works of this ilk still provide a beginning point to talk about biosociality and technosociality and allow me to discuss the additional sphere of action, the rhetorosocial.

A more critical view of cyberspace can point us towards the existence of the rhetorosocial. Arguing that the increasingly seamless relationship between humans and their machines is a blurring of boundaries ("the first Cartesian trick") and simply apoliticizes technology that encourages a false sense of trust, Judith Squires condemns the cyborg as a political paradox.[42] Squires does point out that the potential of cybernetics or cyborg identity is that it might offer some challenge to "the self-foundation project of the Enlightenment without giving up on its self-assertion project; abandoning the rationalist and individualist assumptions whilst retaining the pluralist and democratic political structures."[43] To reframe that in a lexicon useful to this dissertation, by watching for the slippage between the biosocial and technosocial, we can make out a shifting, changeable rhetorosocial domain that shapes and is shaped by the biological and technological.

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[41] Nina Wakeford, "Networking Women and Grrrls with Information/Communication Technology: Surfing Tales of the World Wide Web," The Cybercultures Reader, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (1997; New York: Routledge, 2000) 350–359.

[42] Judith Squires, "Fabulous Feminist Futures and the Lure of Cyberculture," The Cybercultures Reader, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (1996; New York: Routledge, 2000) 360–373.

[43] Squires 370.

The now canonical article "Digital Rage" by Claudia Springer also helps me point to the liminal nature of the rhetorosocial. The preoccupation with sex and technology, declared as equal to that of the Victorians by Sherry Turkle, is connected to our understanding of selfhood, as Springer explains.[44] Exploring how our love for our "square-headed spouse" is complicit in an "illusory sense of personal wholeness," Springer plumbs the depths of cyberdilonics, cyperpunk, and popular science fiction texts like The Terminator to challenge the possibilities of a technosocial utopia like the one Shaw envisions.[45] Uniting the love of the computer as artifact and prosthetic to fear of the computer as a virtual/literal assassin, Springer shows how biosocial realities like the AIDS epidemic limit as well as promote the seamless advancement of technology in engineering our lives.

The discipline of writing studies has many tools with which to approach the task of building and understanding women's rhetorical work in online dating. Even in its nascent form, "Composition" showed an attention to gender difference in epistemology and ontology. The suggestion by Elizabeth A. Flynn that we should spend time learning (and teaching) how to read as women to understand the writing of women and what it means to write as a woman demonstrates the field's early concern.[46] Flynn relies on a number of veins of feminist theory – psychoanalytic, socio-cultural, and material – to point out the persistent hierarchy in what constitutes public and private discourse,

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[44] Sherry Turkle, The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984) 313.

[45] Claudia Springer, "Digital Rage," (1996) The Cybercultures Reader, eds. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, (1996; New York: Routledge, 2000) 338.

[46] Elizabeth A. Flynn, "Composing as a Woman," Cross-Talk in Comp Theory, ed. Victor Villanueva, 2nd ed. (1988; Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2003) 571–585.

reinforcing the mandate that feminist critique be a prime mover in analysis. Deborah Holdstein makes what I classify as a feminist argument for the incorporation of technology into the literature and language classroom in her suggestion that its use will promote connection and dialogue with stakeholders, going on to state that it is through collaboration and cooperation (two feminized modes of innovation) that the project will move forward.[47] As feminist writing scholars such as Laura Brady and Min-Zhau Lu have pointed out, these sorts of moves – the marking off of what is feminized and what is masculinized – is a form of essentialist othering, particularly when it is made in a way that reinforces white-centricism, even when it is on the side of the angels.[48]

Work on women and networked technologies like that of Patricia Sullivan, Gail E. Hawisher, and Cynthia E. Selfe strives to be strategic in how it frames women's experiences with online platforms while still making informative and useful conclusions. Sullivan and Hawisher show that the complexities of academic women's participation in a women-only discussion listserv challenges Foucauldian distinctions between utopian and heterotopian sites in that public and private often mix and merge in women's use. The collection Literate Lives in the Information Age, while not an expressly (exclusively?) feminist volume, within its purpose to "begin tracing technological literacy

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[47] Deborah H. Holdstein, On Composition and Computers (New York: MLA, 1988) 85-92.

[48] Laura Brady, "The Reproduction of Othering," Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words, eds. Susan C. Jarratt & Lynn Worsham, Research and Scholarship in Composition ser. New York: MLA, 1998. 21 – 45.

Min-Zhan Lu, "Reading and Writing Differences: The Problematic of Experience," Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words, eds. Susan C. Jarratt and Lynn Worsham, Research and Scholarship in Composition ser. (New York: MLA, 1998) 239–251.

as it has emerged over the last few decades within the United States" does much to teach us about how women read and write within the biosocial, technosocial, and rhetorosocial realms and forms a cornerstone on top of which this project attempts to build.[49]

My process of rhetorical listening has continued throughout the four years I have spent researching and writing this document. While my initial preparation served me well, my interviews often lead me down paths of inquiry that I had not anticipated.

David Coogan's work on service-learning's multiple narratives, "Counterpublics in Public Housing," discusses the many sources–a Christian love ethic, theories of Afrocentric communication, feminist rhetoric, "stereotypes," and others–that shaped how his students interpreted their work in a Chicago public housing project and were in turn read by the residents and community leaders.[50] This work has provided me with a way to discuss in the next chapter and throughout this dissertation the "circulating discourses" that can be amplifying, contradictory, and fractious while still informing how individuals negotiate the rhetorosocial terrain.

Other works and other scholars have played a significant role in how I have shaped this exploration. Annette Lareau's evocative and troubling sociological ethnography of parenting and difference, Unequal Childhoods, not only better attuned me to the subtle discursive markers of race and class but modeled how powerful a tool of observation qualitative research can be in forming a theory of practice. I in no way hold

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[49] Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L Selfe, introduction, Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States eds. Cynthia L. Self and Gail E. Hawisher (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004) 3.

[50] David Coogan, "Counterpublics in Public Housing: Reframing the Politics of Service-Learning," College English, 67.5 (2005) 461–482, 9 Aug. 2010, Jstor, UNC Libraries <http://lib.unc.edu>.

my own preliminary work up as equal to hers, but I have tried to emulate her methodology in several ways, including her deployment of Pierre Bourdieu's work as a context for understanding how social privilege is "mis-recognized" in a capitalist society as being "earned" through talent and effort rather than transmitted through the habitus of social location and arbitrarily ordered by the various fields (specific markets and institutions) in which an individual operates.[51] I have similarly attempted to have such an attentiveness to the distribution of power by gender, class, and race. I have also tried, as Lareau does but Bourdieu does not, to pay attention to "the difference between the possession of capital and the activation of capital" to understand how the rhetorosocial informs online dating.[52]

Margaret J. Finders's excellent and now-canonical Just Girls has stayed with me since I first read it in 1997. Through her year-long ethnographic study of four seventh graders, not only does Finders illustrate the "hidden literacies" of adolescent girls as equally interesting to scholastic study as the in-class writing and assigned reading girls complete, but also how attention to these literacy events challenge the myths we hold about the socialization of women. As I describe above, I understand this dissertation as fulfilling a similar, if humbler, role: challenging the myths we hold about women's technosocial reality.

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[51] Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, trans. Richard Nice. (1972; New York: Cambridge UP, 2002) 172-183.

[52] Annette Lareau, Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003) 277.

Annette Lareau and Erin McNamara Horvat, "Moments of Social Inclusion and Exclusion: Race, Class, and Cultural Capital in Family-School Relationships," Sociology of Education 72 (1999) 37-53.

Neither Finders nor Lareau take on the role of technology specifically. That is, they do not address the overarching role of medium in the crafting of message, but they share an attention to the literacy practices that happen on a less visible register. For Lareau, these practices take place within the family, as interactions among children and adults. For Finders, these practices are outside of the school curriculum. However, both scholars see these events as vital to understanding the wider exercise of literacy in public and private over the course of a lifetime. I take similar positions on the "hidden" or "private" or "unsanctioned" writing and reading women perform in online dating as vital to understanding the condition of women in the U.S. at the current historical, rhetorical moment.

Also integral to a better understanding of women's rhetorosociality in online dating, indeed, rhetorosociality as a concept, is Bruno Latour's challenge to the concept of what we have rather sloppily called "the Social." Trained as both an anthropologist and philosopher, Latour has published on a variety of subjects, always taking on the totalizing epistemology of theory in history, philosophy, sociology (especially organizational studies), and the sciences to turn against the concept of objectivity a form of empiricism that rejects "the social" as a hackneyed form of short hand to describe the interactions of objects and people. He poses a way of both looking and being, studying actors (actants, as he prefers) linked together by their work (of association or function) in a way that constitutes a theory of existing: Actor-Network-Theory. Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), what he calls a "negative theory," is almost opposite to Bourdieu's theory of transmission of class privilege as an operation of hierarchical society. If Bourdieu formulates the field as agents of their own, like institutions, that order people and things

in a way that reinforces the superior power of the elite, Latour offers a way to see those institutions not as isolated or privileged agents but rather as influenced by the mediations of those who participate in the assemblages we might trace as we explore those institutions. (It is important to remember that Latour also considers the organizational structure, the physical building, its location, and the infinitesimal number of other parts that create what we might call "an institution" as acting and being acted upon.)

ANT is becoming de rigueur in technology studies for its recognition of the work objects (software, hardware) perform on other objects and users. Like all sociological theories, ANT is somewhat vague in its practical application. In what I believe to be a rather tongue-in-cheek take on this vagueness the chapter, "On the Difficulty of Being an ANT" in Resembling the Social, rejects the notions that ANT is a tool (or frame) for examining people working in an institution or organization, suggesting instead, that the theory is a way to contextualize that work. In this chapter, Latour argues through dialogue between a professor and his doctoral student that true ANT works "just describe the state of affairs at hand" and acknowledge and make the most of the "'Bella Vista'" of subjectivity, rather than considering it a limitation. He makes an analogy to the viewer of the statue who has a "standpoint" that is unique, suggesting that other viewers can also have unique but equally worthy standpoints towards the statue precisely because the beautiful, complex statue exists in space and time.[53]

In discussing the usefulness of ANT, Latour rails against the moribund nature of social criticism, dismissing what he sees as its only two approaches to theorization. Latour dismantles the "fact position," the anti-fetish critical move that dismisses "objects

[53] Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (New York: Oxford UP, 2005) 144–145.

of belief" as the mere concepts into which subjects deposit power, like religion.[54] Latour also challenges the "fair position," which shares no objects in common with the fact position and instead gives researchers the opportunity to attribute the actions and motivations of subjects to overarching, dominating forces like gender and imperialism.[55] Both of these approaches seem to justify themselves and their resulting conclusions because they lack attention to the kind of subjective empiricism Latour sees as vital. To avoid the fact and fairy trap, Latour urges foregoing facts for "matters of concern."[56] Concerns, according to Latour, are "constructions," and in being so are inherently "real" but still uncertain, unhitched from the causality of "technical determinism."[57] The emphasis on construction (or "fabrication" as Latour prefers) focuses researchers on multiple "relations" or "associations" to demonstrate agency.[58]

Despite its seeming resistance to practical use, I have found ANT helpful to the intellectual work of this dissertation. First, it provides a means to consider the way the software of online dating and the world in which the users exist interact and shape each other. Second, ANT allows me to formulate a (grand) theory of rhetorosociality while admitting the limitations of my own observations. Finally, ANT provides a means to talk about the way the hardware, organizations, users, typologies, media outlets, rubrics (and

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[54] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Facts to Matters of Concern," Critical Inquiry 30.2 (2004): 225-249, 238.

[55] Latour, Steam 238.

[56] Latour, Reassembling 87.

[57] Latour, Reassembling 109.

[58] Latour, Reassembling 119.

on and on) don't present data as "in-formation" but rather "trans-formation."[59] To say this another way, ANT allows me to move away from discussions of causality to discuss how technology mediates experience.

Taking ANT's emphasis on mediation a step further, it has allowed me to posit the rhetorosocial as something like ideology—indeed, my use of "rhetorosocial" could sometimes be swapped for "ideological"--but without allowing the rhetorosocial to flatten out into a "fairy" concept. ANT allows me to entertain concepts like the rhetorosocial, technosocial, and biosocial as matters of concern without requiring any of them to play an over-determined role in my analysis. This work also allows me to trace mediations between and among these concerns, and to further trace their associations with objects (like radio buttons) or people (like my collaborators.)

Methodology

I complement the analytical help ANT provides with some lenses from writing studies. Patricia Sullivan and James E. Porter present a manifesto for research in digital writing environments in their 1997 landmark work, Opening Spaces. Sullivan and Porter position writing research as praxis, as a process of discovery that admits

> up front that [the] research choices are guided by such factors as local need or accessibility or convenience and further, that those factors are guided by political and ethical choices involving institutional bureaucracies, [researchers'] personal preferences, taxpayer support, and the like, rather than simply a cut-and-dried methodology through which to discover some form of crystalline Truth.[60]

[59] Latour, Reassembling 222.

[60] Patricia Sullivan and James E. Porter, Opening Spaces: Writing Technologies and Critical Research Practices, New Directions in Computers and Composition Studies ser. (Westport, CT: Ablex, 1997) 9.

I take from Sullivan and Porter a stance that sees methodology as a heuristic of "know-how" rather than "know-that." I can apply a research practice to women's rhetorosociality in online dating that is not epistemic but rather rhetorically situated.[61]

Although I have taken care to adhere to the ethical considerations of reflective practice, and to follow Sullivan and Porter's urge to empower study participants by honoring their experiences as authentic and knowledgeable, I diverge from their emphasis on revealing and combating oppression whenever it is discovered. I am not in favor of perpetuating oppression or of eliding its operation; indeed, I make an effort to relate both oppression and power in action in my description of the collaborators' literacy actions in online dating. Instead, I find the binaries Sullivan and Porter perhaps inadvertently establish between neutral and oppressive, libratory and constraining, as themselves rendering invisible relationships and labor that might be neither one nor the other. Drawing heavily from Paolo Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed as well as the usual suspects of deconstruction (Foucault, Deleuze, Guttari, and others), Sullivan and Porter make an argument that to me is neither nuanced nor particularly useful in creating situated-ness. In Chapter 3 of Opening Spaces, "The Politics and Ethics of Studying Writing with Computers," Sullivan and Porter ask, "By what criteria do we distinguish between good and bad interfaces? Ones that promote democracy vs. ones that dominate?"[62] This search for a mechanism for sorting the goodies from the baddies seems to me fruitless; the interactions of humans and computers are always oppressive and yet always democratic. Perhaps I should forgive this breakdown in argument, as Sullivan and

[61] Sullivan and Porter 11.

[62] Sullivan and Porter 134.

Porter are ultimately striving to bring about a more perfect way to study, and through study, to implement the teaching of writing [thinking] with computers. My project is less directly related to this goal, but what is interesting, both to me and I believe likely to Sullivan and Porter, is how we can learn about our condition, our rhetorosociality, by looking closer at these multi-faceted, often paradoxical mechanisms.

Like Latour whose work I overview above, Sullivan and Porter forsake discussing particular methodologies in favor of arguing for reflectivity. For specifics on how to go about a qualitative research project, I turned to other works. First among them is Robert S. Weiss's Learning From Strangers, which instructs us how to create cooperation between researcher and respondent in interviews, from designing questions to coding data.[63] Weiss's work was particularly helpful when incorporating collaborators' affect and nonverbal cues into how I read their responses. Further, it offered a snapshot of the research methods in social science which concern Latour. Also, the white paper handbook, Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research, while not written with small case studies like mine in mind, was helpful in defining how far I could reasonably extrapolate collaborators' contributions while maintaining reliable conclusions.[64] On the other hand, Wendy Bishop's excellent Ethnographic Writing Research was both a historical and practical guide to thinking about qualitative investigation as an educational endeavor with the dissertation researcher as a visible presence shaping the results as well

[63] Robert S. Weiss, Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 39-121.

[64] Jerome Kirk and Marc L. Miller, Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research, Qualitative Research Methods ser. 1 (New York: Sage Publications, 1986).

as collecting them.[65] James P. Spradley's Participant Observation played a larger role in the stages before I actually began interviewing, particularly when I was reading online dating profiles and formulating my early thoughts about the genres related to online dating. Particularly worthwhile to my study, even though implicitly focusing on face-to-face observation, as was the modus operandi in 1980, was Spradley's discussion of discovering cultural themes as playing out in large and small domains.[66] An additional help to the nitty-gritty work of performing the labor of qualitative assessment was Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's Writing Ethnographic Field Notes. Amongst the theoretical and critical work, this volume was a breath of fresh air, laying out a step-by-step guide to creating an organized workable set of notes that would serve as my primary text for the length of my project.[67] The collection of essays by Africana scholars edited by Kim Vaz, Oral Narrative Research with Black Women, was not necessarily a theoretical or methodological reference. However, reading it helped me tune in to the manner in which difference can be expressed in ways that at first may not be apparent, or at least the work helped me stay alert for those expressions. While I do not pretend that I perfectly listened and saw Black women (or any woman) in my research, this volume–written by black women, about research with black women–was a powerful tool for disrupting my own

[65] Wendy Bishop, Ethnographic Writing Research: Writing It Down, Writing It Up, and Reading It. (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1999) 57-157.

[66] James P. Spradley, Participant Observation (York: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning, 1980) 140-154.

[67] Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I Frentz, and Linda L. Shaw, Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Editing and Publishing ser. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).

cultural attitudes to facilitate phenomenological research, particularly as it relates to my own ethnocentricism.[68]

I gathered preliminary data through content analysis of three hundred Triangle women's profiles on four online dating sites. (See a brief description of the sites discussed in this dissertation in Appendix A.) To begin to address the questions this initial examination brought to light--outlined above--I originally designed this study with three parts in mind: a content analysis of three hundred profiles from four major dating sites, a survey of at least fifty participants conducted face-to-face throughout the Triangle, ethnographic interviews with fifteen participants, and a final group discussion. Time constraints and difficulty recruiting subjects ultimately made the survey unfeasible, necessarily focusing my investigation on an in-depth exploration of the online dating writing lives of my ethnographic participants. Once recruited, I met with each participant–whom I have called "collaborators" to demonstrate the expansive nature of their roles in this project and to recognize their agency–for between four and six hours during which I asked them the questions detailed in Appendix B. I made arrangements for these meetings at least a week in advance and offered the collaborators a choice as to where they would prefer to be interviewed: at their homes, in the Gaskin Library of Greenlaw Hall (home of the English and Comparative Literature Department at UNC), or in a hotel room. I offered these choices to allow for both collaborator convenience and comfort, guessing that a collaborator might prefer not to have her biosocial network become aware that she was participating. One collaborator did prefer Gaskin Library, but

[68] Kim Marie Vaz, introduction, Oral Narrative Research with Black Women: Collecting Treasures, ed. Kim Marie Vaz (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997) 1-6.

primarily because it allowed her to attend the interview after work. No collaborators opted to be interviewed at a hotel.

I designed the questionnaire with my own use and initial critical attention in mind, specifically as it related to how users approached online dating software and its technological intervention into dating. I attempted to leave room for the collaborators to tell me what they thought was important and interesting about the interaction, however. These conversations often proved to be the most fruitful, providing insight into the intentionality of users when selecting one or more online dating sites and the identification collaborators felt while reading others' profiles.

Recruiting subjects proved to be the most challenging part of the research process. That is to say, I expended considerable energy locating women who were willing to be interviewed. I had planned to use two primary methods of recruitment: 1.) posting general calls to listservs and online bulletin boards, as well tacking hard copies of the call to coffee shop, bus stop, and bookstore corkboards around the Triangle area, and 2.) contacting individuals I know directly or indirectly through mutual acquaintances using email messages. Ultimately, I received no positive responses from either biosocial or technosocial mass-solicitations. Initially, I was only able to locate seven possible participants using direct contact. Fearing that seven informants would not provide me with enough variety of experience to get a sense of writing in online dating, I requested help from collaborators, teachers, and colleagues to find another six, among them women older than the twenty-seven year-old median age for online dating users, women of color, and lesbian or bisexual women. My eventual ethnographic pool of nine is not statistically diverse but proved to be useful in forming a quilt of experience from which to see both

pattern and dissonance, highlighting both the similarities of use among the participants and divergent processes.

As the UNC Institutional Review Board pointed out to me, relying on my established biosocial networks to recruit collaborators was somewhat exploitative. Some collaborators did not seem concerned about any break of confidentiality because they inherently trusted me as a friend. Several, for example, barely glanced at the paperwork outlining how I would use what they told me and others hurried me along as I was explaining the measures I was taking to ensure their privacy, saying "I understand, you can skip that part." Of course, I couldn't really skip this explanation. Not only because it breached the permissions I had gained from the UNC IRB, but also because subjects of a study of this or any type have a right to understand the project to which they are committing. It was clear to me, despite the fact that my collaborators were highly educated, socially savvy women, that the measures I took were still insufficient. One collaborator who had been "volunteered" by her adult child did not grasp that I was analyzing how she was reading and writing in online dating until I had concluded the interview with her. She asked, as I was leaving the interview, how long I had been a sociologist, even though I had mentioned my status as a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at the beginning of the interview.

Further, because I used almost exclusively women within my larger [bio]social sphere, the trust that they afforded me included a level of comfort that made the interviews a delight to conduct, although I would add anecdotally that the closeness of my relationship with a collaborator did not correspond to her openness. In fact, the collaborators who elaborated the least in their responses were those who were most aware

of qualitative methodologies because of their professional background. That said, I feel that many, if not all, collaborators confided information that they might not have to a stranger. This feeling, particularly poignant as I reviewed my transcripts, points to the conclusion that even in technological writing studies there are issues with the "caring friend" researcher's fallacy. Even though in many cases I was a caring friend, in the context of this dissertation I am a self-serving one. This dissertation benefits me and me alone. (Though I stand by my claims that these insights serve well the field of writing studies.) The collaborators received little more than lunch as material compensation, even if I believe that they enjoyed spending time talking with the empathetic listener that I tried to be.

Collaborators

Because the collaborators were drawn from my existing biosocial and technosocial networks, they resemble me in lifestyle and values. Although their ages varied from twenty-four to sixty-four, they all were highly educated and were very familiar with computers. Many also had strong ties to universities—as current graduate students or employees or both--and all had used computers in their professional and personal lives before they began online dating. As I explain above, my interviews with collaborators primarily were conducted in their homes, with snacks for us both to munch on, and unfolded much like conversations. Through these conversations, I came to like and admire each of these women, not just for their insightful takes on my dissertation topic but also for their wit, courage, and generosity. In many ways this dissertation is a friendship letter to these women whose voices I listened to for more than three years, gathering their collective and individual wisdom onto the page. However, I find it

important to differentiate their voices from my analysis, which aims to move beyond recording to offering insight on the condition of rhetorosociality in the U.S. through this examination of online dating. In addition, by individualizing the collaborators in this dissertation I hope to make heard my own voice, as a mechanism of rhetorosociality, by tracing associations among people, ideas, and forces, as Latour would suggest.

Caroline, a white heterosexual North Carolina native in her early thirties, also earned her bachelor and medical degrees from Triangle universities. Before her marriage to a man she met on Match.com, she experimented on several online dating sites including LavaLife. Caroline's experience is unique because she did not craft a detailed profile like the other collaborators; she also engaged in web cam chats with prospective matches, something that other collaborators felt was too intrusive. Currently, Caroline spends her outside-of-work hours with her husband and toddler.

Chrissie is a white lesbian in her late twenties with a background in linguistics pursuing her law degree at a Triangle university. In addition to pursuing a healthy lifestyle and school, she is active in the Triangle LGTB community and cites the relatively small local biosocial pool as a hindrance to both technosocial and biosocial relationships. Chrissie has experimented with several online dating sites, including PlanetOut, OkCupid, and Match on both the West coast where she used to live and in the Triangle.

Dafina is a late twenty-something African American heterosexual who moved from the coast of the Gulf of Mexico to complete her PhD in literature at a Triangle university. Immersed in her scholarly pursuits, Dafina has little time to spare, but she has in the past had both local and long-distance relationships, the majority of which began

biosocially. However, she has experience with BlackPlanet and craigslist and casually dated several men she met on those sites.

Elle, whose voice informs almost every aspect of this dissertation, generously allowed me to interview her for over four hours about her nearly six years of online dating experience. She even followed this conversation with emails elaborating on or refining points we had discussed. A graduate of an elite Triangle university for both her baccalaureate degree in performing arts and her master's degree in ethics, she was an administrator at that same university. Originally from the industrial Northeast but having lived in the Triangle for over ten years, she identifies as a white heterosexual. In addition to her job and online dating, Elle is very active with her extensive biosocial friend circle, frequenting the restaurants, bars, and art museums of the Triangle. Elle has used Match.com and eHarmony and casually dated men she met through those sites.

Kelsey is a white heterosexual woman in her early thirties who harkens from a conservative family in the Mid-Atlantic states but identifies herself as liberal. She moved to the Triangle area after she completed her master's degree and began working in publishing before beginning a doctorate in gender and identity. She has used eHarmony for two periods; one of those episodes led to a long-term relationship that eventually ended. She reports that bad date stories are really what she has to show for her experience with online dating. She is not currently dating online. Her recreational interests include creative writing and yoga.

Patricia, a white heterosexual North Carolina native and alumna of the undergraduate and graduate schools at a large Triangle university, is in her early sixties and was widowed in her mid-twenties. She works at a Triangle university in a web-

centric position. Unlike other collaborators, she moved to online dating, trying Match and Plenty of Fish, after years of newspaper personal advertising. In addition to staying close with her adult child, she enjoys lace-making and other delicate handicrafts and belongs to a number of affinity groups on and offline.

Rachel is a Jewish woman in her late thirties from the urban Mid-Atlantic. She has two master's degrees, both earned at a Triangle university, one of which is in literary studies. She works in a temporary professional position at a Triangle university library and, like Kelsey, has a history in publishing. When we spoke, she had only recently begun using Match and after some initial concerns about the friendliness of technosociality has found it fun and rewarding.

Sophia is also a white heterosexual native of the Triangle in her late twenties and obtained her bachelor's degree from a private local university. She briefly left the Triangle for New York City to attend culinary school. She returned to the Triangle and her staff position in a university library but now co-owns a food stall with her husband, whom she met when they both worked at a local community grocery store. In addition to her passion for local, organic food, Sophia keeps pet rabbits and enjoys fiber crafts like weaving. When she was actively pursuing online dating, Sophia used the now defunct Yahoo! Personals.

Suzanne, a white heterosexual divorced woman in her early sixties, moved to the Triangle from a rural area in the Mid-Atlantic to be closer to her adult children. A retired language teacher and dancer, she has a Master's degree and likes to stay current in European fiction and news. In addition to languages, literature, and dance, she enjoys

traveling and the arts. Like many other collaborators, she started online dating at the suggestion of another woman, and shared the experience with several friends.

Antoinette was one of the first collaborators I interviewed. Recently engaged after using several different online dating sites in both the Triangle and in a larger Mid-Atlantic city, her insight shed tremendous light on the intentionality of various sites, but also on how biosocial embodiment informed online dating rhetoric. Like Dafina and Kelsey, Antoinette is also a college instructor with an advanced degree in English (M.A.), so her take on profile reading and writing proved particularly useful. Unfortunately, my document of the transcript of my interview with her became corrupted, leaving me with only my notes and a partial soft copy, making her voice less present in this final dissertation than I would have liked.

Review of Chapters

In each of the following four chapters, I explore how the rhetorosocial expands and contracts with the fluid boundaries of the bio/technosocial realms, complicating what we understand as the origins of knowledge and the way epistemology reforms when we apply the lens of technosociality.

In Chapter 2: Representing, I examine the marketing of eHarmony to demonstrate how technosociality both in how it is enforced and how we practice it, can reinvigorate constraining rhetorics of romance, heteronormative conventions of marriage, and the way these rhetorics are both resisted and enacted by the collaborators. Specifically, I lay out how the collaborators' interactions with eHarmony draw in counter-public rhetorics that touch on almost every aspect of public and private life, blending the biosocial, technosocial, and rhetorosocial.

I take these circulating, seemingly paradoxical rhetorics and examine how the collaborators applied them in their own interpretive processes in Chapter 3: Reading. I explore the way capitalism constructs the machinations of technosociality, particularly when it comes to solving the problem of the unmarried person. Further, by picking up again the concept of rhetorical listening to frame the ways collaborators participated in the searching and researching aspects of online dating, I position the relationship of biosociality to technosociality as inextricably tangled. I hope to finally dismiss the idea that technosociality is simply an alternative fantasy biosociality. Further, I discuss the important roles of friendship and collaboration in each collaborators'online dating process. Pushing these discussions further, I take on the ethical and practical ramifications for the collaborators of injecting networked technologies into their dating lives.

Chapter 4: Writing takes on the collaborators' efforts to define themselves within the boundaries of online dating sites. By examining their best-self profiles, I theorize the ways the collaborators performed an "all things to all people" technosocial persona that attempts to both define the writer's biosociality and the writer's ideal match in a rosy-colored future. I also explore how these written personae resist the classifications associated with the visual rhetoric of profile pictures to distill the rhetorosocial implications for women's biosocial sexuality and embodiment as constructed in technosociality.

In Chapter 5: Reflecting, I revisit ANT and its role in revealing rhetorosociality. Summarizing my findings from chapters two through four, I attempt to define the

rhetorosocial as it operates in online dating. I end by posing possibilities for further research into the study of both women's writing online and rhetorosociality.

I put my early findings and analyses to the collaborators on display for discussion in the Coda: Responding. I attempt to illustrate my own complicity in sculpting the shape of the collaborators' rhetorosociality in an effort to democratize the process of codifying a reading of online dating users' experience. In essence, I give the collaborators the "last word" in order to submit my conclusions to a modicum of scrutiny, to test how authentic they seemed to the women who were living out what I am theorizing. By showing my hand at work, my intimate involvement, I hope to disrupt, at least marginally, the positions of observer and observed. Although this might be a nominal gesture, I find it necessary to acknowledge my own liability as a microphone for rhetorosociality, rather than a challenge to it.

CHAPTER 2: REPRESENTING

My personal experiences with eHarmony were brief and rather unremarkable. Hearing from friends that it offered a more serious (i.e., more focused on long-term commitment) take on online dating, I thought I would try it out. After signing up, I nearly quit before the matching got underway. Worn out by the process of completing the lengthy personality assessment, I eventually started thoughtlessly picking any answer to the multiple choice questions, like a student who chooses C on a test when she doesn't know the answer. When I was finally matched with some potential dates and allowed to communicate with them through the site, I found myself rejecting the site's suggestions. Rather than questions like, "What role do you think religion should play in child-rearing?" or "How have your parents influenced your life?" I preferred "Who is your favorite super hero? Why?" and "President T. Roosevelt vs. President Bush: Who wins in a homerun derby?" Put off by the number of useless hoops the site required me to jump through and frustrated by lackluster dates that resulted, I eventually canceled my membership. I decided eHarmony was just not for me.

In this chapter, I will discuss representations, those rhetorics (biosocial, technosocial, and rhetorosocial) that define online dating users, online dating sites, and the matching mechanisms that concern them both. I focus on the example of eHarmony to demonstrate how a site–its design, marketing and use by humans–works through a

blending of related but sometimes contrarian rhetorics, rhetorics that help illustrate the way biosocial, technosocial, and rhetorosocial realms intertwine.

I begin with the biosocial realm and move through the technosocial realm to end by discussing the rhetorosociality of online dating as lived through eHarmony. I examine the biological/rhetorical history of eHarmony's founder and figurehead, Neil Clark Warren. Moving on to discuss eHarmony's marketing and design of the patented *29 Dimensions of Compatibility*, I show how online dating sites harness the ethos of relationship expertise to enact technosocial intervention into users' lives. Finally, I discuss the rhetorical failures of eHarmony in that intervention to appropriately recognize and construct the collaborators. In this discussion of rhetorosociality, I focus on the collaborators' rhetorical efforts to harness (or poach) the eHarmony technosociality for their own ends while resisting the site's construction of them.

Many of the troubling aspects of eHarmony's technosocial structure stem from difficult biosocial notions about professional women and marriage. Seemingly disparate but connected rhetorical themes are knit through the fabric of the cultural quilt of eHarmony, replicated in the technological machinations of the site and imposed on users. Western society's contentious--if not paradoxical--construction of romance, as both a miraculous phenomenon and the most natural of processes is even further complicated by a cultural moment in which psychological theories explaining love and marriage gain popular ground in both descriptive and proscriptive permutations. Not separate from this bifurcated construction of romance is the role of fundamentalist faiths, particularly evangelical Christianity, in civic life at the *fin de millennium*. As these themes knot

together and unravel around eHarmony, they help create a rhetorical landscape inhabited by human beings who both resist and comply with it.

Most important to this discussion are the lived experiences of collaborators negotiating their own paths in the cultural and rhetorosocial milieu. Throughout, I will explore how the rhetorical universe enacted through eHarmony failed to construct appropriately collaborators and their experiences, leading to eventual dissatisfaction with the site, and resistance to the process. Although these failings were specific to eHarmony and stem in part from the technosociality established by the site, these failings or misrepresentations had origins and consequences in the biosocial realm and are hardly unique. The lived experiences of the collaborators reveal the material stakes of any bio/techno/rhetorical enterprise.

Biosocial Problems and Their Solutions

In 2005, Neil Clark Warren, founder and CEO of eHarmony, told Salon that he wanted to change the world and he planned to run his company.[69] These two goals and the ways in which they inform and collide illustrate that the contentious history of online dating is a very human history marked by global events and cultural attitudes. In this section, I will examine how much of the rhetoric of eHarmony revolves around Warren, including his corporate and social agendas as they were exercised during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Warren has become an integral part of eHarmony's branding. His kind voice and grandfatherly appearance invite trust. His enthusiasm for "successful relationships" and confidence in eHarmony's ability to help users find them invite hope. Early television

[69] Rebecca Traister, "My Date with Mr. eHarmony," Salon 10 Jun. 2005, 21 August 2010 <http://dir.salon.com/story/mwt/feature/2005/06/10/warren/index.html>.

advertising campaigns featured him with his wife discussing their forty-year marriage, eliding the site's own technological machinations with his personal relationship success. He appears in the advertisements as the benevolent matchmaker, practically suggesting that it is he, not software and a database, that selects potential partners for the site's users.

Before Neil Clark Warren became the most recognized face of online dating–so famous, in fact that the advertisements for eHarmony were parodied on Saturday Night Live--he still lived a life distinguished by most standards.[70] He grew up in Iowa to parents who he believes were not particularly well suited to one another; his father was broad thinker with a curious mind, while his mother was "sweet" but not intelligent. Warren left the heartland for the West coast, attending undergraduate school at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. A chance encounter he describes as "pure luck," lead to his marriage to Marylyn, with whom he reports he remains "breath catchingly in love." After undergraduate school, he earned a Master's of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Doctorate of Clinical Psychology from the University of Chicago, where he worked with humanist Carl Rodgers.[71] After a short stint as a pastor before completing his Ph.D., he taught at Fuller Theological Seminary Graduate School. For many years he was also in private therapeutic practice, largely

[70] "MeHarmony," perf. Horatio Sanz, Maya Rudolph, Kenan Thompson, Rob Riggle, Will Forte, and Seth Meyers, Saturday Night Live, NBC, 12 Feb. 2005, 20 Aug. 2010 <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/recaps/#cat=30&mea=1388&ima=48501>.

[71] Neil Clark Warren, interview with Terry Gross, Fresh Air, Natl. Public Radio, 17 Aug. 2005, 21 Aug. 2010 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4803877>.

marriage counseling. He also traveled the country giving workshops and seminars, helping to promote his books, primarily to Christian audiences.[72]

Despite his success as an academic, therapist, and author, Warren says he craved more. His true professional dream was to own his own business. He told the *Los Angeles Times*, "All my life I have wanted to be an entrepreneur."[73] His father, a farmer, owned several businesses including a car dealership, and once made an unsuccessful run for a county supervisor's seat.[74] Warren's own initial ventures were also largely unsuccessful, a failed attempt to organize a group oil drilling investment and a credit card venture he does not discuss.[75] According to Warren, it was not until Marylyn suggested he try something closer to his field of expertise, relationship counseling, that he found success.[76]

What is now called eHarmony began as a 1995 venture under the auspices of Neil Clark Warren & Associates selling relationship advice video and audiotapes based on Neil Clark Warren's years as a marriage counselor. The initial business plan was to find the way to best distribute Warren's teachings as outlined in his 1993 best-selling self-help book, Finding the Love of Your Life, the success of which landed him an appearance on

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[72] David Colker, "Sounding Out the Singles Set; Neil Clark Warren has made eHarmony.com a success but still may face an image challenge," L. A. Times.com Archives 1 May 2005, 22 Aug. 2010 <http://www.latimes.com>.

[73] Colker.

[74] Traister.

[75] Colker.

[76] Colker.

The Oprah Winfrey Show.[77] It soon became evident that moving the business online did just that. Warren told PC Magazine in 2004 that at the time he personally did not foresee what would become of the company: "We pretty quickly came to the conclusion that moving our business on to the Internet made distribution [of the audio and video tapes] so much more feasible."[78]

By the late 1990s, the company and its founder were beginning to see the future. During this time, Neil Clark Warren and Associates were establishing the pattern that would characterize eHarmony's approach, the exchange of personal information for expert guidance and recommendations. In 1999, 5,000 respondents to a marriage satisfaction survey on the site received a "marriage profile," intended to help the couples improve their relationships, as a token of the company's appreciation.[79] The data collected was later used in eHarmony's patent application. Warren shared his burgeoning philosophy about expert guidance with Terry Gross on her NPR program, *Fresh Air*: "[We] came to the conclusion that what single people want is not information, they *like a little information* but they don't want more info, they want *somebody*. And so we thought, how can we do that?"[80]

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[77] "The Business of Relations," Small Business School, narr. Hattie Bryant, Public Broadcasting System, May 2007.

[78] Cady Metz, "Lucky in Love," PC Magazine, Oct. 2004: 92.

[79] "History of eHarmony," Online Dating Magazine.com. 20 Aug. 2010. <http://www.onlinedatingmagazine.com/history/eharmony/history.html>.

[80] Emphasis is mine.

Warren, Fresh Air.

The seeming contradictions here–Warren's belief that single people want to find mates and desire only a small amount of information--are reconciled in his personalized "readings" and "profiles," analyzing user information to provide *expert intelligence*[81] on attaining and maintaining a relationship. Further, unlike therapeutic talk dynamics in which a clinician encourages a patient to probe her thoughts and feelings through questioning or abstract information to arrive at self-awareness, these profiles and readings give *codified, professional judgments*, offering biosocial advice. The information eHarmony would go on to provide its users, like the first survey respondents, would be of this same sort. Further, Warren and his team would go on to imagine collectively a role for the technology of matchmaking that was increasingly more interventionist than on other dating sites. By controlling the options and interactivity of users, eHarmony makes technosocially manifest the professional advice Warren offers. These proscriptive applications reflected not only Warren's intent to deliver what users desired, but also technically engineer a solution to what he saw as a social problem.

As Warren's statement to Salon emphasizes, the intent of eHarmony is not simply to become a market force but to become a market force in the service of change. That change serves a capitalist purpose, however: the (re)strengthening of the institution of marriage through expertly guided courtship. Warren told the National Review in 2005,

> The marital deterioration rate, if we don't bring it under control, will destroy our society . . . We can bring this epidemic under control! Seventy-five percent of what makes for a great marriage has to do with the successful selection of a partner. And [eHarmony] is better prepared to do this now than ever before . . . For every one percent that we can reduce the divorce rate in North America, this will affect about one million people in one generation. If we can ever get the

[81] Because the expert and professional nature of these judgments are under contention, I will italicize these words here.

> divorce rate divorce rate down to single digits, it will be the greatest single social revolution in the history of the human race.[82]

Warren articulates the stakes of the marriage project as crucial; preventing the destruction of "society" by remaking the generational legacy of marriage. Taking for granted that divorce damages not only the family unit of the divorcing couple but also couples in the future, he defines divorce as a cultural phenomena that is both highly destructive–implying it irreparably harms children–and that can be controlled through technosocial engineering. He positions eHarmony's work as focused on children, manifestations of the future of civilization, through the reimagination of marriage, positioning marriage at the center of social order and affirming the rearing of children as its primary purpose.

While Warren's marriage project may not be an expression of a Christian ideological agenda, it has been read that way in the context of his affiliations at a particularly loaded moment in the culture wars. Warren is a life-long evangelical Christian and until recently maintained a public personal and professional relationship with fellow Californian James Dobson, president of Focus on the Family.[83] Dobson, a child psychologist who served on the faculty of the University of Southern California School of Medicine and the staff of Children's Hospital of Los Angeles founded the not-for-profit organization in 1977.[84] Dobson's work with Focus on the Family (FoF) earned

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[82] Kathryn Jean Lopez, "The Love Doctor," National Review, LexisNexis Academic. 14 Feb 2005, UNC Libraries, 6 Aug. 2010.

[83] Traister.

[84] "James B. Dobson," Focus On the Family, 21 Aug. 2010 <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/profiles/dr_james_dobson.aspx>.

"History," Focus On the Family, 21 Aug. 2010 <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/history.aspx>.

him numerous high governmental appointments under both Democratic and Republican administrations (although the Democratic accolades are omitted on the FoF website), including the 1980 White House Conferences on the Family under Jimmy Carter and a National Advisory Commission for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention under Ronald Reagan.[85] Focus on the Family describes itself as "a global Christian ministry dedicated to helping families thrive."[86] Among its ministerial activities are multiple radio broadcasts/podcasts, publications, splinter projects, a helpline, counseling, and small group discussions on topics related to dating, marriage, sex, and childrearing. The "core beliefs" defining the ministerial work of FoF are articulated on its website. These include valuing all persons infinitely, regardless of "age, development, appearance or ability," centering family life around committed heterosexual marriage, understanding children as a gift from God and promoting their upbringing in heterosexual, married homes; discouraging premarital and extramarital sex; evangelizing personally and lobbying politically for "social policy that improves the strength and health of the family, as God designed," and instructing children in the teachings of Jesus Christ "at home and in the community."[87]

These rhetorosocial beliefs support the organization's work, not only with individuals or church organizations but also lobbying efforts on "social issues"; the organization does not call these "political," in part perhaps because they bleed with life-style choices like living abstinent before marriage. (They do not identify with the feminist

[85] History.

[86] History.

[87] "About Us," Focus On the Family, 21 Aug. 2010 <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx>.

position that the personal is political.) Some of the issues for which FoF regularly lobbies relate to restricting access to abortion, stem cell research, and physician-assisted suicide. The organization supports the appointment of strict constructionist judges, sex trafficking legislation and law enforcement efforts, promotes zoning reform and so-called broadcast decency legislation to restrict pornography and gambling, and promotes school voucher programs and abstinence-only sexual education.[88]

On the topic of marriage, FoF is particularly active. Not only does the organization support legislation opposing the extension of the right of marriage to same sex couples, often called the Marriage Protection Amendment, it supports legislation blocking gays and lesbians from adopting (despite tireless work to promote adoption among heterosexuals). FoF also supports repeal of the inadvertently-progressive "marriage penalty" tax. Further, FoF advocates for the tightening of divorce requirements, specifically promoting pre-divorce education on the effects of divorce on children and supporting "mutual consent" legislation requiring both parties to agree to the split.[89]

In eHarmony's early days, Warren appeared on Dobson's radio broadcasts and wrote columns for publication on the FoF site, including one reportedly decrying the damage premarital co-habitation can have on a marriage.[90] His work was familiar to the FoF community; a number of his books, including the landmark *Finding the Love of Your*

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[88] "Social Issues," Focus On the Family, 21 Aug. 2010 <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues.aspx>.

[89] "Our Position," Focus On the Family, 21 Aug. 2010 <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/marriage-and-family/marriage/our-position.aspx>.

[90] These no longer appear on the FoF website.

Life, had all been published by FoF. It is not all that surprising, then, that after Warren appeared on an August 2001 radio broadcast of Dobson's with ten couples who had met and married through eHarmony, 90,000 new members joined.[91] Warren said, "It overwhelmed any previous activity we had had . . . Had we spent millions . . . on radio commercials, we could never have achieved the same response the interviews [on Dobson's show] elicited."[92]

Sometime between February 2005 and May 2005, Warren began to distance himself from Focus on the Family in the media, despite their shared goal of promoting marriage. Janet Kornblum's USA Today article, "eHarmony: Heart and Soul," appearing on May 19, 2005 was one of the first national pieces to address eHarmony's close ties to FoF after the site had gone big time. Kornblum writes,

> Warren started out marketing to primarily Christian sites, touting eHarmony as based on the Christian principles of Focus on the Family author Dr. Neil Clark Warren. The connection may come as a surprise to today's mainstream users: Nothing in Warren's TV or radio ads ($50 million last year, $80 million projected this year) hints at his background. And while it is no secret, the website doesn't play it up either.[93]

In this same article, Warren told Kornblum that the site was intended for a secular audience and that he was intent to buy back three of his titles, including Finding the Love of Your Life, from FoF. Warren said, "We're trying to reach the whole world--people of all spiritual orientations, all political philosophies, all racial backgrounds, [a]nd if indeed, we have Focus on the Family on the top of our books, it is a killer. Because people do

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[91] Dale Buss, "Neil Warren; Online Passion," Brandchannel, 28 Feb. 2005, 21 Aug. 2010 <http://www.brandchannel.com/careers_profile.asp?cr_id=53>.

[92] Buss.

[93] Janet Kornblum, "eHarmony: Heart and Soul," USA Today, 19 May 2005, 21 Aug. 210, LexisNexis Academic, UNC Libraries <http://lib.unc.edu>.

recognize [FoF] as occupying a very precise political position in this society and a very precise spiritual position."[94]

The "killer" Warren refers to above is not just a killer to revenue. Clearly, the eHarmony marriage agenda jives perfectly with the FoF mission. However, Warren and eHarmony could not continue to evangelize marriage if they were seen to be evangelizing Christianity through the site. By 2005, FoF had become a political wedge that separated potential users into two groups, as Kornblum's choice of the oppositional labels "Christian" and "mainstream" may suggest. To those on the conservative religious right, the organization was the loudspeaker of social truth, working to bring the U.S. back to goodness and moral rectitude through Biblical teachings. To those on the secular left, FoF represented a dangerous attempt to limit civil rights by imposing a "Christian" agenda on the country.

In 2005, the evangelical right, embodied by FoF, was becoming a lightening rod for sensational news coverage, fueled in part by the group's outspoken advocacy for restricting access to abortion through judicial appointment and banning biomedical research related to stem cells. In addition, harsh criticisms of the George W. Bush presidency, seen as closely aligned with evangelical Christianity generally, and as well as Dobson and FoF particularly, were pushing back against the wave of popularity that had surged after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.

At the same time, the President's evangelism was a national topic of discussion, if not obsession in the Foucauldian sense, as the January 18, 2005 article in The

[94] Kornblum.

Washington Times, "Bush's Embrace of Faith Cheered" suggests.[95] Reflecting on remarks from President Bush that stated he (Mr. Bush) could not imagine serving as President without "a relationship with the Lord," FoF's Vice President of Public Policy, Thomas Minnery, stated defensively in the article, "We believe that not only the president, but everyone would be much better off for eternity with a relationship with the Lord. The president should not be criticized for stating what he believes by faith. Every American has a right to do that."[96] Because the FoF response was placed at the top of the article, giving it primacy, the more neutral response from a representative from the Jewish Anti-Defamation League (five lines in) and a rebuke from the president of American Atheists at the end of the article, seem to represent minority opinions. An additional statement by Minnery in the middle of the article–his take on the majority of the quotations--calls the U.S. a "Christian country."[97] Minnery's representation overstates the U.S.'s Christian conviction, but inclusion of this sentiment sets up an ideological binary.

The Christianity of the U.S. and its President, as well as the nation's concern over it, was both amplified and opposed by what was characterized as Muslim extremism in both the West and Middle East. Four years after the 9/11 attacks, the separation of terrorism from Islam was not fully parsed in the national conscience, and Christianity was positioned as a radical Islam's natural opponent, embodied in the Bush presidency, suggesting the so-called war on terror was actually a holy war. Secular liberals on the left

[95] James G. Lakley, "Bush's embrace of faith cheered," The Washington Times, 18 Jan. 2005, 21 Aug. 2010, LexisNexis Academic, UNC Libraries <http://www.lib.unc.edu/>.

[96] Lakley.

[97] Lakley.

objected to the seemingly Crusades-like agenda of the war in Iraq, looting natural resources and attempting to impose Western-style systems of government. Conservatives, dominated by members of the Religious Right, deployed equally fiery language, asserting that preemptive suppression of "Islamo-fascist" regimes was the only way to keep the U.S. safe. As the debates increased, so did the characterizations. Conservatives denounced those who opposed them as anti-patriotic. Liberals rejected the label the conservatives offered, implying that the conservative agenda was anti-intellectual and superstitious. The lens of religious ideology became the primary view of both Bush's administration and those who opposed it, eliding differences within parties and justifying numerous rhetorosocial constructions. The teams on the discursive battlefield became Christian vs. Muslim, represented by President Bush and Osama Bin Laden, and Atheist vs. Evangelical, represented by leftist associations like the Atheist Association of American and religious right organizations like Focus on the Family.

Political rhetorosociality, loaded with religious implications of Athetist vs. Evangelical polarization, were equally divisive concerning domestic affairs in the press, but U.S. citizens' biosociality reflected a more moderate take than that press coverage offered. While ambivalent on many religious issues under debate, such as the teaching of creationism in schools, a summer 2005 survey taken by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that many voters, especially those with college degrees or higher, felt that politically conservative Christians had overstepped in asserting their beliefs on the country.[98] Warren seemed to realize that continuing to be seen as aligning

[98] Pew Research for the People and the Press, "Religion a Strength and Weakness for Both Parties," 30 Aug. 2005, 23 Aug. 2010 <http://people-press.org/report/254/religion-a-strength-and-weakness-for-both-parties>.

with Dobson, Focus on the Family, and religious conservatives would pigeon-hole eHarmony into a service not just for Christians, but for conservative Christians.

After the L.A. Times and USA Today articles in which Warren expressed consternation at FoF's strident political agenda, FoF publicly broke ties with eHarmony. On the organization's website, FoF now writes that "it never officially endorsed" eHarmony and after the comments in those articles "as well as other concerns [. . .] that came to our attention" it seemed appropriate that the two organizations "go separate ways."[99] What those "other concerns" might be, I can only speculate. A number of conservative pundits, including radio host/blogger Kevin McCullough at the conservative online news source, The Conservative Voice (now a part of TownHall.com), found eHarmony's settlement with a gay man in New Jersey in 2008 a too-easy capitulation to the gay rights movement.[100]

The suit against eHarmony, filed in New Jersey's civil court in 2005 by Eric McKinley, resulted in the sister site Compatible Partners, as a sort of "separate-but-equal" solution. Like any such solution, it is separate, but it is not really equal. The tremendous television and radio advertisement for eHarmony does not mention Compatible Partners. However, it is mentioned at the bottom of the eHarmony entry site, along with "Christian Dating" and "eHarmony and Diversity."

Indeed, Warren has personally offered complicated opinions about gay marriage and eHarmony's role in matching same-sex couples. Despite urging the racial and

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[99] "What has Focus on the Family said about eHarmony?" Focus on the Family, 22 Aug. 2010 <http://family.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/family.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=22893&p_created=1117826279>.

[100] Kevin McCullough, "eHarmony Caves," Musclehead Revolution, 21 Nov. 2008, 22 Aug. 2010 <kevinmccullough.townhall.com/blog/page50>.

religious inclusiveness of eHarmony–"We're trying to reach the whole world–people of all spiritual orientations, all political philosophies, all racial backgrounds,"–this worldview did not extend to same sex couples.[101] Warren has also explained that research, particularly the research that informs the eHarmony matching method, has only been conducted with heterosexuals.[102] In addition, he told Salon that because the site's intent is strictly to match couples for marriage and gay marriage is illegal in almost every state, the issue seems moot. To the critical audience, these arguments read as rationalizations born out of a Christian evangelism. However, Rebecca Traister, author of the Salon article, wrote that she felt Warren was torn on the issue. She quotes him "playing out his internal debate," qualifying Biblical condemnation of homosexuality with Old Testament dictate that he who works on the Sabbath should be shot and citing the lesbian daughter of a friend who is a mother of two with her partner and "a very strong spiritual person" and a "very dear person to us."[103] Warren goes on to say,

> And when I start seeing things like that [my friend's daughter's relationship], I think we've got to start to think about that maybe this can work. . . I literally would like to at some point put my money where my mouth is and see research done on it, . . . In the meantime, [w]e have to get real civil with one another.[104]

Warren's statements to Traister and Salon show the effects of the biosocial and rhetorical realms on Warren's own conception of the world, but they also reinforce his investment not only in the marriage project, but in his belief in the science of matchmaking for marital success and satisfaction.

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[101] Kornblum.

[102] Colker.

[103] Traister.

[104] Traister.

Healthy Marriages

More difficult for the eHarmony marriage agenda than concerns of homophobia or rejection by the once-loyal evangelical community are continuing whispers of a biosocial agenda that extends beyond the overt marriage project. Business Week reported on a single man who appeared on "Good Morning America" claiming he had been rejected by eHarmony because he was not spiritual enough.[105] The Wall Street Journal also reported on eHarmony's practice of rejecting potential users in an article on ego-bruising online trends.[106] Warren responded to the rejected "Good Morning America" guest in Business Week, "say[ing] that he [Warren] took one look at the guy's body language and concluded that [the GMA guest] was depressed, which would explain why he flunked the personality quiz."[107] According to Newsweek, eHarmony rejects around 20% of those who take the personality profile without explanation, a fact that competitor sites use to make considerable hay. eHarmony's rival site, Chemistry, produced a "Rejected by eHarmony" television and print advertising campaign using the iconic white background with a softly lit attractive person discussing his/her search for love only to end with a record-scratch sound effect and a red "Rejected by eHarmony" stamp over the frame. As Newsweek points out, this campaign effectively defined eHarmony as a service

[105] Christopher Palmeri, "Dr. Warren's Lonely Heart's Club; EHarmony sheds its mom-and-pop structure, setting the stage for an IPO (Neil Clark Warren)," Business Week, 20 Feb. 2006, 8 Jul. 2010, General One File, Gale Doc. No.: A142155364, Alexandria Public Library.

I could not verify appearance of any such person on "Good Morning America."

[106] Jane Spencer, "Sorry, You're Nobody's Type; Dating Sites Now Reject Some Applicants Upfront; Flunking the Personality Test," Wall Street Journal, 30 Jul. 2003, 7 Sept. 2010, ProQuest Database. UNC Libraries <http://www.lib.unc.edu>.

[107] Palmeri.

for squares.[108] As undermining for Warren's marriage project as this might first appear, it also raises questions about the biosocial implications for those eHarmony classifies as appropriate (or not) for the service.

The notion alone that a personality quiz or as eHarmony terms it, "profile," could be, using Warren's choice of words as reported in Business Week, "flunked" raises questions about intentionality for a service that has used a tagline, "find someone who will love you for you." On a microlevel, these rejections simply mean that eHarmony has technocratically judged some registrants unfit for its service. On a biosocial macrolevel, they suggest that eHarmony has rhetorically judged these applicants unfit for marriage, taking the eHarmony (bio)social engineering agenda from one Warren has acknowledged is "paternalistic" to one that might be described as eugenic.[109]

eHarmony admits rejecting those it considers poor candidates for marriage: those who have been divorced two or more times, because research indicates that future relationships will also fail; the obstreperous, i.e., those who cannot be pleased; those who lie on the questionnaire to make themselves seem like a better catch, based on nineteen validity indices; and those who are depressed as indicated by responses to questions about energy level, because depression is linked to a number of other of other mental illnesses.[110] Strictly speaking, research does quantitatively support that marriages are more stable when the partners are not mentally ill, dishonest, and difficult to please, or

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[108] Lisa Miller, "An Algorithm for Mr. Right," Newsweek, 5 May 2008: 18.

[109] Traister.

[110] Kornblum.

Colker.

have not been married more than twice. These issues are hardly the only barriers for stable marriages, however. The National Marriage Project, a scholarly project run through Rutgers University and the University of Virginia, concludes that the primary barrier to a stable marriage is education. Those with a college education or better will be more likely to stay married while those with a high school diploma or less will be more likely to divorce.[111] In addition, the American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association both consider a face-to-face interaction standard for initial diagnosis for any emotional or personality disorder.[112]

By attempting to shape technologically and rhetorically the future face of the U.S. through marriage, eHarmony's efforts are not categorically different from those of late 19th-Century physican Havelock Ellis. Ellis, who was one of the innovators of the rest cure for neurasthenic people in general and for hysterical women in particular, served as an officer in the English Eugenics Education Society, now called the Galton Institute. Ellis presciently wrote in his work, The Task of Social Hygiene, "it seems evident, a general system, whether private or public, whereby all personal facts, biological and

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[111] The National Marriage Project, a scholarly project run through Rutgers University and the University of Virginia, concludes that the primary barrier to a stable marriage is education. Those with a college education or better will be more likely to stay married while those with a high school diploma or less will be more likely to divorce.

The National Marriage Project, "The State of Our Unions 2007," Jul. 2007, 8 Sept. 2010 <http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/SOOU2007.pdf>.

[112] David Kaplan, "Ethical Use of Technology in Counseling," CT Online, 6 Oct. 2006, 8 Sept. 2010 <http://www.counseling.org/Publications/CounselingTodayArticles.aspx?AGuid=421e99b9-ec6c-4f46-a6c4-4f8b6101275a>.

American Psychological Association, "Dr. Katherine C. Nordal on How to Find a Therapist," 10 May 2010, 8 Sept. 2010 <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2010/05/locate-a-therapist.aspx>.

mental, normal and morbid, are duly and systematically registered, must become inevitable if we are to have a real guide as to those persons who are fit, or most unfit to carry on the race."[113] As were his like-minded contemporaries, Ellis was concerned that the British race (and with it the British way of life) would disintegrate as well-born and wealthy Britons had fewer children while lesser races (Irish, Indian, African, etc.) reproduced abundantly. A primary concern of The Task of Social Hygiene is the care of physically weaker but mentally superior infants from the better-born classes.

While Warren appears concerned less with the racial dimensions of marriage, favoring instead a national civic agenda, he too is concerned with the fate of children and has posited a "real guide" for screening candidates for their fitness for marriage, and eHarmony is the technosocial mechanism through which that guide is executed. Further, while Warren does not frame his project in now unacceptable terms such as "feebleminded," Warren has told multiple news sources that eHarmony is interested in "filter[ing] out" those the service identifies as "pretty unhealthy" and expends significant money and effort on the process.[114] The filter, however expensive and time-consuming, is not perfected. The site's failure to match appropriately the collaborators who used it, often failing spectacularly, is one indication of this. (See more about this topic in the Science and Expertise, and Misrecognition sections below.) It is also worthwhile mentioning that I have taken the eHarmony personality assessment four times, twice while I was living with depression, and was accepted for registration each time. On one

[113] Henry Havelock Ellis, The Task of Social Hygiene (New York: Houghlin Mifflin, 1916), 17 May 2011 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22090/22090-h/22090-h.htm>: para 201.

[114] Kornblum.

occasion, I deliberately answered twenty questions with answers I considered to represent a rosier view of myself than was accurate and yet was still accepted. The eugenic technosociality of eHarmony is ill equipped to encounter the biosociality of women like the collaborators, perhaps suggesting not only computer engineering failure, but also a rhetorosocial one.

Marriage Machine

The genius concept behind eHarmony is the trademarked *29 Dimensions of Compatibility* (*29 dimensions)*. This technosocial compatibility system was originally outlined alphabetically by Warren in his early self-help book, Finding the Love of Your Life, which argues that a single person should discuss his/her views on a number of important issues – children and their rearing, religion, financial management–before they become seriously involved. These "family and values" concerns are one of the four main areas into which eHarmony delineates the *29 dimensions*. The others are "character and constitution," "emotional make-up," and "personality." The *29 dimensions* might also be grouped into two even larger groups, the Core Attributes, the unchanging essentials of one's being, and Vital Traits, one's current demographics.[115] In the matching process, performed through coding a user's answers on the personality questionnaire in a database, all factors are assigned equal value, weighting arguably incommensurate traits like sense of humor and family status.

Table 1 29 Dimensions of Compatibility Restated

	Expression	**Dimension**	**Area**

[115] "29 Dimensions of Compatibility." eHarmony.com, 8 Sept. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/?cmd=dimensions>.

Core Attributes	Emotional Temperament	Self Concept	Emotional make-up
		Emotional Status	Emotional make-up
		Energy: Emotional	Emotional make-up
		Obstreperousness	Emotional make-up
		Passion: Romantic	Personality
	Social Style	Character	Character and Constitution
		Kindness	Character and Constitution
		Dominance	Character and Constitution
		Sociability	Character and Constitution
		Autonomy	Character and Constitution
		Adaptability	Personality
	Cognitive Mode	Intellect	Personality
		Curiosity	Personality
		Humor	Personality
		Artistic Passion	Emotional Make-Up
	Physicality	Energy: Physical	Personality
		Passion: Sexual	Emotional Make-up
		Vitality and Security	Character and

			Constitution
		Industry	Character and Constitution
		Appearance	Character and Constitution
Vital Traits	Relationship Skills	Communication Style	Character and Constitution
		Emotion Management	Emotional Make-up
		Conflict Resolution	Character and Constitution
	Values and Beliefs	Spirituality	Family and Values
		Family Goals	Family and Values
		Traditionalism	Family and Values
		Ambition	Character and Constitution
		Altruism	Character and Constitution
	Key Experiences	Family Background	Family and Values
		Family Status	Family and Values
		Education	Character and Constitution

Despite failing to parse out the relative merits of each of the *29 dimensions*, Warren stresses finding a mate who has the same (or very close) profile as you for a happy, successful marriage.[116] eHarmony reportedly only matches users who share at least twenty-one *dimensions* in common, ensuring that the technosociality of eHarmony is "homogamous," that is pairing users who are similar, like with like.[117] In his folksy way, Dr. Warren uses two particular analogies to explain homogamy. The first uses the middle class vocabulary of finance: "Similarities are like money in the bank. Differences are like debts. It's all right to have a few debts as long as you have plenty of equity in your account. Otherwise, your marriage may be bankrupt at an early point."[118] Refuting the adage that opposites attract, he is also fond of saying, "Opposites attract and then they attack."[119] The ramifications of such a literal approach to matching (i.e., matched users actually match), besides the obvious suppression of mysogynation and mixed class relationships, are that the expectation that intimate partners should be *prêt a porter* after the technosocial beginning, that the biosocial relationship will neither differ from the technosocial match, nor act as its own mechanism of change on its members. The growth of partners together through shared biosocial experience is missing from eHarmony rhetorosociality.

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[116] Neil Clark Warren, Finding the Love of Your Life (New York: Pocket Books, 1994).
[117] In psychological parlance, "homagamous" marriages are those between partners with very similar personalities.

[118] Lopez.

[119] Warren, Fresh Air.

Palmeri.

Like much of the *science* and *research* of eHarmony, homogamy as a successful model of marriage is not considered a settled fact. Multiple long-term studies show that homogamous marriages can be more prone to conflict.[120] Not to be daunted, eHarmony is closely following ten thousand couples who had met and married through the service and hopes to connect with up to fifty thousand more. The goal of this outreach was to follow the marriages to "make sure they work in every way."[121]

The eHarmony patented method makes homogamous matches using data collected through a 436-item questionnaire using single and multiple answer radio button questions. In Section 1, General Information, users are asked to provide income bracket, age, marital status (sexuality is not queried), occupation, ethnicity, as well as the importance of income level, education, and physical attractiveness in a partner. Section 2 probes personal characteristics, including religion. Section 3 provides the user a series of statements from which to select the most accurate about him/herself, such as "I am easily discouraged" or "I love to help others." Section 4, Self Description, gives a series of forty adjectives, such as adventurous, frugal, quarrelsome, affectionate, of which the user should pick four that s/he believes a friend would use to describe him/her. Section 5, Personal Characteristics, again offers statements from which to select the most

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[120] W. Bradford Wilcox and Jeffrey Dew, "Is Love a Flimsy Foundation? Soulmate Versus Institutional Models of Marriage," Social Science Research 39.5. (2010) ScienceDirect, 8 Jul. 2010 <http://www.sciencedirect.com>.

W. Bradford Wilcox and Steven L. Nock, "What's Love Got to Do With It? Gender Ideology, Men's Emotion Work, and Women's Marital Quality," Social Forces 64.3 (1986): 1321-45, 7 Sep. 2010 <http://www.virginia.edu/sociology/peopleofsociology/wilcoxpapers/Wilcox%20Nock%20marriage.pdf>.

[121] Palmeri.

appropriate, such as "I greatly appreciate the physical beauty of the opposite sex" and "I enjoy mingling with people on social occasions." In Section 6, Emotions Over the Past Month, the user is asked to answer "rarely," "occasionally," or "almost always" to statements about the user's state of mind. Section 7, Relationship Orientation and Values, again provides statements for the user to select as representative of his/her feelings towards relationships; these primarily deal with marriage and monogamy, such as, "I am looking for a long-term relationship that will ultimately lead to marriage." In Section 8, Important Qualities, the statements become somewhat transparent; it is clearly inappropriate to select "The other person is usually to blame [in conflicts]." Section 9, About Your Personality, encourages "truth telling," such as "I always read ALL of the warning literature on side-effects before taking any medication." Section 10, Personal Interests, allows the user to click on activities she enjoys. Section 11, Living Skills, provides a list of traits, such as "remaining calm yet resilient in a crisis" or "achieving personal goals." Section 12 queries Communication style through as series of I-statements. The thirteenth and last section requests Matching Information about a user's smoking and drinking habits, as well as her desire (or lack thereof) for children.[122]

The extensive questionnaire serves several purposes. As I allude to above, it serves a function not unlike the WalMart employment applications Barbara Ehrenreich described in her portrait of women working below the poverty line, Nickel and Dimed.[123] These applications asked prospective employees about past drug use but in such a way

[122] These sections were observed when I took the personality Intake Questionnaire on 5 May 2010.

[123] Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America (New York: Holt, 2001)126 -127.

that it made it clear that recreational drug use was unacceptable for someone employed by WalMart.[124] They serve as an admonition, articulating the expectations of behavior. For WalMart, the employment application alerts prospective employees that recreational drug use, even outside of work hours, will not be tolerated. As Ehrenreich points out, applicants are already aware that drug use is illegal and that it would be ridiculous to admit to in a job application; the questions reshape the rhetorosocial realm, putting the prospective employee on notice that WalMart does not observe an employee zone of privacy in which the employee might act without consequence.

For eHarmony, many questions act in a similarly didactic fashion, telegraphing to users appropriate modes of behaviors, communication styles, and values. If the eHarmony matching criteria is not weighted, then the subtle directives within the personality questionnaire are providing "good" options and admonishingly bad ones. Questions about physical attractiveness and income are marked so that users understand that they should answer in such a fashion as to indicate that they are more interested in honesty than wealth, internal beauty than external attractiveness. Questions about communication style point out that open-minded listening is preferable to bigotry with statements such as "I try to be respectful of all opinions differing from my own." And questions about behavior affirm that it is better not to smoke or drink excessively. By choosing the "good" pro-social options, users confirm their allegiance to the rhetorosocial world eHarmony promotes.

More obvious than its tacit confirmation of expectations, the information collected in the questionnaire also serves as the data for the patented matching method.

[124] Ehrenreich 124.

The data will be read and interpreted via custom-built tools to create a user's profile. A database compares this profile each night with all the active profiles of registrants of the opposite sex. [125] Those registrants with whom the user is appropriately compatible will receive an email notifying them that they have a new "match" and will be able to access the user's profile, along with a photograph, if the user made one available. As I will discuss in the next section, users' access to their matches and the discourse available to them is governed by eHarmony's explicit and implicit expectations.

As the collaborators' reports testify, not all users remain compliant to these expectations. A brief scan of Consumeraffairs.com's consumer complaints shows that there are myriad complaints about the eHarmony site, about one filed every other day going back to 2005.[126] Some of those include unauthorized continued charging of users' credit cards after the subscription had expired, unauthorized reenrollment, and false advertising about the privacy of one's profile. But a greater number of complaints related to effectiveness of the *29 dimensions*: the inappropriateness of matches (due to their incompatibility, the complete lack of them, the fact that the user had been matched with someone who had only filled out the profile but not actually subscribed to the service), the misreading of user's personality in the profile, and the general unhelpfulness of customer service representatives to address these issues. In 2007, eHarmony started using TeafLeaf's web monitoring software to track registrant activity, after which it made

[125] Cady Metz, "Lucky in Love," PC Magazine 5 Oct. 2004: 92.

[126] "eharmony.com," ConsumerAffairs.com Accessed 20 Aug. 2010 <http://www.consumeraffairs.com/dating_services/eharmony.html>.

changes not only to the site's customer service but also to the grueling personality questionnaire.[127]

Regulation and Marriage Apprenticeship

EHarmony's technosocial engineering crept into the biosocial experience of collaborators' relationships beyond simply the screen experience. Collaborators reported feeling urged, coerced or manipulated into what I will term inappropriate rhetorical moments with their matches, creating a clash of representations. While the site organized moments that looked like they should create intimacy and relationship, creating an expectation that the matches would move on to a permanent (or nearly so) relationship, the collaborators felt that the kairos was wrong. Rather than committing to a relationship, the collaborators desired biosocial interactions to gather more information for assessing the relationship as viable and the match as "right."

When Kelsey joined eHarmony, she was unprepared for the manner in which the site would regulate her desires and expectations for any relationship. She saw the communication that took place online as simply introductory, a way to meet someone. The actual relationship building would take place off-line as she and her partner got to know each other in the biosocial light of day, without the technosocial chaperoning of Neil Clark Warren. She was surprised to find that the eHarmony experience, with its stages of "Guided Communication," had created expectations of permanency:

> I did feel like there was an intensity in meeting somebody through that process that there was a basic assumption that you are looking for not a relationship but marriage. And that was the downfall. I had to decide by the third date if I ever wanted to see this person again [and if I could marry him.] And sometimes there was this intense pressure. The few people I choose to meet in person, I felt like

[127] "Dating Service eHarmony Taps Software For Help With Relationships," InformationWeek, 15 June 2007, 8 Jul. 2010, General OneFile <http://galegroup.com>.

> there was a lot of pressure to decide quickly how I felt about them. Or to develop intense feelings. "Oh well you met me in person, there must be an intense connection!" And then the fairy tale is supposed to start happening now. Anytime I said, "wait, wait. We don't really know each other." That seemed [to upset] or put a damper for the other person. I felt like some people came in with the assumption that eHarmony was going to do all the work. "Well, I filled out the personality questionnaire and I told you what kind of person I was. Now that we have met, we can fast forward a year and half into the relationship." I don't believe in that. All it does is facilitate an introduction for two people who will likely get along. But you still have to do that work of building a foundation and having a relationship. But a lot of the men–a lot. The millions that I met. The majority of them had the assumption that we were already going to be there. Because the matching system was supposed to work. I only had a relationship with one person. It lasted nine months.

Kelsey's statement that she felt pressure to develop deep, or at least definitive feelings, online that could be furthered off-line through the eHarmony structure was echoed in other collaborators' experiences. Of the frequent criticisms of eHarmony, the most resounding was the artificial nature through which it attempted to grow a relationship between two people. Specifically, collaborators complained about the restrictive nature of the site, the inability to choose their own matches, the irrelevance of the revealing process, and the failure of the compatibility software to match them with suitable partners.

Kelsey and the other collaborators' sense of being pressured to develop definitive feelings through the mechanism of the eHarmony site is both ironic, considering the site's emphasis on appropriate pacing, and predictable. Elizabeth Abbott, author of A History of Marriage, chronicles the rise of marriage apprenticeship apparati in the 19th and 20th centuries.[128] These institutional functions and texts, such as proms and books like the twin classics, What a Young Wife Ought to Know / What a Young Husband Ought to

[128] Elizabeth Abbott, A History of Marriage (Toronto, CA: Penguin, 2010): 103.

Know, prepared young people (particularly women) for the emotional, sexual, and physical challenges of matrimony. [129] eHarmony performs a similar apprenticeship program, acting as a relationship mentor as it moderates/regulates user interaction and suggests codes of conduct through eHarmony Dating.

The mentoring function of eHarmony is intended to teach users, through on-line use, how to conceive of and conduct marital relationships, particularly as it relates to interpersonal communication. eHarmony offers only two tracks to meeting others. The first track is "Guided Communication." After completing a personality assessment, a user is assigned compatible matches as they become available. eHarmony does not disclose the maximum number a user may be assigned but collaborators estimate around ten. When a user first receives a match, she is only able to access his profile information. (Some users also include a picture.) She cannot contact him directly. A user may elect to "close" or reject the match at any time based on the information she has received. (She also may be "closed" by the match, in which event his information will no longer be accessible to her.) Based on this limited information, the design intention is that users will keep many matches "open" to move through the four stages of Guided Communication:

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[129] Both of these texts are from the perfectly titled Pure Books on Avoided Subjects series.

Emma F. A. Drake, What a Young Wife Ought to Know (Philadelphia: Vir, 1902) Google Books, 19 Sep. 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=D6cCAAAAYAAJ&printsec=copyright#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Sylvanus Stall, What a Young Husband Ought to Know (Toronto, CA: Ryerson, 1899) Google Books, 19 Sep. 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=D6cCAAAAYAAJ&printsec=copyright#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Stage One: Read Your Match's "About Me" Information
Stage Two: Send 1st Questions
Stage Three: Exchange 10 "Must Haves" and 10 "Can't Stands"
Stage Four: Send 2nd Questions[130]

During the first three stages, the site provides stock forms for matches to use in the exchange of information. The fourth stage allows users to write their own questions but provides stock questions as suggestions. When, and if, matches navigate to the end of the four stages of communication, they arrive at the fifth stage, open communication. In this stage they may communicate anonymously through the site's email service and exchange personality profiles and photos.

In the second track for getting to know others, "FastTrack," users and their matches skip "Guided Communication" and go straight to open communication. Both matches must agree to proceed on this course. Because it bypasses the eHarmony mechanism, it is coded as slightly overzealous. Consider this tip on eHarmony's Advice page in an article entitled, "Online Dating 101: Guided Communication":

> By clicking on the FastTrack button your match will receive an offer to meet you in Open Communication. This offer and your first Open message are sent immediately. If the match accepts, you are on your way. If your match prefers to stay with the paced, guided communication, you will receive a reply letting you know and you can continue with the guided process.
> Remember, though, that not every match will be as eager as you are, but that doesn't mean that they aren't interested or wouldn't be great to get to know and meet in person. . . But who knows, if you want to FastTrack and your match responds favorably, great! But if not, don't close your match out immediately on the basis of this decision alone. Get to know them. That's what the Guided Communications process is for.[131]

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[130] "What are the four stages of communication?" eHarmony, 7 Jun. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/FAQ/>.

[131] eHarmony staff, "Dating Online 101: Guided Communication," eHarmony, 7 Jun. 2010 <http://advice.eharmony.com/article/online-dating-101-guided-communication.html#ixzz0qCtZNv3G>.

Using explicit directions like these and the implicit directives of site design, eHarmony normalizes its process by marginalizing the desires of those who might want to step outside it, again stressing the importance of comfort and guidance in the hands of experts. In this way, eHarmony manufactures relationships between users, appropriately "paced" and "guided" by expert Dr. Neil Clark Warren. This scientific guidance is meant to standardize communications, helping users to reveal honestly themselves in a manner that will build healthy intimate relationships, according to research. However, the collaborators, as represented in Kelsey's comment above, often found the technological intervention performed precisely the opposite function. Rather than creating real intimacy and sharing meaningful confidences, the technology created an artificial relationship and a sense of obligation. Elle explains more about her take on the intervention of the technology into the process of meeting potential partners.

> I also used eHarmony. I hated it. . . [T]here was this horrific personality thing you have to do. Which is great. In theory. I, being who I am, took it very seriously. It is who I am. Earnest. I am investing in it, financially and personally. In the amount of time I am putting into it. So I put a lot into it, time and care. But goodness gracious. Three quarters of the way through, I was like, is this thing ever going to be over? It was painfully long. I think I spent three and half hours on it. Or four hours. Even at that point, I was annoyed. Nonetheless, I had dedicated this much time to it, I might as well see it through. When I was doing this, I wasn't doing Match, I never overlapped. As I very quickly found out, I never got to see who was out there, I only got to see who was compatible on my quote 29 points of compatibility on Dr. Clark Warren or whatever-his-name-is talks about. And I think they recommend setting it on a fairly large geographic setting because based on your region you may not have as many people. So I think I had set mine on 250 miles. So I was interacting with people from Charlotte and Richmond and one person from Winston-Salem but basically, eHarmony's whole point is that they want you to establish an emotional connection that is not predicated on what do they do, what do they look like, which in theory is a great premise. However, I think it can lend itself to a little bit of bait and switch. You get sort of drawn in, and as some of these other layers emerge, you start to realize

> as that for other reasons this person may not be a fit, but I remember in one case I'd had about two weeks of interaction with somebody and it was only about a week and a half in. You had a choice about whether your photo was available at the beginning or at the end. I always had my photo at the beginning. . . When he [finally] sent me his photo, I was like, hmm. I am not sure I am attracted to him. I was intellectually--I was having a real issue was this. I know that we are intellectually compatible. I know we are connecting on a number of issues through email. And on the phone we were having these really great conversations. But I just couldn't get over the very gut visceral reaction of "I don't want to see you naked." But I was like, whatever. Be open-minded. People in person are different than people in photographs. I went to meet him because he was doing business in the Triangle, because he was from Charlotte. So I felt less guilty that he had driven all that way to see me but under the auspices of business. We met at [a local restaurant] and I was walking up to meet him. And from about 20 feet away I was like "oh no that is him. Oh no, that's him." We had a nice dinner. I was my usual engaging, pleasant self. He said, he had a wonderful time and [asked] could we do it again. I smiled and gave him the obligatory hug. "Thank you for dinner." I had to follow up later and say no. And so after that experience, the long distance, all the layers, that they had canned questions for you. There was nothing organic about it. There was nothing like let's just see where it goes. The questions were like, "If you could do skydiving or gardening, which would you choose?" Like, you could gauge someone's personality by which they choose from these stock questions. I realized for me that was not a good medium.

eHarmony's technosocial mentoring for biosocial relationships is evident in Elle's reaction. She understood from the site (and no doubt other marriage apprenticeship apparati) that she should value qualities in potential matches that had to do with "emotional connection," specifically not those that related to "what they look like, what they do." Elle shared this anecdote because she felt let down by the date but also the experience of eHarmony. She had invested "personally, financially" and had been "[e]arnest" only to find that the online experience could not withstand the harsh sunshine of face-to-face meeting. For Elle, this had to do with physical attractiveness and personal chemistry, but she goes further in her critique. She questions the artificial process of matching through "long distance, layers" and "canned questions." She flatly states there is nothing "organic" about the service eHarmony provides, the compatibility matching

privileges emotional or intellectual factors over sexual attraction. Elle sees this as a "bait and switch," an exercise designed to "draw [the user] in" to a situation, creating a commitment that might not be a "fit." Further, she implicitly rejects the notion that a remote database and a group of scientists can better predict with whom she might have a happy and fulfilling long-term relationship.

Rather than fostering intimacy and proving a road to a successful relationship, eHarmony's regulatory features that technosocially matched the collaborators to other users impeded creating a biosocial relationship. Not only did the site craft disjunctive expectations among users and limit their rhetorical options, its interventions attempted to impose a rheterosociality that proved untenable.

Science and Expertise

The rhetoric eHarmony deploys both in its advertising and on the site combines science with romance to quantify and rationalize the idea of "compatible partner" with "preordained soul mate." It calls these technosocial machinations "scientific matching" through the *29 dimensions*, distancing itself from the amateur matchmaking of interfering busybodys or well-meant blind dates. Its "expert guidance" promises not only a relationship, but a better, "healthier, more successful" one with "the love of your life."[132]

To all but one of the collaborators, eHarmony's claims that science is better able to choose a partner for them were suspect. But if the claims seemed overblown, to the collaborators who used the service, they did seem intriguing. (More accurately, the other people who signed up for the service seemed intriguing and desirable.) Whether other users felt the same ambivalence, I am unprepared to say. However, eHarmony's entrance

[132] "The Science of Love," eHarmony, 6 Jun. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/why>.

onto the online dating scene fundamentally altered the rhetoric of online dating. The logic justifying online dating shifted from simply providing technosocial access to that of providing both a corrective intervention and a biosocial verification of the matching, creating a pseudo-scholarly explanation/expectation for the partnership that represented it as a pre-determined success.

The success of eHarmony's use of scientific/expert rhetoric has invited imitation in the online dating marketplace. Match.com, the senior market shareholder, introduced MindFindBind™ with Dr. Phil McGraw, well-known clinical psychologist who appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" before hosting his own day-time talk show, "The Dr. Phil Show."[133] This program, available as a premium addition to the standard Match subscription, was intended to educate singles about healthy relationships through self-reflection (mind), goal-oriented dating (find), and relationship maintenance (bind).[134] Failing to compete adequately with eHarmony, it was eventually discontinued. (Match.com continues to offer Chemistry, a compatibility matching service independent of MindFindBind™.) Many dating sites purport to use some sort of compatibility matching, like True and eHarmony. Chemistry, a Match.com subsidiary, emphasizes biological anthropologist Helen Fisher's role in crafting a long-view of human

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[133] Dr. Phil makes no pretensions of academic credentials beyond his 1979 Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of North Texas (formerly North Texas State University) but is a New York Times best-selling author of a number of works related to dating including

Phil McGraw, Love Smart: Find the One You Want – Fix the One You've Got (New York: Free Press, 2006).

[134] "Match.com launches MindFindBind™ with Dr. Phil," PRNewswire, 12 Jan. 2006, 5 Aug. 2010 <http://www.redorbit.com/news/technology/355009/matchcom_launches_mindfindbindtm_with_dr_phil/index.html>.

relationships (including the sexual components of attraction) in their personality test-based matching.[135] Dr. Fisher's numerous books are displayed on the site (linked to Amazon). Most prominently among these is Why Him? Why Her?: Finding Real Love By Understanding Your Personality Type, the 2009 release that popularized her descriptive earlier findings into a proscriptive self-help book along with a blog (dormant since February 2010) and comment section for discussion of the questions her research poses, such as "What leads people to cheat?"[136] Missing from the site is Dr. Fisher's university affliation (Visiting Research Professor at Rutgers University since 2003); her Rutgers' faculty page fails to mention her work with Chemistry as well.[137]

Dr. Fisher is an unusual scientific advisor; most are psychologists or sociologists. Dr. Pepper Schwartz, who is shown in her academic regalia on the entry page of PerfectMatch.com, is described as "chief relationship expert" as well as "tenured Professor of Sociology at the University of Washington" who "received her doctorate at Yale University."[138] In addition to Dr. Schwartz's extended credentials, Perfectmatch includes "Ph.D. Endorsements" for both Dr. Schwartz and the Duet ® system she has co-developed. The button link to the list of endorsements is shaped like a diploma seal and

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[135] Chemistry, 5 Aug. 2010 <http://www.chemistry.com>.

[136] Helen Fisher, "The Great Mate Debate," 5 Aug. 2010 <http://chemistrygreatdebate.spaces.live.com/>.

[137] "Helen Fisher," Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, 5 Aug. 2010 <http://anthro.rutgers.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=177&Itemid=136>.

[138] "About Dr. Pepper Schwartz," Perfectmatch, 6 Aug. 2010 <http://www.perfectmatch.com/hp/pepper/pepper14.asp?v=0&rt=/index.asp>.

golden. The subsequent pop-up of endorsements reads like book jacket blurbs from Dr. Schwartz's peers. Here is a representative endorsement:

> Dr. Schwartz has created a sophisticated, personality assessment profile that will not only help people learn about themselves, but assist them in identifying what traits might be best in a mate. This leading-edge test has the uncanny ability to help each person articulate who they really are and what they need from a relationship.
>
> **- Barbara Risman, Ph.D**
> Professor, North Carolina State University, Raleigh-Durham
> Past President, Sociologists for Women in Society
> Past Chair, Contemporary Council on the Family
> Author, Gender Vertigo[139]

What is missing here might again be telling. Dr. Pepper Schwartz, in addition to being a prominent sociologist and relationship expert, is also a feminist with name recognition. Her 1994 landmark work, Peer Marriage, part sociological ethnography, part self-help guide, espoused marriage without a dominant–submissive dynamic.[140] She has also written and co-written a number of works designed to help parents discuss difficult developmental issues with children, including body-positive sexuality.[141]

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[139] "Endorsements," Perfectmatch, 5 Aug. 2010 <http://www.perfectmatch.com/index.asp?v=0>.

[140] Pepper Schwartz, Peer Marriage: How Love Between Equals Really Works (New York: Free Press, 1994).

[141] See titles such as

Pepper Schwartz and Dominic Cappello, Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children About Sex and Character (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

and the game

Pepper Schwartz, 201 Questions to Ask Your Kids/201 Questions to Ask Your Parents (New York: Avon Book, 2000).

Online dating sites now appear to be in competition for the *science* and *expertise* mantel that eHarmony has long shouldered to verify the compatibility methodology. In a 2005 interview for "Love Machines" for AlterNet.org, Dr. James Houran, chief psychologist of True, contrasted the practices of his own company, which provides criminal background and marital status checks on all members as well as ninety-nine relationship factors in a independently audited statistical model, with those of eHarmony: "I have seen no evidence they even conducted any study that forms the basis of their test. . . If you're touting that you are doing something scientific[,] you inform the academic community."[142]

Houran's characterization of eHarmony's empty science is true in the letter, if not in spirit. eHarmony runs the eHarmony Labs, "a site dedicated to the science and exploration of relationships."[143] The commercial lab was launched in 2007 to conduct relationship dynamics and marital satisfaction research, stating that some of the findings will be proprietary while others will be published for academic peer review.[144] The staff of researchers includes Gian C. Gozaga, Ph.D. (Personality–Social Psychology), Steven R. Carter, Ph.D. (Psychology), Patrick Giordani, Ph.D. (Personality–Social Psychology), Vaclev Petricek, Ph.D. (Computer Science), Erina Lee, Ph.D. (Social Psychology), Amy Strachman, Ph.D. (Social Psychology), Heather Setrekian, M.A. (Clinical Psychology), Kolby Kirk (no degree listed), Jaqueline A. Martin, B.A. (Political Science), and Erica

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[142] Jennifer Hahn, "Love Machines," AlterNet, 25 Feb. 2005, 5 Aug. 2010 <http://disqus.com/forums/alternet/love_machines_alternet/trackback/>.

[143] "EHarmony Labs," eHarmony, 6 Aug. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/labs/>.

[144] "More Info," eHarmony, 6 Aug. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/labs/about/>.

Scheer, B.A. (Media Effects and Telecommunications).[145] Research is also overseen by an advisory board of highly credentialed academics including Thomas Bradbury, Ph.D. founder of the UCLA Marriage Lab; John T. Caccioppo, Ph.D., President of the Society of Psychological Science; Bruce E. McEwen, Ph.D., head of Hatch Laboratory of Neuroendricinology at Rockefeller University; and Linda Waite, Ph.D., co-director of Sloan Center on Parents, Children, and Work at the University of Chicago. J. Galen Buckwalter, Ph.D., former chief scientist at eHarmony, also serves on the board.[146] Before joining eHarmony, Buckwalter published extensively on brain functioning, specifically the effects of hormones on cognition. My research shows he was actively publishing in this area, although not in a way immediately relevant to the eHarmony Lab's mission, until 2007.[147]

My scan of PsychInfo, an electronic database devoted to social science research, reveals that the active members of the eHarmony Labs do seem to be contributing scholarly knowledge to the academic community both on issues relevant to the eHarmony Lab's mission and to a wider of variety of subjects. eHarmony Labs staff members have recently published in scholarly publications such as Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies and the Journal of Adolescent Health, as well as Personal Relationships, Evolution and Human Behavior, Journal of Sex Research, and Cognition and Emotion.

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[145] "Research Team," eHarmony, 6 Aug. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/labs/category/research-team/>.

[146] Research Team.

[147] Thomas D. Parsons, Todd Bowerly, J. Galen Buckwalter, and Albert A.Rizzo, "A Controlled Clinical Comparison of Attention Performance in Children with ADHD in a Virtual Reality Classroom Compared to Standard Neuropsychological Methods," Child Neuropsychology 13.4. (2007): 363-381.

Despite a recent press release from eHarmony announcing the findings of a study using registrant data,[148] the majority of the research in the studies listed above were attained using the resources associated with the University of California at Los Angeles, not eHarmony Labs. eHarmony Labs does invite participation in its studies through its Los Angeles research facility.[149] eHarmony registrants are automatically enrolled in eHarmony Labs' research as outlined in the privacy policy as well.[150] What constitutes research collection becomes hazy, however, taken in the context of the eHarmony Labs' website's relationship to both the eHarmony home site and eHarmony Advice. On the day I visited, the eHarmony Lab site listed three current studies, similar in style to an online quiz found at Yahoo! or Facebook. The top was titled "Life Balance Meter," the middle "What makes Good Sex?," and the lower, "Procrastination Quiz."[151] Taking each of these, I found that that the "Life Balance Meter" and the "Procrastination Quiz" both responded to the answers I gave by providing me with a "reading," again in the style of an internet quiz. (For your information, I am pretty responsible, but I do not have a very good work/life balance.) At the end of each of these quizzes/surveys I was directed to the eHarmony Advice website. When selecting the "What makes Good Sex?" survey, I was first offered a warning about explicit content and then taken to a scanned informed

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[148] "Getting from 'Love Buzz' to 'Happily Ever After': eHarmony Studies Reveal Many Singles Don't Consider Long-Term Relationship Realities When Choosing a Partner," eHarmony, 9 Feb. 2010, 6 Aug. 2010 < http://www.eharmony.com/press/release/27>.

[149] See "Marriage Study–Earn $300 or More," eHarmony, 6 Aug. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/labs/category/la-studies/>.

[150] "Privacy Policy," eHarmony 6 Aug. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/privacy/statement#howcollectuse>.

[151] "Current Studies," eHarmony, 6 Aug. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/labs/category/current-studies/>.

consent authorization page, the principle investigator on which was listed as J. Galen Buckwalter. What followed was what seemed to be an academic online investigation into romantic closeness and sexual satisfaction until I received yet another "reading" of my answers.

What part of this particular survey was simply for my edification and what part of it constituted unbiased research? This question becomes even harder to address when seen in the larger context of the eHarmony Labs' site. Propaganda for the dating site seems to flow seamlessly into "scientific" materials. I put "scientific" in quotation here because, although the materials are not meant to be scholarly, some of them are meant to be instructive, and they are aimed at an educated, middle-class audience. In addition to articles on "hot topics" contributed by research team members, advisory board members, and guest contributors, the site features a blog that summarizes emerging research on relationship issues. The blog includes a sidebar with links to other relationship, marriage, and family research blogs as well as "University links" pointing to individual researchers. Topping the page, however, are colorful buttons advertising eHarmony Singles and eHarmony Marriage, again juxtaposing the tension between research and the for-profit nature of eHarmony Labs. Predictably, the "Videos" and "Press" sections are strictly geared towards promoting the efficacy of the site. Specifically, the release of findings by the research team using registrant responses to the eHarmony personality questionnaire that those who have never been married overestimate the importance of immediate attraction, rather than those shared values that will help sustain a relationship.[152] These results, explained using women as examples, saying only that "findings were

[152] Love Buzz.

directionally similar for men," seem to justify the existence of a service like eHarmony that controls how and to whom users are matched, making the enterprise suspect in its objectivity.[153]

Dr. James Houran of True, as mentioned above, finds the methodology of eHarmony and other online sites dubious. He raised these concerns in a 2004 article for The North American Journal of Psychology with True co-authors Jason P. Rentfrowand Karin H. Bruckner as well as a statistical auditor--who provided testing of True's model– Rense Lange. The authors call for public scrutiny of the psychometrics of compatibility tests. Unlike other dating sites that literally or metaphorically acknowledge that love matching has an unquantifiable element, Fisher of Chemistry calls it "magic."[154] Houran attacks Match.com, Perfectmatch.com, and eHarmony on their grandiose claims of successful matchmaking through compatibility testing, instead asserting that True has a proven scientific method. Dismissing Match.com and Perfectmatch.com for presenting virtually no hard data, Houran examines data presented by eHarmony representatives at the 2004 American Psychological Association convention as well as information supplied in the application for eHarmony's patent. Both of these rely on reported satisfaction in married couples (some who had been matched through the eHarmony *29 dimensions*) to suggest a strict homogamy approach to matching. Houran et al. point out, as I do above, that this is contentious territory. They condemn the research as a priori but end with a conclusion not far from Neil Clark Warren's own ideological position:

> The online dating industry is clearly growing in importance as an industry, not only because it is becoming a popular and efficient way for busy singles to find

[153] Love Buzz.

[154] Fisher, Great Mate.

> love-interests, but because of the rich and valuable information that it provides for potentially reducing the rising divorce rate and other types of unsuccessful relationships. Therefore, it is crucial that online matching services purporting to use empirically validated matching systems actually do validate their systems and release their findings to the public. Doing so will allow the public to make more informed decisions about which services to register for, and facilitate the development of increasingly error-free, higher quality matching systems.[155]

Houran et al's point that users have a right to know about the efficacy of scientific matching systems is well met, if ironically, through his making it. His justification for the need for disclosure of information is ultimately "reducing the rising divorce rate and other types of unsuccessful relationships." Put another way, Houran, like Warren, sees online dating sites as providing a technosocial solution for a social ill, divorce, rather than simply an opportunity to introduce single people to one another from which moment the individuals might determine the outcome. Although the various sites – and their champions – disagree about the efficacy of their mechanisms, they share a believe that the technosocial means can address what they see as a biosocial problem.[156]

The Fairytale Romance of Finding a "Soul Mate"

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[155] James Houran, Renses Lange, P. Jason Rentfrow, and Karin H. Bruckner, "Do Online Matchmaking Tests Work? An Assessment of Preliminary Evidence for a Publicized 'Predicative Model of Marital Success," North American Journal of Psychology 6.3 (2004): 521.

[156] The disempowerment of users through concealed information is the main thrust of Stephanie Helen Blake's dissertation which found, "increasing corporate conglomeration, both online and offline, and decreasing user knowledge of corporate structures and policies" created unequal power structures and reinforced traditional gender roles. While I agree with Blake's assessment, I would extend it to include along with users' decreasing agency in online dating the simultaneous rise of (bio/techno)socially engineered projects cloaked in the language of expertise.

Stephanie Helen Blake, "A Virtual Triangle: Mainstream Online Dating Sites, the Companies that Own Them and Women Subscribers," diss., U of Minnesota, 2007, 180.

To make the marriage project more appealing, eHarmony attempts to neutralize the clinical nature of its technosociality by harnessing the supernatural language of fairytale monogamy. The expert-driven scientific verbage of mate selection is coupled, in seeming paradox, with the romantic rhetoric of the soul mate. This language stresses finding the person with whom one is destined to spend his/her life, inviting the testimonies or "success stories" of users who have married. In eHarmony's advertising campaigns, the smiling, grandfatherly Neil Clark Warren is shot in a slight up angle against a white background while Natalie Cole's 1975 uplifting ballad, "This Will Be (An Everlasting Love)" plays in the background. Next, real couples appear together or separately to discuss their relationship and what they feel for one another. Absent are double entrendres and ironic cautions seen in other dating site ads. This presentation is completely earnest. Rather than tempering what might be considered an overly clinical approach to romantic love set forth by the emphasis on research-driven matching, the advertisements naturalize the process as predestination. Warren is the benevolent and omniscient god of marriage, bringing together singles pre-ordained for one another, or in the language of the advertisements, "soul mates."

In an advertisement with the real-life couple Lee and Anne Marie that originally aired in the U.S. and now airs only in Canada, Lee props ups the idea of preordination by stating that the couple was meant to be together. Against a video montage of the attractive young couple celebrating each other's strikes in a retro-cool bowling alley and running arm in arm down a charming brick street at twilight, Lee's voice states that his feelings upon meeting Anne Marie were that they had always known one another: "We

knew each other, we just hadn't seen each other."[157] The long and wide angle shots give the sense that the couple is separated from the viewer and as such even closer together. The tone of the commercial is romantic and intimate; the soft lighting makes the couple's faces radiate love and the background piano and wordless vocal harmonizing evoke the feeling of a wedding.

Through this powerful deployment of Burkean identification coupled with technosocial interactivity, eHarmony users (current and prospective) can write themselves into the epic romance.[158] Using the technique of sharing users' stories, visitors to the site can click on categories of user love narratives including "Nearly Gave Up," "50+," "eHarmony Babies," and "Multiple Successes in the Family."[159] In addition, prospective users may watch wedding footage and a marine in his dress whites propose on one knee to his girlfriend while her family looks on in the background, all submitted by happy former registrants.[160] Both implicitly and explicitly, these videos and written testimonials echo the same necessary fallacies asserted in the advertisements, "I found my soul mate." The logic of this rhetoric emphasizes the *finding* as a miraculous act, rather than one engineered through the trademarked method and technologies created by eHarmony the corporation. The *finding* is less a process of searching out from the wilderness than a revealing from a limited selection of those the corporation and its

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[157] "Anne Marie and Lee," eHarmony, 1 Sep. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/success/tv/annemarie-lee>.

[158] Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1962): 20 – 27.

[159] "Success Stories," eharmony, 15 June 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/success>.

[160] Success Stories.

effective advertising campaign made available. Further, the *soul mate*, the twin in homogamous monogamy, reinforces the notion that there is only one partner for each person, thereby building up the notion that the meeting was a preordained certainty, rather than the work of very human or technosocial forces. This language, while naturalizing the compatibility matching processes, also reinforces it.

If the collaborators were largely not drawn to eHarmony because of the patented *29 dimensions* matching nor by the conceit of homogamy, they were made curious by the advertising campaign's promise of finding a partner so naturally suited he or she is meant to be with you. The eHarmony YouTube channel videos of user-submitted success stories acknowledge this contradiction, playing with the idea that eHarmony's compatibility matching actually does fate's work. In a quick-edit conglomeration of web cam videos, user couples struggle to remember what it is about eHarmony that makes it successful. They call it "the magic" and "parallels of the universe" or "matching points." How many are those? Is it 27? 24? 36? The couples giggle and goof at both their ignorance and the scientific nature of the matching. The punch line of the ad dubbed "29 Magic Dimensions" is, of course, that although these couples may not be able to remember the patented *29 dimensions*, they know the method works.[161] On the same topic, but using a different emotional vocabulary, the ad "So Right" features a couple speaking into a web cam. The woman, Denne, wonders what it was that the matching method saw in her and saw in her partner to "know" they were "perfect for each other," but it was "so right." She is overcome with emotion, saying, "it is hard to put into words," turning into her partner's shoulder. He wraps his arms around her and smiles as the voice-over says,

[161] "eHarmony Ad: 29 Magic Dimensions," eHarmony channel, YouTube, 16 Feb. 2010, 3 Sep. 2010 < http://www.youtube.com/user/eHarmony#p/u/17/z15gVnZykUg>.

"Find the love of your life. Try eHarmony and review your matches for free."[162] By acknowledging the 29 Dimensions of Compatibility as too complex for the couples for whom they have worked, the marketing reaffirms Warren as god-like figure who arranges biosocial life as it should be and eHarmony as the technosocial instrument of destiny.

Even those among the collaborators who felt skeptical of the one pre-ordained love idea or considered themselves "unromantic" wanted intimacy and closeness with a romantic partner and were drawn to eHarmony because, as I address in the Cache section below, the site seemed to cater to those ideals. Although they did not expressly voice this, I believe some of the collaborators, perhaps not all, felt eHarmony exploited their desire for emotional connection simply to railroad them into financial and relational obligations. Further, the collaborators' frustration with eHarmony--their feelings that it not only did not work but imposed labels and relationships on them--is intimately linked to the site's representation of itself as a premium service.

eHarmony's Cache of "Seriousness" and "Integrity"

Unlike sites such as Match.com that cultivate a notion of social, recreational dating through advertising slogans like, "It is free to look," eHarmony represents itself as a creator of healthy relationships, particularly marriages.[163] In technosocially converting singles into biosocial marrieds, eHarmony telescopes/collapses the intent to join the site with the intent to find a marriage partner. In the techno/rhetorosocial universe of eHarmony, marriage is (and should be) the ultimate goal and "compatibility," that is the

[162] "eHarmony.com Ad: So Right," eHarmony channel, YouTube, 16 Feb. 2010, 3 Sep. 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/user/eHarmony#p/u/16/JEkE3j8tR4I>.

[163] "Entry Page," Match, 11 Aug. 2010 <http://www.match.com>.

ability to stay married, eclipses other values such as passion and, in fact, love, that it codes as superficial.

Collaborators, both those who had used eHarmony and those who had not, agreed that the design of eHarmony was to secure a permanent heterosexual relationship in an efficient matter. Sophia described a spectrum of sites based on intent. At one end of the hierarchy Sophia described, the end devoted to "husband hunting," is eHarmony, the most marriage oriented. At the other end: Craigslist, the site most devoted to "casual encounters." Sophia stated that everyone she knew who used eHarmony had wanted to get married and joined the site with that express purpose. Further, they had been successful in that goal in a year or less. On these grounds, Sophia rejected eHarmony. Dafina offered a similar take on the purpose and intent of each service, declining to use "a more serious" site such as eHarmony until she was in a more stable place in her career and her feelings over her recent break-up were resolved. Kelsey, who did not ultimately find eHarmony a positive experience, describes her selection of eHarmony this way:

> I was leery of doing something like Craigslist just because it had this reputation of being all about sex and I was looking for more of a relationship. And eHarmony had more of a reputation of being more about relationship although I kind of discovered that it was more about marriage. And I wasn't quite looking for that.

Kelsey understood that a serious relationship with a person she was compatible with did not have to lead to marriage. As I understand her intentions, what she was seeking by "more of a relationship" was exclusivity, intimacy, and companionship. Marriage was not completely off the table for Kelsey, but she wanted the relationship to grow into that stage without a preconceived expectation. Instead, she felt hustled to the altar.

eHarmony's marketing packages the service's "marriage mechanism" as a premium and a mark of quality. eHarmony is the most expensive the all of the online

dating sites, costing around $60 per month when purchased month-by-month (compared with about $35 when purchased month-by-month for Match.com).[164] On its web site, the service again links quality with permanent relationships, explaining this high cost as "reflect[ing] the ability to find high-quality matches who are interested in long-term relationships." The site goes on to justify this expense as a cost-saving measure, emphasizing the efficiency of "getting someone else to find Mr. Right for you," as one half of the television couples state: "In the long-run, the eHarmony subscription price costs less than going out on dates with people who are not compatible with you."[165]

One television advertisement featuring married couples who connected through the site describes the service using the language "integrity," "honesty," and "authentic."[166] Another describes the experience of using eHarmony as "graduating," implying that other sites were simply infantile playgrounds for those too immature to begin the important exercise of finding a spouse.[167]

The premium service rhetoric proved attractive to some collaborators, although not for the intended reasons. Suzanne joined eHarmony hoping that the men she would meet would be of a higher quality, not only because they were willing (and able) to

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[164] "Gift of Love," eHarmony, 7 Aug. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/subscription/giftplans>.

"Subscribe," eHarmony, 11 Sep. 2010 <http://www.match.com/subscribe/subscribe.aspx?lid=0>.

[165] "Why does eHarmony have a premium price?" eHarmony, 11 Aug. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/about/faq>.

[166] "Why eHarmony is Different," eHarmony channel, YouTube, 1 Mar. 2009, 11 Aug. 2010 < http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ftIwh5v2u4>.

[167] "Graduate to eHarmony," eHarmony channel, YouTube, 16 Jul. 2009, 11 Aug. 2010 < http://www.youtube.com/user/EHarmony#p/u/27/wME7zNnn_UI>.

devote the financial resources to pay the high subscription price, but also because they would have the intellectual and emotional stamina to wade through the arduous personality test. Further, she initially put some stock in the idea that Dr. Warren's *29 dimensions* would make her work of assessing potential dates easier.

> [T]he thing that attracted me to [eHarmony] was that you had to pay a little bit more money and go through this long psychological profile and it is Dr. so and so, said "I have the matching [formula]." So I thought these people might be a little bit more selective and . . . really put the information about themselves. So immediately I felt like, I knew that I didn't want to meet [men] who were not intellectually my equal. I thought, this might sift out some of the dreck that is there.

Like Kelsey, Suzanne found her experience with eHarmony disappointing. All the contributors who used eHarmony–save for Chrissie whose experiences are described in detail below–found the site's marketing and delivered service divergent. One collaborator, who preferred not to be identified when discussing eHarmony, found her time using eHarmony a profoundly embarrassing experience that eroded her confidence in dating. She described the service as "a huge rip-off" and her matches, "complete losers . . . [R]ude." She described feeling offended that the men who were matched with her were supposedly similar to her. This collaborator's experience was markedly more negative than the three other collaborators', but the general opinion toward eHarmony during my research was low. Of the twelve collaborators, ten had advised friends not to use it. This word-of-mouth campaign sprang primarily from collaborators who had warned friends away from the site's push towards marriage and from the rhetorosocial failings this dissertation will call "misrecognition," the phenomena the unnamed collaborator described above and I will discuss in detail below.

Misrecognition

For the heterosexual collaborators, eHarmony seemed to get it all wrong. The men they were matched with never seemed to deliver on the much-hyped promise of compatibility. The collaborators, as represented by Kelsey's statement below, felt that the personality questionnaire failed to take adequately their measure. It never grasped their nuances or valued their priorities.

> No, I don't think it worked. Not for me. Just because I am complicated. More complicated that a 300 question test. I don't well on personality tests. I tend to throw them. But I don't think the problem is the personality test. I think that people are complicated. Yeah, I don't think I probably would have dated this guy if I hadn't been introduced the way we had. And it is hard to say. One of the things that really bothered me is that I kept waiting for him to live up to his profile and it not like [pause]--And I didn't have that realization until pretty far along. He claimed to be--and I loved his profile and he is a wonderful guy–he really is, but he claimed to be really thoughtful and attentive about the other person. And would wax on about, "if I know this matters to her, she has a favorite brand of chocolate, I will drive all over the city to find it. And I like to plan dates. I love planning dates. I am huge gourmet cook. I love cooking dinners." I met [him] and he is very thoughtful and very loving. But in the 9 months we were together, he planned two dates. He surprised me with one gift, the week we started dating. This guy is not a romantic. No, no, no. This guy is [a] "let you do all the work" kind of guy who would like to be a romantic. I think that is really his personality. I think it was the difference between who he was and who he would like to be. He genuinely questioned the relationship all along. He was really – One of the reasons I think we had the relationship was because he was into let's take it slow. Let's build it, let's get to know each other as people, let's not rest on assuming this will work because we got matched by eHarmony. So I trusted him a lot more because he was that way. Also, I thought he was a great guy and fun to talk to and all of that. But, it got to a point where I was like, there are things that I am needing that you are not providing. And I realized that I was willing to wait for them because he, even in his manner and sense of self, he seemed to be promising those things. He articulated them in his profile but didn't ever do them.

Like Kelsey, Suzanne was also sorely disappointed in the results of eHarmony, calling Dr. Neil Clark Warren's method of compatibility matching "hocus pocus" because she felt it did not adequately reflect who she was. She was initially attracted to the site because of the arduous sign-up process and premium membership rate, hoping these

would translate into a better experience in which she wouldn't need to waste time weeding out matches she was not interested in meeting. Ultimately, however, she found eHarmony intruded on her search in a way that retarded, rather than advanced it. Especially frustrating to Suzanne was eHarmony's perpetuation of the rhetorosocial notion of age appropriateness for dating men and women, matching women to men who are 70% to 110% of their age. For Suzanne, a very active former dancer and high school language teacher in her late fifties, this meant she was matched with men who could not match her zest for life.

> [T]he problem with eHarmony is that they make the decision about who it is you are going to meet. So you don't even get to look through and think, that is an interesting or cool person. And I found that they sent me the least interesting and boring people. I read my own profile and was like, what is it in there that would lead them to send me people like this? And they were sending me a lot of men like 70 years old. So if I was 57 or 58 and they probably thought that I was just material for much older men. Meanwhile, I had just come off of a 5-year relationship with a man who was 2 years younger than myself. If he didn't have a problem that I was older, what is wrong with these men? Don't [these men] understand they aren't going to have anything in common with these women? Even the guy who was five years older it was a stretch because we were of different decades and different backgrounds.

For Kelsey, Elle, and Suzanne, eHarmony failed to "see" them as they were, technosocially representing them in ways that eschewed their biosocial selves, as expressed in their desires. Most critically, the site mediated their lived realities with rhetorosocial stereotypes.

For the heterosexual collaborators, the technosocial subject and the biosocial subject could not be reconciled. The eHarmony matching mechanism limited their agency to individualize themselves and interpret the data available to them. Instead, the site relied on hackneyed conventions such as most relationships are between women and men who are slightly older than they are and dictates such as physical appearance should not

weigh into how you judge your marriage partner. These conventions seemed to artificially create relationships through a telescoping mechanism that asserts that matches are designed for one another, and that through the exclusion of choice, those matches can be naturalized into "potential mates." By attempting to manufacture these relationships that turned out to be unwanted, eHarmony endangered the collaborators' consent to the point that they withdrew from the service.

Interestingly, it was Chrissie who offered me a differing reading of the human-computer romance collapse. While acknowledging eHarmony's failure to confront gay and bisexual relationships, she enjoyed the matching criteria it used. Despite fully understanding that eHarmony does not create same-sex matching, Chrissie took the registration personality test and was eventually matched with a male friend. Unlike the heterosexual collaborators who felt undermined and misread by eHarmony, she reports that this experience was gratifying, technosocially affirming how companionable she and her friend are.

It is important to keep in mind, however, the difference in Chrissie's intentionality and that of the heterosexual collaborators. Chrissie was able to take for granted that eHarmony could not fully represent her as a lesbian woman. By understanding her lived experiences as incalculable by the eHarmony rubric, she was able to take the technosociality of the site less proscriptively. That it matched her with someone she already had a (platonic) biosocial relationship with made eHarmony's pronouncements more of a curiosity than a judgment.

Conclusion

Warren has said that educated women are the most difficult to match.[168] The collaborators' experiences with eHarmony show the technosocial realm cannot adequately account for the biosociality of these educated, professional women. In essence, the technological process collapsing the collaborators into an eHarmony profile yields a null result. These women simply do not compute.

Suzanne, Elle, and Kelsey resisted eHarmony's attempts to match them and rejected the expert intervention into their own analytical processes. Chrissie's use of eHarmony, however unintended, might still be seen as compliant, in that she bought into the premise of psychological matching. However, she was still indefinable in the techno/bio social realm of eHarmony as a lesbian. This fact brings to mind the omission in legislation against homosexual acts to explicitly ban woman-on-woman sex acts because they are inconceivable in the rhetorosocial realm, despite their very real practice in the biosocial realm. In this way, Chrissie's use is unquestionably a challenge to eHarmony logic.

Warren's admission that women like the collaborators are hard to address through eHarmony's technosociality, while reinforcing the rhetorosocial failures of the site and its founder, might at least shed light on why the collaborators were resistant and unruly subjects of the eHarmony technosocial discourse. Likewise, Warren and eHarmony struggled against the biosocial and rhetorosocial confines of the political moment to define an identity apart from Evangelical Christianity but still within the entrepreneurial marriage-making business. In each circumstance, the subject's technosocial and biosocial agendas were complicated by the discursive limits of the rhetorosocial realm.

[168] Traister.

In this discussion, I have tried to illustrate how the bio/techno/rhetorosocial representations are inextricably linked and constantly shaping and reshaping each other by approaching the online dating site eHarmony from each of those obtuse angles. In the next chapter, I will discuss how collaborators "poach" representations presented in the bio/techno/rhetorosocial realms to compete in what I call an "information arms race" in their interpretation of technosocial personas and their forecasting of their biosocial origins. The reading processes of the collaborators is colored by their biosocial realities but their deployment of technosocial reading strategies harnessed both rhetorosocial and biosocial elements.

CHAPTER 3: READING

In my experience, online dating felt tailor-made for a rhetoric and composition student. Not only did it offer me a host of fun assignments to complete, it served up thousands (millions?) of short, narrative texts written by other people. It was as if I could read and collect all these witty, neatly organized profiles without having to deal with the messy, flawed people who wrote them. Whether I realized it at the time or not, reading online dating profiles taught me – sometimes by negative example – how to write my own. In fact, it taught me the kind of person I should be in online dating.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the larger rhetorosocial frame of online dating by exploring how eHarmony seeks to technosocially convert biosocial singles into stabilized, productive married couples. I also discussed how heterosexual women are primarily targeted by the service that affords the least amount of agency to users through suggestions of scientific certainty paired with a magical notion of predestination. While that discussion focused primarily on the technosociality of online dating software as manifesting a larger rhetorosociality, this chapter and the two that follow will examine online dating from the perspective of users.

In this chapter, I explore the uneasy relationship between the information mediated by online dating (and other) sites and the collaborators in their role as consumers of that information. I am particularly concerned here with how the collaborators operated within interlocking systems of technocratic capitalism in a manner

that both abided by those systems and resisted them. De Certeau describes this dual process of reading as the embodied action of "poaching," interpreting against and away from the "literal" meaning of texts, thereby subverting the meaning authorized by social institutions/corporations.[169]

In making visible how the collaborators poached information, I try to draw attention to the ever-changing mechanisms that constitute the constructions of literacy in online dating. Zygmut Bauman has pointed out "speed, instantaneity, mobility, on-the-spot readjustment, perpetual experimentation, change devoid of consistent direction and incessant reincarnation are some of the hallmarks of [web literacy practices.]"[170] I add to this definition that web literacy practices are also cultural. In the words of Paul Willis,

> It is one of the fundamental paradoxes of our social life that when we are at our most natural, most everyday, we are also at our most cultural: that when we are in the roles that look the most obvious and given, we are actually in roles that are constructed, learned and far from inevitable.[171]

These natural/cultural practices by collaborators demonstrate how rhetorosociality, specifically the cultural logic of capitalism, informs both the biosocial and technosocial.

Shopping as Metaphor

One does not need to be an online dater to appreciate the purchasing impulse that comes with dating and romance. From traditional romantic rhetorical gestures like sending roses or even a humble greeting card, we see the notion that love is manifested as sharing one's resources, particularly financial resources. As the tagline for a national

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[169] Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: U California P, 1985)120-176.

[170] Zygmunt Bauman, The Individualized Society (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2001) 41.
[171] Emphasis in original.

Paul Willis, Profane Culture (London: Routledge, 1978) 184.

jeweler goes, “Show Her How Much You Care [with a diamond].” Couples’ counseling, self-help books, and romantic vacations are just some of the ways we demonstrate the Western notions of commitment. Online dating is no less a product of this phenomena. Certainly there is an abundance of opportunities to buy surrounding Internet dating. From self-deprecating memoirs (e.g., May 2011’s Love, Cry, Laugh with Internet Dating by Jackie Ann Dee) and romantic comedies (e.g., You’ve Got Mail, Must Love Dogs) to self-help instruction manuals (e.g., Worldwide Search: The Savvy Christian’s Guide to Online Dating) to services that claim to help men and women craft more effective profiles, there is no shortage of items in the commercial marketplace intended to provide information that explains online dating and how best to get the results one wants. These goods and services are of course symbols--rhetorosocial tells, if you will--for the consumer experience of online dating.

The collaborators themselves often called what they did shopping when reviewing profiles of other users. Elle reported that her process was not unlike shopping for clothes. She admits to joking with friends that she is “shopping for a boyfriend” when actively engaged in online dating. For Elle, as for the other collaborators, the reading and evaluation process of selecting one or more technosocial matches with whom to correspond had to do with long-term usability. For clothing, Elle might ask herself if an article of clothing was flattering and versatile while being affordable. When searching online for potential matches, her process is similar.

> I click on profiles and what is going through my head is, is this profile interesting, is this profile interesting? Would I want to email this person? If you were up at my desk, you would find little scratch notepaper. You would find little scratch notepaper with names, sometimes it is in a notebook, sometimes it is on scratch notepaper of all the usernames that I like. I make checks next to them if I have emailed them or winked at them--rarely do I wink. And then, like, then the ones

> that I haven't responded to, and rarely the ones that I haven't responded to, I pull up the profile and think, so why haven't I emailed them yet? It is almost like it is tiered? I keep this running list of ones that intrigue me. And the ones I [am] most excited about I email. And the ones that I am like "eh," I don't, I keep and from time to time I go back and look. And in the meantime sometimes they email [me].

Elle's description of the process of evaluating potential matches is akin to cataloguing and considering options with a mind to eventually committing to/purchasing one and illustrates the power of the shopping metaphor. As Elle said, "I go shopping for boyfriends and I decide if I want to take them to the fitting room." Elle's process of deliberation speaks to the degree to which online dating is infused with a market ethos. Users are categorized through appearance, interests, incomes, and education; then, they are marketed. Further, the tracking that Elle performs acts as a kind assessment, charting those who are appropriate, attractive, and attainable.

Thinking about the searching and reading aspects of online dating can reveal how closely allied this activity is with the single largest online pursuit for women. It is important to keep in mind how similar the software/user interaction is to an online buying experience like that of Amazon. Taking Match.com as an example, users find the results of their searches (Basic or Advanced) displayed in lists with "teaser" photographs and headlines, allowing them to preview the poster/product before clicking to read further. Once inside a profile page, the viewing user may verify the posting user's availability (whether or not s/he is in stock) by checking the last time the posting user logged in. Once the viewer makes a decision, s/he can click to contact the user, effectively buying what s/he is selling. If the viewing user is not ready to commit, s/he may simply "save" the profile, like saving a book or toaster to a wish list.

Sophia DeMasi, in "Shopping for Love: Online Dating and the Making of a Cyber Culture of Romance," argues that the normalization of online dating has lead to a revolution in the way people look for love but has done little to challenge the monogamous heternormative dimensions of our collective story of intimacy, despite the inclusion of gay men and lesbians in targeted advertisements.[172] DeMasi points out that the values of efficiency (as I explore below) actually stymie openings for the creation of "relationships, courtship patterns, and identity expressions" by "transform[ing] the search for intimate partners into a consumer activity."[173] Inherent in this consumer model of finding love is the reliance on established rhetorosocial categories of gender, race, and sexuality. To put this in the terminology of this dissertation, the rhetorosocial mediates biosocial possibilities. Expanding DeMasi's argument, I argue that the model is not only that of a market because of its insistent categorization but also for the way in which it replicates the competitiveness of a global marketplace with seemingly endless choice.

Efficiency and Competition

E-commerce as a framework for understanding online dating is fruitful in part because it aligns with the reliance on categorization that De Masi describes. Online dating converts people into commodities and by doing so creates (or replicates) a competitive hierarchy. Following Judith Butler, we can see that when the software creates a category "African American lesbian" or "24 year-old teacher," the mimetic process

[172] Sophia DeMasi, "Shopping for Love: Online Dating and the Making of a Cyber Culture of Romance," Handbook of the New Sexuality Studies, eds. Steven Seidman, Nancy Fisher and Chet Meeks (New York: Routledge, 2004) 208–216.

[173] DeMasi 214.

contains and ranks those identities.[174] Although current trends in online dating marketing have positioned the services as assisting in finding "the right one," eschewing the inherently competitive aspect of online dating, this process reinforces the patriarchal cum capitalist conceptions of monogamous romance. Detailing the mechanisms of this coercive social norm is beyond the scope of this dissertation, particularly since it has been done so ably by feminist scholars such as Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone, and more recently Laura Kipnis and Eva Feder Kittay.[175] I think it worthwhile, however, to reiterate that reproductive heterosexual marriage is a dominant paradigm for relationships in North America and that romantic or intimate relationships necessarily interact with/are co-opted by state, cultural, and consumer entities as diverse as the Internal Revenue Service, houses of worship, and department stores. In the formulation of a concept of "choice," social mores craft the self as a series of rhetorical "purchases," mitigated through the exchange of capital--so too is the selection of a mate.

In this way, online dating constructed as an expedient way to usher single people into committed relationships with soul mates is in fact a well-dressed façade for a digital mechanism of the regulating forces of a market economy. Allow me to phrase this in the

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[174] Butler, Gender 23.

[175] Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for a Feminist Revolution (New York: Quill, 1970) 113-139.

Laura Kipnis, Against Love: A Polemic (New York: Pantheon, 2003) 105-142.

Eva Feder Kittay, Love's Labor: Women, Equality, and Dependency (New York: Routledge, 1998) 83-100.

Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (New York: Double Day, 1970) 130-157.

vocabulary of this dissertation: The technosociality of online dating is a conduit for a rhetorosociality that urges the transmutation of individuals into goods.

Job-Hunting

Job-hunting provides another useful lens to consider online dating. Like shopping, the biosociality of hiring and applying for jobs paradoxically stresses competition and fit in selecting the perfect match of position to candidate. Rhetorosocially, whereas shopping attempts to bring together the "right" pair of shoes (or blender or vacation) for the cultivated, niche buyer, as job-hunting promises to unite the savvy employer with the "right" skilled worker for the open position who will fit into the culture of the entity. The collaborators felt this process of fitting was the same as online dating.

Elle likened the process of reading-as-screening to that of evaluating job applicants or college admissions aspirants, looking for the most qualified in terms of education and experience while still sharing her outlook on life, as if the position of "Boyfriend" was open at her firm. Other collaborators also likened the reading process to that of judging a competition, more common in workplace environments. Suzanne even occasionally referred to her profile as her "resume." Alice Horning explores the intermediation of "love and work hunting" online. She writes,

> The first step of online dating, the personal profile, is like sending out a resume, though it includes a good deal of information not normally found in a resume, and the goal, of course, is a date/relationship, instead of an interview/job. Just as job hunters are told to mail or email their resumes, post them to online job sites and so on, love hunters must post their personal profiles to the dating sites.

To evaluate the pool of candidates for work, employers review their credentials. Applicants for love also present their qualifications, in the form of the personal profile required on nearly all dating sites.[176]

Further, Horning argues that the two rhetorical situations require use of the same classical techniques of narration, description, and exposition (among others); they deploy ethos, pathos, and logos in different ways. Most useful to my discussion, Horning points out that while job hunting has legal implications for falsifying information (fraud, labor regulations), an amount of misrepresentation is expected in online dating.[177] The implications of this dissimilarity means that online dating users are in an "ethical free-for-all" that, rather than emphasizing literal truthfulness, emphasizes the "best foot forward" mentality.[178] Put another way, the techno- and rhetorosocial mediations of online dating demand that online profiles are accurate in spirit rather than in letter.

The euphemizing of the "best foot forward" rhetoric in online dating ads, while acknowledged and in fact expected by the collaborators, required sophisticated critical readings to decipher. For collaborators, this process required both using the categorizing features of the online dating sites, while remaining suspicious of their completeness and accuracy. The reading strategies employed by collaborators as they seek out these long-term relationships is akin to the care and deliberation educated, professional consumers might use when making a purchase of some expense. They do not only react quickly to potential matches' self presentations in pictures but spend time inspecting profiles,

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[176] Alice Horning, "Examining Personal Ads and Job Ads," Online M@tchmaking, eds. Monica T. Whitty, Andrea J. Baker, and James A. Inman (New York: Palgrave, 2007) 72.

[177] Horning 75 -76.

[178] Horning 74.

evaluating claims, validating information, and measuring compatibility. These processes allow us to see the tensions in both online dating as a search for love but also the ways in which a baggy, fluid, and indefinable notion like "love" is formed and reformed by the rhetoric we use to talk about it. Although expressed by the technosociality of online dating where users represent themselves in strictly two-dimensional digital ways, the rhetorosocial imperative of finding love through the technology of dating governs the process.

Screening

Tied into the expectation that users would manage the first impression of their profile to offer a best foot forward, or as I call it in the next chapter, "a best self," collaborators relied on the searching mechanisms of the dating sites to eliminate potential poor matches. While they sometime decried the [rhetorosocial] flatness of a profile, collaborators relied on site infometrics and interface design to sort the large number of users into potential and unacceptable data sets based largely on demographic information like age, income, education and location. And users made quick judgments based on more abstract meta-information such as job titles and profile pictures. The collaborators recognized that these weeding out processes were patently unfair and unrepresentative of biosocial interactions: a kind person with a charismatic personality but a lower status job or less compelling physicality would appear more attractive in person than in technosociality. This recognition often caused collaborators to worry over their own representation in the quick-sort of profile screening.

The competing technosocial impulses to both sympathize with another online dating writer and to simultaneously critique him/her, a tension that may exist in all

reading processes, is a staple in online dating. Whether or not the ability to evaluate a potential match based on a two dimensional profile was ultimately helpful was up for debate among the collaborators. As Elle discusses below, she felt that online dating, because it was not "organic," encouraged her to be too rigid in her negative assessments.

> One rule that I have but have thought about bending but have a hard time bending is the no kids. I am really not interested in dating men who have kids. Now here's the thing–If I met a guy at the grocery store and had this great conversation and he told me he had kids, I'd probably be bending that rule a lot faster because I met him in an organic way than if I met him online. Online right away you can put [up] the wall and people have to scale it. I had an instance recently where a man was older than I normally consider dating contacted me and I liked his profile and I thought he seemed interesting but I just wasn't sure I was comfortable going out with him and he followed up again, very persistent, very flattering, and I thought maybe I should be open to this. Had we met outside of Match, if we had met and had a great conversation, like I wouldn't be wrestling with this issue. Online mediums let you be your own worst enemy in that way.

In contrast, Sophia preferred meeting potential matches online precisely because of the screening abilities. She defends the mediated process by saying, "[I] really like online dating. I liked the pre-screening part." Rachel also enjoyed the representation of potential matches in a [digital] document, allowing her to be more reflective about her priorities as well as easing the initial awkwardness of meeting a new person. However, she troubles the idea that a profile might be an accurate representation in her assessment, citing the example of smokers who indicate they are "trying to quit." These people understand the social sanction on smoking and therefore elect to occupy a rhetorical limbo-land between defiantly claiming the categorization, and possibly turning people off, and neglecting to tell the truth.

Chrissie had the following to say about the racial and sexual reductionism on the more permissive Match.com:

> The big critique of [Match.com] is that [the site] [doesn't] allow bisexuals and they don't allow mixed race people [in radio button identity selection choices]. And so those are the big two [issues]. And even though I don't want to date bisexuals, I'll give it a shot. My friend's roommate is half Asian and he was like, "What should I put?" And they [customer service at Match.com] told him "white." Yeah! And my friend, who does all this sociology stuff, got so mad and said, "I bet if he had said "white and black", they would have told him to say black! Yeah!

Despite the fact that she was explicitly excluded from eHarmony and that online dating in general tends to collapse identity categories, Chrissie offered a different opinion than the other collaborators in that, rather than suggesting that the online dating mechanism was an intrusion or an artificial means for meeting others, she preferred it, often using it as a tool for intimacy and communication with her partner. Below she offers a take on OKCupid, a site that has a matching algorithm similar to eHarmony's, that counters the responses Kelsey, Suzanne, and Elle gave above. Rather than intruding, the demographic and lifestyle information was extremely useful and informative. It helped her avoid becoming attached to someone who ultimately did not share her lifestyle choices.

> I do prefer to meet people online. I think it is a great screening device [. . .] You can tell things like do they smoke? Do they drink wholesomely? Some people on my OkCupid matches are matched pretty decently. I had someone I was dating and she didn't have an OkCupid profile and I told her to go do one. I was like, I want to see what they say! You know, you can see if they want to have kids. That is just something about their personality. Their education their – whatever they spit out in one paragraph, that is something. Sometimes it is not very good but you can tell a lot from that.

In essence, Chrissie uses the information from these profiles in a way Neil Clark Warren and eHarmony might intend, as a meaningful vehicle to build an off-line relationship. For the other collaborators, the profile was largely a method of access, a fork in a

decision tree. For Chrissie, the technosocial commitment to self-representation was revealing of the biosocial self.

Technosocializing Tensions

After retrieving online dating search results using radio button categorization features, collaborators analyzed the photographic and alphabetic texts composed by users. This process was highly interpretive of both content and style (if those can be separated) and involved an assessment of the writer's credibility. That the collaborators considered this the most crucial part of finding potential partners–more than the screening process described above--demonstrates the manner in which they privileged their own abilities to decipher and interpret over that of matching software. Rather than taking at face value the matching calculus and trusting that the users presented to them were worthy of pursuit, collaborators evaluated the results against their own rhetoro/biosocial reactions. In this sense, the collaborators engaged the sites as both an assistance and a hindrance.

The poaching of technosocial information about potential matches reflects the acknowledged incompleteness and inaccuracy of online dating signification and how readers interpolate that information into a useful form. The excerpt below demonstrates one such example of how collaborators interpreted information. In it, Elle illustrates the process of weighing characteristics and their value as presented through an online dating profile, highlighting her reaction to wealth and enterprise as a culturally constructed good as well as something that can be represented as a radio button feature.

> [A specific profile writer] was an interesting example of an entrepreneur who was financially successful. And for a lot of women, that financial stability, and what comes with that is appealing. And it is amazing what people are willing to forgive with money. It really is true. I wish we weren't so superficial as a society but you look at some relationships and you go did Anna Nicole Smith really love that man? Come on! Or did she love his billions of dollars? Whatever. So that is kinda

> of interesting when you come across a profile where you like the body of the profile, and then they list their salary [. . .] but they list a salary over $150,000 and then you scroll down and see they never finished college. So first you are like, Damn! I am not making half that and I have two degrees! And these people are making over $150,000 and have no degree! First, is it legal? Second of all, what is it that they are doing? Then it is a struggle. So they are financially stable. And it is interesting. I have recently been intrigued by entrepreneurs. I guess because entrepreneurs represent a high tolerance for risk and I am fairly risk averse but definitely leaning towards taking more risk in life, so I am definitely benefit[ing] from being with someone who takes more risks in life. So you know if they are an entrepreneur, they are taking a fair amount of risk and if they are making a large amount of money and they don't have a college education, the intellectual rational side of me says what if I connect with this person and something happens and their business goes belly up. They don't have a degree to fall on. So I am going to be viewed as the primary breadwinner. That is a lot of pressure. Especially since I don't work in a lucrative field and I don't work in a field that can afford a family. And that is an interesting dimension too. To talk about trying to find people on Match as you get a little bit older and the realities change a little bit. When you are 25, the things you entertain on Match are different than the things you entertain when you are 32. And I have been on Match since I was 24. Is that right? No, I was 26. . . Even the people I consider now are different that the people I considered then.

Elle's deliberation process offers an example of how she and the other collaborators viewed the categorization features, and their own reactions to them, as both informative but conditional. The collaborators place in tension the artificial technology of the dating site and the biological/rhetorical reactions to profiles to make executive decisions about potential matches.

In her essay on the interactions between human pilots and flight management systems, Caroline Moricot calls the technological systems "automats" (pleasingly appropriate to my discussion of commodification and online dating environments), describing a similar tension between human and machine. Moricot describes the interaction between/merging of machine and human as a "paradox of automation" in which "despite everything [. . .] [the human user] is in the middle of a tension, that [s/he] has to manage, between a tendency of the automation which aims to draw him [sic] aside

as a daily management of the systems which, simultaneously make his presence irreducible."[179] Both this systems analysis of the relationship existing in a tension and Moricot's description of the forms of resistance automat and user deploy against each other are apt here. Two such resistances are the ways in which flight management systems train the pilot to conform to established protocols thereby "denaturalizing" human senses and the pilots' abilities to "overreason" both the software and their own physical sensations (such as that of being inverted) to objectify their own feelings as either appropriate or "improper" in light of available data.[180]

In contrast to Donna Harraway's conceptualization of cyborg identities in which human and machine cyborg form a symbiotic, liberatory relationship, Moricot explores the ways the automat tests the robustness of the pilot's biological body, threatening to push it beyond the point of giving out.[181] This failure by the automat to take account of the pilot, although not discussed by Moricot, illustrates the way thinking machines are inherently fallible in their attempt to augment completely (or improve) the human task. The technosocial logic of the automat may only be appropriate in contexts when the human user is removed from the rhetorosocial context. Moricot's recentering of the human user's reason as essential to her/his bodily experience (i.e., the interpretation of information gathered through sight, sound, and touch) points out how the mediated

[179] Caroline Moricot, "Resistances of the Body, The Presence of the Human Body in the Automated World," Acting Bodies and Social Networks: A Bridge Between Technology and Human Memory, eds. Bianca Maria Pirani and Ivan Varga (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2010) 262.

[180] Moricot 262.

[181] Moricot 263.

expression of data provided by dating automats, though useful in technosocial environments, is still suspect in the biosocial.

The intentionality of data provided by online dating is part of the problem, as illustrated by the doubt that comes with the "best foot forward" profile. By creating an online space where a human being is a virtual advertisement for him/herself, online dating sites undermine the signification value of that advertisement. John W. Jordan provides a useful example in his exploration of user experience with body modeling software implemented by online branches of retail operations such as Ann Taylor and Nutrisystem.[182] Jordan argues that the "rhetorical tensions" used by the My Virtual Body™ software create both a Burkean identification and a competing consumerist desire. By conflating the virtual body with the user's physical body, the software follows Burke's theory that a writer may "persuade [another] only insofar" as the writer is able to match the "language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude," thereby "*identifying* [with the audience's] ways."[183] At the same time, because the software is embedded in a retail context, the "consumer *telos*" will create a fantastical body image that the user may attain through purchasing the clothing/body on offer.[184] Just like the body modeling software, online dating sites represent themselves as employing online features that try to provide tactile or more embodied information in an attempt to

[182] John W. Jordan, "(Ad)Dressing the Body in Online Shopping Sites," Critical Studies in Media Communication 20.3 (2003): 246-268, Academic Search Premier, 25 Apr. 2011, UNC Libraries, <http://www.lib.unc.edu>, 248.

[183] Burke 55.

[184] Jordan 246.

overwrite the "improper feelings" of interpretive skepticism users like the collaborators may bring to their reading experience.

This brings us to an important point about the reading processes of the collaborators. In one way or another, all the women mined profiles and communications for signs of character and bemoaned the fact that technosocial personas were often such superficial representations of what was more often than not called "the real person." I read the implicit message here to be a longing for the cues associated with the wealth of information in biosocial nonverbal communication. Some of the characteristics like punctuality, body control, judgment and customs in social situations, and manners contribute to the longed-for notion of chemistry. Users might be forgiven then for codifying biosocial meanings–accurate or not–to elements of technosociality in a manner that might seem inaccurate. Further, the clash of identification and desire, biosocial against technosocial, complicates the intertwining of these realms in the larger rhetorosocial realm, illustrating the inherent contradictory and ambiguous nature of what we understand as knowledge.

Research

This tension between technosocially mediated information and collaborators' attempts to interpret the "real person" telescope towards a relationship that crosses over from the technosocial to the biosocial.[185] Many, but not all, collaborators looked for contexts outside of the profile to make decisions about potential matches. Often this research took forms accessible within the technosociality of the dating site: searching out

[185] R. Burnett, "A Torn Page, Ghosts on the Computer Screen, Words, Images, Labyrinths: Exploring the Frontiers of Cyberspace," Connected: Engagement with Media!, ed. George E. Marcus (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1996) 71.

and reading a user's posts in an online forum, checking the results of online questionnaires, or perusing information linked from the profile. At other times, particularly when a collaborator was communicating with a potential match through email and not the dating site, she would conduct research that sought out biosocial tidbits. Many admitted to searching Google for information about potential matches, some tracking information such as property ownership, legal entanglements, and employment. Some viewed this information as a helpful sort of DIY background check, particularly when evaluating the individual's suitability as an intimate partner; they also considered it as suspect by virtue of its transgression of the site's technosocial boundaries. That is to say, they conducted this research clandestinely and would be unlikely to admit to accessing it. (Dafina even considered it unethical. Read about this in Chapter 5.) Further, collaborators were aware of the ramifications of this sort of research being conducted on them. Patricia describes her thinking on extra-site research.

> A couple years ago, I was part of seminar or I guess it was a symposium on identity theft so I got a lot of information on how to find out about people on the web that doesn't cost anything. When I knew the person's name, I've looked at their tax records to find out what kind of car they have and how old it was and where they lived and what the value of their house was. Voter's registration, to see what party they were affiliated with. Check them in the sexual offender's [database.] What else have I done? And then I've done just a general Google to see if there were any articles about them anywhere. If they were listed on any website. I dated this one guy who said he was a member of this bridge group and I could see yes, he was in these tournaments and he wasn't lying. But I never tell the people that [I] do it because I think it would freak them out. [And it wouldn't freak me out if they did it.] I would think they are just doing what I am doing. Everybody Googles themselves. I had one case where I was at somebody's retirement party and [someone took a] picture and posted [it] up on the web and I was wearing this mint green dress and thirty pounds heavier and wearing my hair a lot differently and a lot less flatteringly and I was identified in this photograph. And it bothered me that someone could Google my name and do the image thing and pull up this picture and think "Oh my god, this mint green whale!" And so, I asked the person in charge of the site if she could please remove the identification. And so you're still up there but it is a group shot so it will say,

> Mary Jones, Jim Brown, and unidentified. So I am the unidentified person. If guys are Googling me and they see me, and they haven't met me yet and they see this picture and they think, what is the newer picture? I feel like it is misrepresenting me in the current time.

Patricia's framing of Googling as both a useful tool for evaluating a potential match but also a liability to her own careful first impression management demonstrates how this kind of research provides a means of challenging the mediations of a site in an attempt to recover a biosocial self.

To summon again the shopping and job-hunting metaphors I described earlier, dating technosociality also encompasses buyer feedback. While a user may craft an initial technosocial presentation through a profile, that presentation might well be refined in texts created by other users. In addition to sites like Truedater.com where users can evaluate one another based on the relationship of online profiles to face-to-face presentations, many resources exist to research supposedly anonymous fellow users. These sites attempt again to "embody" the profile writer, but the intent here is to uncover attempts to deceive and by doing so to empower the consumer of the information. Patricia again discusses the arms race for biosocial "truth."

> There was this one guy I met through the Independent but he is on Match.com too, he is a faculty member at NC State, so I Googled him and went to his faculty website and vitae was up there, and I found out he was lying grossly about his age. When I went [out] with him, we just had coffee, he was maybe, two years older than me, according to what he said, he was actually five years older. Now he is three years younger. Maybe more, now that I have turned 60. He is about 64 years old. And I think he has listed himself at about 54. I wouldn't have known how old he really was but it had the years he graduated and now, if you saw his CV, he was about 13 when he graduated from college. I don't apologize. Like I said, I don't tell them, but if they flat out ask me I'd tell them. But I don't apologize for it because especially being a woman I have to protect myself. They may have my home phone number. Now, everybody has caller ID there is no more thinking, when I hang up, they aren't going to know how to get back with me. I'd call guys and they'd know who it was before I'd pick up. That is one thing I did change. Now I have caller ID. This was about three years ago I got that. I

> was at a disadvantage. Guys knew when I called them but I didn't know when they called me.

Patricia's discovery that a potential match had creatively represented his biological age in an online dating site sheds light on the relatively small variation allowed between technosocial and biological personas. This hapless professor's poor technosocial presentation supports Patricia's understanding of her research as a protective measure against deception as well as a divining rod meant to better locate the biosocial self.

Grammar and Identity

Furthering the collapse, if not precisely a one-to-one correspondence, of the technosocial persona with the biosocial persona is the demonstration of a high level of proficiency with edited, standard American English. Despite the proliferation of "leet" and Internet slang in popular usage, collaborators expressed doubts that they would respond positively to this method of expression, particularly at the expense of traditional alphabetic forms. They are hardly unique in their distaste for this form of altered English that may have originated in nascent forms of cell phone text messaging or instant messenger. In fact, massive multiplayer gaming environments such as World of War Craft and Second Life have shown symptoms of intolerance to non-standard English forms including incidences in which players demanded an alphabetic writing sample in order to judge another user's language proficiency. These incidents demonstrate that the living humans in front of and behind machines desire strategies for sousing out biosocial identity.

The collaborators themselves monitored their own technosocial personas for what more than one called "carefulness." In first impression management, standard spelling and grammar were paramount. This expectation carried into the evaluation of others'

profiles. In fact, sometimes collaborators read the profiles of potential dates as if they were critiquing the writing and marketing strategies of the profiles beyond or outside of simply evaluating the writer's suitability as a partner. This was particularly true when negatively assessing the writer's rhetorical choices. Elle echoed the responses of many collaborators when she asked, "Why would you do that?" about a particularly poorly written profile.

Responses show both the exacting standards to which the collaborators held expression on online dating platforms and the relative rigidity of the profile genre conventions. On the other hand, harsh critiques of profiles, particularly the writer's attempt at managing first impressions were softened by a Burkean identification and tolerance. As Dafina pointed out, she herself might make a single grammatical error in her profile or in an email communication. Although she was completing her doctoral dissertation in literary studies, she was still human. To flip this comment on its head, I suggest that Dafina was confident in her rhetorical ability when it was taken holistically precisely because she knew she could perform [read write] that privileged identity in technosociality just as she did in biosociality.

The women's reaction to the use of nonstandard alphabetic English is one example of how collaborators assessed rhetorical support for the identity claims made in the categorization features, particularly as those claims represented class. Collaborators were quick to groan at how little they liked seeing spelling and grammatical errors in potential matches' profiles and contact emails. As Elle put it, "Egregious errors are a quick way to get ruled out." The collaborators, asked to elaborate on their distaste for mechanical errors, nuanced this position somewhat. They all agreed that one or two typos

were acceptable; probably the result of an accident, they reasoned. They also suggested that it was very likely their own materials might show similar errors. Gross errors were more troubling, however. First, these errors flouted the rhetorical significance of the "first impression." In a digital environment like online dating, the first impression is extremely important, and what is casually referred to as "netiquette" hardly begins to describe how a lack of proofreading could potentially derail a writer's success before meeting face-to-face. By demonstrating carelessness, the writers failed to show themselves off in the best way, as detail-oriented and educated.

It was not a strictly conventional, standard edited English the collaborators expected to find in profiles, however. When asked what they thought about the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) often seen in digital environments like sentence fragments, abbreviations such as LOL ("laughing out loud"), or an abundance of lower case letters, the collaborators indicated that they didn't have strong feelings about these if they were used sparingly, "correctly," and "if [the writer] was actually clever or making a joke or whatever." By contrast, the over-use of capitalized letters, often referred to as shouting in cyber-environments, was considered so unacceptable it was almost unthinkable. Here is Patricia relating her feelings about appropriate and inappropriate prose forms.

> Typos. Hate those! Sent an email to someone, new guy that said, "It is so nice to read a profile that is grammatically correct!" They [i.e. men with grammatically-challenged profiles] say, "well there is no spell checker on this thing." Well, there are other ways to do it. You could compose it in Notepad and cut and paste it. It is one thing to have a typo in an email, it is quite another in a big profile because a profile is a big thing and you can come in and edit it and edit it and edit [it.] There is no reason a typo should stay there forever. And a lot of women in the discussion forums feel the same way because it shows that the person has not spent serious time composing and proofing and that – it is sloppiness. This is your first impression. Particularly for the guys without photographs. This is the only

> picture you have of this person and it looks illiterate or careless. And either one of those is not good. [. . .] Anyone who uses all caps gets called down for shouting, so yeah [it would be a turn-off]. But I still see those once in awhile but I think this is a person using a medium that they don't quite understand. The all lowercase, I see but it is when they start getting cute and using the abbreviations [it gets annoying], but I don't see that much in the age range I am looking at, because [. . .] [There is a] lot of self-policing. [It] would be a turn off [if I saw leet or other digital shorthand] because it would be an old guy with an earring. It doesn't take very long for someone to be told that all caps is rude. I might cut them some slack if their profile sounded interesting.

As Patricia explains, the collaborators saw no excuse for gross mechanical errors that could represent "carelessness" or being "illiterate" in the age of word processing. Further, those users who got too "cute" with CMC or "shouted" at readers in all capital letters, while not as sloppy as those who failed to proofread, still lacked in sufficient literacy. Casting this in terms of Ben Rampton's 1995 study of young, working class English language speakers and ethnicity in London, we might suggest that Patricia considered CMC and "shouting" in a profile not as codeswitching, but as "crossing."[186] Rampton uses this term to describe the adoption of South East Asian patterns by Anglo working-class youth whose peer group is dominated by South East Asian and Punjabi speakers. While the Anglo youth were not accepted members of the racial group, they adopted ritualized language patterns of a group with less cultural capital in an attempt to fit in with—but not into—an establish community. Like the users Patricia describes, the Anglo youths' use of South East Asian and Punjabi language patterns distinguishes them as not fluent in but as "crossing" into the ethnic/language discourse community. For the too cute profile writers, the use of leet or other emergent English language forms did not make

[186] Ben Rampton, Crossing: Language and Ethnicity Among Adolescents (London; New York: Longman, 1995) 7.

them appear as if they could adroitly codeswitch[187]; it merely distinguished the old men with earrings from bona fide digital natives.

It might be most appropriate, then to say that collaborators wanted writers to demonstrate not just grammatical but rhetorical literacy in their profiles and emails. This distinction follows Stuart Selber's three-pronged or "tripartite" theory of computer literacy. In 2004's Multiliteracies for a Digital Age, Selber describes three approaches to literacy in computing environments.[188] Users who are functionally literate treat computers primarily as tools, having learned the basic nuts and bolts of online tasks, but remaining unconcerned with matters like audience, context, and purpose. The critically literate are just that, critics. They are adroit at analyzing online texts as artifacts linked together in systems. Finally, rhetorically literate users, garnering the skills and abilities of both the functionally and critically literate, transcend them for persuasion, deliberation, reflection, and "social versus technical action."[189] It is these users who can effectively manipulate profiles and emails to show that they are truly in "a medium they understand," as Patricia put it.

There was an expectation among the collaborators that a suitable date would craft a profile resistant to critique and representative of serious linguistic capital. As Rhiannon

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[187] I use "codeswitching" in the way Monica Heller defines it: "the use of more than one language in the course of a single communicative episode." This definition includes the assumption that participants are proficient in the languages or codes harnessed.

Monica Heller, Codeswitching: Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988) 1.

[188] Stuart Selber, Multiliteracies for a Digital Age (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004).

[189] Selber 147.

Bury has pointed out in 2005's Cyberspaces of Their Own, mechanical errors can be forgiven as typographical mistakes when all the members of a community are "performing normative [middle] class identities."[190] The online communities Bury participated in, women-only fan fiction discussion sites dedicated to the 1990s North American television programs The X-files and Due South, policed the use of language, demanding considerable "linguistic prowess" from members. Bury cites examples of this prowess as witty wordplay, including the ability to conjure neologisms, expressions of deep knowledge of the program, as well as traditionally accurate sentences and sophisticated word choice.[191] In Bury's examination, a writer who exhibited this kind prowess in her posts accrued linguistic capital that allowed her minor typographical slip-ups to be overlooked by the other members of the community. In fact, writers who gained prestige for their superior language skills gained an expert status, complemented by other members who turned to them to arbitrate questions of usage. Conversely, other community members might publicly correct a writer who lacked sufficient capital or ignore the contributions of such a writer.

Patricia articulates a similar dynamic in the statement below:

> Poor spelling. The poor spelling in and of itself was more a sign of you really, you are not putting your best foot out there. You need to rethink your profile. It could be any of those things [lack of investment, lack of education] and none of them are good. [The] lack of education thing isn't so, it isn't so–I mean, because the degree thing is on there. I mean it is more, that if you have a careless style. I am focusing on that because I feel like I saw a lot of it.

[190] Rhiannon Bury, Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online, Digital Formations 25 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) 130.

[191] Bury 113.

Notice how Patricia differentiates between a user's lack of a college education–a truthful declaration of authenticity--and failure to perform in accordance with one's privilege. Those with post-secondary educations were actually held to higher mechanical (and perhaps rhetorical) standards than users who had not completed a bachelor's degree. In this sense, lacking an education was considered permissible while the appearance of laziness was not. As Suzanne put it, "[the failure to] proofread just makes you look ignorant." In this sense, "looking ignorant" through a "careless style" when you could "look smart" means that you should "rethink your profile" to "put your best foot forward" if you want to participate seriously in online dating. To put this another way might be to say that lack of education might signify a lack of resources or an understandable choice, whereas a profile rife with surface errors signals a personal failing. Lack of investment and carelessness are additional violations of normative middle class identity. Linguistic capital is refined in this splitting of hairs, the difference between being undereducated and "looking ignorant."

Although two collaborators said that level of education was a make or break issue, the other ten were open to people of relatively wide spectrums of education. (Less than a high school diploma was unacceptable for all collaborators, however.) In contrast, all the collaborators rejected profiles they believed were too carelessly crafted because they read than as a rhetorical representation of poor character, something relatively hard to judge in a static online form. Part and parcel of these character decisions is the tension between the technosocial and the biosocial which is mediated here in the rhetoric of the profiles.

Deception

As the collaborators' assessment of potential matches' style demonstrates, they spent considerable time verifying technosocial presentation of biosociality to guard themselves against a deception that would have repercussions beyond that realm. In 1999, Judith Donath argued that, in Usenet environments, the lack of unstable conventional assessment signals (such as consumer tastes) was crucial to the formation of online identity since costly assessment signals were unavailable. Further, the higher the stakes of the situation, the more severe a punishment would be meted out for deception.[192] One such case of a severely punished attempt at deception is no doubt the story of New York psychiatrist Stanford Lewin who created an online persona for chatting on the CompuServe discussion boards that did not correspond with his biological life. Allucquere Rosanne Stone compellingly details the rise and fall of Lewin's "Julie Graham," a bisexual disabled female neuropsychologist who offered advice to other women, unmasked men posing as women online, and developed her own life narrative arc – recovering from depression, getting married, etc. When the truth about Julie was eventually uncovered, Stone reports that among the emotions voiced by CompuServe members the most demonstrative was mourning.[193] That sense of loss for a persona was coupled with the regret from Lewin, and even the attempts by some of Julie's friends to befriend the now-present but infinitely less charming and helpful Sanford, because they believed "that good person must be in there somewhere." This episode illustrates

> that one of our Western industrialized cultural assumptions is that subjectivity is invariably constituted in relation to a physical substrate – that social beings,

[192] Judith S. Donath, "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community," Communities in Cyberspace, eds. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (New York: Routledge, 1999) 29–59.

[193] Stone, War 78.

> people, exist by virtue of possessing biological bodies through which their experience is warranted in the body politic.[194]

That human beings lie to potential and current partners, online and off, is well traversed territory in both popular and scholarly literature.[195] In her analysis of cheating among online dating users, particularly the 2003 case of Army Col. Kassem Saleh who had developed simultaneous romantic relationships with at least fifty women, Julie Albright argues that there are facilitating aspects of computer communication that enable

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[194] Stone, War 65.

[195] This is a partial list:

Julie M. Albright and Thomas Conran, "Desire, Love, and Betrayal: Constructing and Deconstructing Intimacy Online," Journal of Systemic Therapies 22.3(2003): 42–53.

Susan D. Boon and Beverly A. McCloud, "Deception in Romantic Relationships: Subjective Estimates at Success at Deceiving and Attitudes Toward Deception," Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 18.4 (2001): 46–76.

B. Cornwall and D.C. Lundgren, "Love on the Internet: Involvement and Misrepresentation in Romantic Relationships in Cyberspace vs. Realspace," Computers in Human Behavior 17 (2002): 197-211.

Maria Hardley, "Mediated Relationships: Authenticity and the Possibility of Romance," Information, Communication & Society 7 (2004): 207-22.

Candida Peterson, "Deception in Intimate Relationships," International Journal of Psychology 31.6 (1996): 279-88.

Joseph B. Walther, "Computer-Mediated Communication: Impersonal, Interpersonal, and Hyperpersonal Interaction," Communication Research 23 (1996): 3–43.

Monica T. Whitty, "Liar, Liar! An Examination of How Open, Supportive, and Honest People are in Chat Rooms," Computers in Human Behavior, 18.4 (2002): 343–52.

Monica T. Whitty, "The 'Realness' of Cyber-cheating: Men and Women's Representations of Unfaithful Internet Relationships," Social Science Computer Review 23.1 (2005): 57-67.

this kind of deception.[196] Albright found that the apparati of computer communication, with their easy cutting and pasting of text, along with the networked yet private nature of email communication and online dating sites, allowed users interested in pursuing multiple relationships to do so with minimal exertion. Further, computer communication also allowed for what Irving Goffman calls "segregation of audiences," that is the physical isolation of lovers and wooing effort.[197] Perhaps most importantly, Albright emphasizes what nineteenth- and twentieth- century letter writers knew, that the "hyperpersonal" nature of online communication not only allowed lotharios to craft an idealized self but the absence of other cues fostered an intimacy that "fuel[ed] romantic fantasies."[198]

As Patricia described in an excerpt above, the nature of online dating provides both the potential for deception but also the opportunity to protect oneself against it. That these methods of information gathering must be kept invisible attests to their morally unstable nature. Elle describes her own efforts to collect information without alerting the subject.

> Other profiles- I don't look for people I know. If I see someone that I know, I'll log off and pull them up when I log off. When my friend Eric was on there, he looked at me and he looked at me and this was before we were really friends and I was like, "I think that is the guy that works upstairs." So I logged off and then read his profile.

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[196] Julie M. Albright. "How Do I Love Thee and Thee and Thee: Self-Presentation and Multiple Relationships Online," Online M@tchmaking, eds. Monica T. Whitty, Andrea J. Baker, and James A. Inman (New York: Palgrave, 2007) 81-93.

[197] Albright 86.

Goffman 169.

[198] Albright 88.

As Elle's explanation illustrates, harnessing the information provided in online dating profiles for purposes at least nominally unrelated to online dating, that is reading about an acquaintance from a face-to-face environment, can be covert. Alerted that her colleague had viewed her profile by the metadata features of Match, Elle decided to review his profile without being logged on, i.e., without alerting him that she was reading his profile. Elle's decision to view his profile anonymously was a rhetorical move that allowed her greater freedom. She could preserve her role at her workplace as strictly professional–a goal she vigorously pursued–but still evaluate Eric's suitability and her interest in dating him without influencing his orientation towards her. If she decided she was interested, she had the opportunity to continue to project a position of indifference or even disinterest as a consolidation of her position of rhetorical power, knowing he had shown interest but not revealing her own. If she decided she was not interested, electing not to alert him to the fact she had assessed his profile allowed the issue of a potential relationship to be dismissed without a change to either person's face-to-face presentation.

Susan B. Barnes refers to this kind of covert reading without responding as "lurking," and says,

> From a theoretical perspective, it could be argued that lurkers are a product of media consumption or the experience of only receiving messages. Mass media-newspapers, magazines, radio and television – have conditioned people to be consumers rather than producers of media. The quintessential "couch potato" illustrates this point.[199]

Barnes goes on to temper her condemnation of "lurking" as morally distasteful for its lack of perceived participation by offering other barriers to online production like technical barriers and social reticence. However, Barnes's conception of lurking misses

[199] Susan B. Barnes, Online Connections: Internet Interpersonal Relationships (Cresskill, NY: Hampton Press, 2001) 43-44.

the point that Elle's activity is anything but passive. It is in fact highly strategic, an example of what Cheryl Glenn terms silence as resistance. Glenn writes, "[s]ilence continues to be, too often, read as simply passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power and has in fact, transformed the rhetorical situation itself."[200] For Elle and the other collaborators, the transformation is a shift in power that comes from subjectivity, from looked-at to looking.

Elle goes on to explain how even when she might not appear to be actively engaged in online dating, she is working: "[E]verytime I go into Match I consider myself active and open to finding new relationships. That is my status. When I go into Match, that is my sole status. I have three saved searches [so I continue to pull in more potential matches everyday.]" Connecting research with her on-going effort to meet matches, Elle demonstrates that uncovering unrevealed biosocial information is integral to dating for her, highlighting the vulnerability many of the collaborators felt as unattached women in both bio and technosocial realms. That this research and deception-busting technosocial work was "silent" or invisible by its very nature allows sites to ignore it, amplifying the perceived vulnerability of users, particularly women, and exploiting the rhetorosocial threat of gender violence.

Technofear

Many websites attempt sell their services by playing to rhetorical constructions of unattached women as defective or in danger. eHarmony, which I discussed in-depth in the previous chapter, is a worthy example of how sites play on the rhetorosociality of gender, violence, and technology to market to women. While denying any concern about

[200] Cheryl Glenn, Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2004): 6.

biosocial, physical safety, some of the collaborators cited biosocial epistemological/face-preserving concerns. Some reported feeling self-conscious or self-aware about their use of online dating; all the collaborators felt that negative stereotypes of "people like [us]" existed both inside the technosocial online dating community as well as outside of it. Some collaborators rejected these rhetorosocialities out of hand; Chrissie rarely felt any discourse actually described her experience and therefore could be discarded--but others felt uncomfortably misrepresented. Kelsey, who used eHarmony for the longest of all the collaborators and dated a man she met through the site for nine months, felt constrained by the negative connotations attached to online dating.

> It was embarrassing. Among my closest friends, they were supportive and encouraging but I am a joker and I am very Chandler Bing and anytime when I am uncomfortable about anything I will make a sarcastic joke about it. And so I'd do this whole comedy routine. Say someone would be like, so do you have a date tonight? And I'd go into this whole routine. It would be hard because people would be like, how did you meet this guy and I wouldn't want to lie but especially [to] like co-workers but it would be hard to say, I met him online, because it felt like there is this stigma attached. It felt like the stigma was like I was desperate or the only way I could meet people would be on the internet because there is this conception of low social skills. Or that, yeah, desperation is a big part of it. Because I can't find anybody in the real world, I have to go to the virtual world. And there isn't any real personal interaction. So it is safer for those of us who aren't fully people. It seems like I was looking for something a lot more committed and stronger than I actually was. Either you are trolling for sex or you are trolling for a husband. You can't be looking just to meet people because just getting introduced to someone is so hard. The assumption is that you are either a sex freak or a marriage freak. You can't just be looking to get introduced to people.

While sites like eHarmony are able to make the most of these constructions to represent themselves as alternatives, they needed little help in fanning the flames of caution. Family members and friends often perpetuated stereotypes that users–other users that the collaborators might encounter–would be desperate, defective, or dangerous. Patricia reported that her adult daughter often said, "These guys are single for a reason."

As Tara Parker-Pope of The New York Times recently reported, single and unmarried people make up nearly half of the adult population in the U.S. yet are denied privileges afforded to married people "from family-leave laws to lower insurance rates."[201] Despite census data and scientific research that makes plain the vital role to communities and extended families that unmarried people play–often greater than married couples who direct their energies toward their own households–the single and unmarried are "typically portrayed as unencumbered by family obligations, or even self-centered individuals." [202]

The social capital denied the single and unmarried and the pejorative rhetorosocial stereotypes that help perpetuate this is documented by Bella DePaulo in her work, Singlism: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Stop It. Pointing out the phenomena, "matrimania," or the privileging of marriage, weddings, and married people, in every aspect of U.S. life, DePaulo examines both the "singling out" of public figures like Barbara Walters, Julia Roberts, and Condelezza Rice in popular and news media as well as the more subtle ways the unmarried subsidize the married in taxes, fees, and

[201] Tara Parker-Pope, "The Plight of American Singles: In a Married World, Singles Struggle for Attention," The Well, The New York Times Online, 19 Sep. 2011, 20 Sep. 2011 <http://well.blogs. nytimes.com/2011/09/19/the-plight-of-american-singles/>.

[202] Parker-Pope.

Naomi Gerstel, "A Fact Sheet Prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families in Honor of Unmarried and Singles Week, September 18 – 24," Council on Contemporary Families, 15 Sep. 2011, 21 Sep. 2011 <http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/marriage-partnership-divorce/20110915-single-and-unmarried-americans.html>.

wages.[203] DePaulo contends that despite social prejudice, particularly towards women, the single and unmarried continue to thrive and "live happily ever after."[204]

Other research explores the many ways in which single women are rhetorosocially discounted, however. In the provocatively-titled 2009 ethnographic study, "I'm a Loser, I'm Not Married, Let's Just All Look at Me," researchers found that successful, otherwise fulfilled women in their thirties who had never been married perceived themselves both as highly visible, stigmatized by their "failure" to marry as their cohorts aged, and invisible in the displacement of their family of origin.[205] Another ethnography of women aged thirty to sixty living alone and unmarried shows that the rhetorosocial resources available to unmarried women for identity formation are polarized, pitching empowered living contra-convention against denigrated spinster, and argues that "single female identity" is taken-for-granted and discursively underdeveloped.[206]

I suggest that the impoverishment of "single female" is due in part to the historical suspicion of singlehood as deviant that is perpetually reinforced in rhetorosociality through heteronormitivity. Historian Stephanie Cootz points out how unmarried women, particularly older ones, were often labeled as "neurotic" or otherwise

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[203] Bella DePaulo, Singlism: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Stop It (New York: Doubledoor, 2011): 2-10.

[204] Bella DePaulo, Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored and Still Live Happily Ever After (New York: St. Martin's, 2007) 37-50.

[205] Elizabeth Sharp and Lawrence Ganong, "I'm a Loser, I'm Not Married, Let's Just All Look at Me: Never Married Women's Perceptions of Their Social Environment," Journal of Family Issues 32.7 (2011): 956 -980.

[206] Jill Reynolds, The Single Woman: A Discursive Investigation (New York: Routledge, 2008) 12, 107.

mentally unfit for fully-fledged adult [sexual] life in the first half of the 20th century.[207] This depiction jives with archetypes of the unmarried from witchy crone to homosexual bachelor teacher. Much of the deviance associated with singlehood, from hysteria to criminality, results from dual rhetorosocial collapses: the collapse of "gay" with "pervert" and "single" with "gay."

Although I will not follow the archeology of these collapses, leaving it instead in the more capable hands of literary scholars Juliana Smith and Eve Sedgwick, I think it worthwhile to point out the way the marriage equality movement, focused on securing the right to legally recognized marriage for lesbians, gays, and transgender people, has mobilized pathetic rhetoric normalizing monogamous marriage between two sexually intimate adults as the only legitimate forum for childrearing and securing rights of property and says to heterosexuals, "we are just like you."[208] I make no argument that members of the LBGT community should not have all the rights afforded to the heterosexual community, or that members of the LBGT community are not just like "us." It is the fact that the "us" in question represents married heterosexuals that concerns me. Single people of all persuasions are othered when marriage is held up as a sacred right/rite. Those who do not partake of that right/rite are marginalized as less-than: less deserving, less capable, less sane, less actualized.

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[207] Stephanie Cootz, A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique in American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s (New York: Basic Books, 2011) 15.

[208] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley, CA: U California P, 1990).

Patricia Juliana Smith, Lesbian Panic (New York: Columbia UP, 1997).

Connected to the sentiment that singleness is the result of inadequacy, possibly of moral failings, loved ones were concerned for the collaborators' safety when dating online. While all the women who discussed their experiences with me acknowledged taking safety precautions (some more than others), all also admitted to being in difficult or uncomfortable rhetorical situations with men (including Chrissie, who identifies as a lesbian) that ranged from inappropriate disclosures to threatening behavior. All the collaborators acknowledged a certain element of risk in Internet dating but were ambivalent about whether or not this risk was greater than "off-line" dating. Some women said the lack of context for meeting someone was unsettling, but the precautions they took when meeting someone were the same as they would be when going on a first date with someone they met in person.

In the circulation of discourse swirling around online dating in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the stage was set for an internet dating site that both neutralized the perceived risk associated with online dating and countered the stereotypes attached to it. eHarmony was able to do both. eHarmony's marketing campaign not only used the language of science and pre-ordained romance, but also capitalized on what I refer to as technofear. Because the flip side of the premium of accessibility (discussed in Chapter 4) is exposure and vulnerability, i.e., making oneself available to potential predators online in order to be available to potential Mr. Rights, eHarmony's concept of screening helps counteract this sense of exposure. To put this another way, the risk created by technology is then solved by further technological intervention. It is only through research-tested methods of compatibility matching, that the risk of online dating can be negated.

None of the collaborators were drawn to eHarmony strictly because they saw it as a safer alternative to online dating. Chrissie, one of the few collaborators with positive things to say about the service, had a very critical view of technofear, linking online dangers to similar threats that existed before the advent of Internet technologies.

> No concerns whatsoever. No, I don't have any concerns [about online dating]. I feel like the concerns are the same with people you meet everyday. Jeffery Dahmer and [other serial killers] were all just great in person and they met people on the street. People flip out that you can type your name into Google and it will tell you your name and address. And they [people who don't understand] freak out over this. I am like, don't you own a phone book? People don't make the connection. People are like "Oh my god, the computer!"

All the collaborators felt themselves more critical of technofear than general consumers and better able to assess actual–as opposed to perceived–risk. All felt that the danger to them lay in the biological world, not the electronic one.

Despite its hollowness with collaborators, or perhaps because of it, the eHarmony crafting of technofear has proved persuasive. Again deploying the language of scientific expertise, eHarmony television commercials suggest that the *29 dimensions* matching method not only connects users with others with whom they would be appropriately matched but also implicitly protects them from the unpredictability of dating via the internet. The commercials sell this expert intervention into private life not as invasive but as a helpful assistance: in the "most important decision of your life, you don't want to just leave it to chance," asserts former member "David," (married in September 2004 to "April") an attractive tanned man in his mid-forties with tousled salt and pepper hair filmed with the ocean in the background wearing surfing shorts and a t-shirt. The earnest tone and middle class target audience of the advertisement calls to mind financial services commercials airing at the same time such as those for Edward Jones that featured

attractive "everyday" people reporting on the need for professional help to navigate difficult waters. The suggestion that a modern single person might outsource finding a partner, like managing financial investments, is advanced in a television commercial with "success story" couple Joshua and Tanyalee, married July 7, 2007. Tanyalee states, "When you own your own business, there is no time to go out. So I went on eHarmony to let them find Mr. Right for me."[209] Although on the surface these advertisements seem to attest to eHarmony's efficacy, they conjure both the image of a concierge service of convenience, "no time to go out," but also as a protective measure against the "chance" of mishandling the "most important decision of your life." These messages credential the service, suggesting it is the only place for busy singles, absorbed in their lives, committed to finding marriage partners, to find matches.

eHarmony uniquely targets women with these advertisements. The focus on long-term relationships was no doubt appealing to both women and men but the pathos claims that foreground comfort, expertise, guidance, and appropriate pacing subtly suggest fear just as they suggest safety. Neil Clark Warren credits the higher number of female than male registrants on eHarmony, an anomaly for an online dating site, to the "extensive focus on safety, and our obvious commitment to thoroughness."[210]

This "commitment to thoroughness" extends beyond the eHarmony matching process to the dating stage. The site regulates registrant behavior to foster relationships (some collaborators said "force") between users. Feeding on the technofear phenomena, Match.com recently announced it would now screen all users against sex offender

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[209] "Meet Our TV Couples," eHarmony, 30 Jun. 2010 <http://www.eharmony.com/success/tv/tanyalee-joshua>.

[210] Lopez.

registries. Acknowledging without explicitly stating as such, the CEO of Match said that the decision to screen was made to meet the expectations of the public even though the company had rejected the idea for a number of years because of the registries' "historical unreliability."[211] Like many of the "checks" and verifications of users, these moves are responses to lawsuits and rhetorosocial ideas about what online dating actually is. In the case of Match.com, a woman recently filed suit after she was sexually assaulted by a man she met through the site. Alleging that a company as large as Match has the resources to screen out sexual predators, the plaintiff claims the company has a responsibility to do so.

Match.com's move will no doubt prompt competitor sites to follow suit. eHarmony, as I discussed previously, already represents itself as the safest option among dating sites because it uses an extensive personality assessment to diagnose what it terms "the emotionally unstable" among applicants, touting the fact that it rejects many users for this reason. True.com verifies the marital status of users through public record searches. Here, technosociality folds back on itself: Solving the biosocial hazards of technosociality with more technology.

Love Making Machine

Without minimizing what happened to the plaintiff in the case against Match, it is worthwhile teasing out the rhetorosocial and technosocial implications of assigning a reading and research responsibility to an online dating site. Before lawsuits like the current case against Match came to light, many users assumed that dating sites automatically performed a screening function and that such screening was reliable. This

[211] Eyder Perlata, "Dating Site Match.com Will Now Check Users Against Sex Offender Database," The Two Way, NPR.com, 18 Apr. 2011, 21 Apr. 2011, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2011/04/18/135514625/dating-site-match-com-will-now-check-users-against-sex-offender-database?sc=fb&cc=fp>.

notion is connected to wider popular ideas about the nature of information on the web. First among those assumptions is that *all* information is available for those savvy enough to retrieve it, perhaps through skilled Google and database searching. This notion takes seriously the metaphor of the Information Super Highway, an on-ramp to all that is knowable, and in this particular landscape, everything is knowable. Second, many users operate from assumptions about the accuracy and infallibility of information on the internet, assigning greater rhetorical power to an invisible (imaginary) information archiving machine that provides unalterable "facts." We as a culture might be a few years past the trusting belief in every Wikipedia article, but the ethos presented by online dating sites is assumed to be both comprehensive and known. That a miscreant could register for a dating site under an alias, and therefore not be detected in a sex offender database scan is not a conceivable possibility in this assumption. In addition, this assumption lends a tremendous amount of authority to the corporations who deliver online dating services, suggesting that if they have the resources to do such searching, their results will be more reliable than a single individual's technological and rhetorical literacy, or even instinct.

I'd like to point out that the fallible research and readings that the collaborators practiced was different from the searches that these corporations are now beginning to perform only in scale. Although the corporations present their screening procedures as comprehensive, the collaborators recognized that the information they accessed using the Internet was relatively superficial. As Chrissie pointed out, meeting someone new is always an experiment in vulnerability. If one assumes the new person is acting in good faith, the information s/he presents can be primarily trusted whether online or off. The

collaborators were all keenly aware that their own minds and experience were the best tools for assessing not only a potential match's suitability, but also his/her threat level.

Further, I posit that, in addition to the real and perceived material dangers associated with the web, online dating must counter another one: that of desentimentalizing or dehumanizing romance to the point that lovers are reduced to simply "users" and therefore the surreal aspects, or "magic" of romance is denatured. Working from Susan Dwyer's early essay on the moral dangers of cyberporn, I believe one digital threat horizon, again real or imagined, against which users push is the way online dating has the potential to make the process of partner-finding like pornography, "sterile."[212]

Outlining the paths of traditional criticisms against pornography, Dwyer argues that the effect online pornography has on its consumers, specifically encouraging "morally risky" fantasizing that perpetuates a culture of degradation and humiliation through repetitive habit, is an activity that the individual should guard him/herself against.[213] By replacing "degradation" and "humiliation" with "commodification" and "objectification," we might lobby a similar assault on online dating. It is not surprising then that online dating marketing campaigns often pathetically attempt to reinstall subjectivity for users by pointing out the individual's complex uniqueness and the campaigns' investments in the individual's happiness. However, it is this very investment–-the technosocial intervention–that effectively reduces the user's agency.

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[212] Susan Dwyer, "Enter Here – At Your Own Risk: The Moral Dangers of Cyberporn," The Impact of the Internet On Our Moral Lives, ed. Robert J. Cavalier (Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2005) 71.

[213] Dwyer 87.

As Lay, Gurak, Gravon and Myntii point out in their introduction to Body Talk, individual experiences are regulated, even if not determined, by the Foucauldian notion of "bio-power" and what anthropologist Bridgette Jordan calls "authoritative knowledge," medical and psychological expertise by a credentialed community that claims "ascendance and legitimacy."[214] Questioning the way modernism has created a seemingly closed system of best practices, they point out, "As bio-power and authoritative knowledge grew, they created a framework for how one should best live, reproduce, maintain health, even die."[215] Within this framework, women as a class became particularly subject to rhetoric employing ethical, logical, and pathetic claims that explained and defended the normative work that regulated their bodies. In the context of reproductive technologies, with which they are primarily concerned, but also in the wider application of technology to women's lives, the writers describe technology as a cultural force.

> This line of thinking proposes that society has used technology to conform and support women's subordinate position, illustrating the ideological link between technology and masculinity. Such work debates whether society has used technologies to free women (e.g., from housework), whether new technologies have given women more choices (e.g., to become pregnant later in life and detect birth defects in the womb), whether society has used technologies to oppress women (e.g., work technologies have enabled employers to raise standards for production so high that they cause repetitive stress injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome), or whether society continues to use the ideology of technology to

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[214] Mary M. Lay, Laura J. Gurak, Clare Gravon, and Cynthia Myntti, introduction, Body Talk: Rhetoric, Technology, Reproduction, eds. Mary M. Lay, Laura J. Gurak, Clare Gravon, and Cynthia Myntti (Madison, WI: U Wisconsin P, 2000) 3–26.

Bridgette Jordan, "Authoritative Knowledge and Its Construction," Childbirth and Authorative Knowledge: Cross-Cultural Perspectives, eds. Robbie E. Davis-Floyd and C. F. Sargent (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 55-79.

[215] Lay, Gurak, Gravon and Myntti 5.

> exclude women (e.g., telling girls in some subtle and not-so-subtle ways that they are not "as good" as boys are.)[216]

The effort to understand the real and imagined dangers faced by online dating users, women specifically, is aided when we consider what Peter C. Reynolds has dubbed the "One-two punch of the technocracy."[217] The society controlled through technology punches first by rhetorically (or physically) creating a problem that proponents of technology urge can be fixed by the application of suitable hard/software. The second punch is the problem created by the application of technology to that problem. Reynolds explores the operation of the one-two punch in the context of environmentalism, citing the challenges created by damming a river that then must be corrected; Robbie Davis-Floyd states that the application of technology becomes normative through rhetoric, creating the imperative of "doing all humanly possible."[218] Bourdieu has framed this kind of experience as The TINA creed ("There is no alternative"), "the most insidious of contemporary forces that leads to a wilting of political power" and stalls collective action for positive change.[219]

Despite the inherent essentialism of Davis-Floyd's contention that "this one-two punch–destroy[ing] a natural process, then rebuild[ing] it as a cultural process–is an integral result of technocratic society's supervaluation of science and technology over nature," the construct is useful for considering the rhetorical production of online dating

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[216] Lay, Gurak, Gravon and Myntti 11.

[217] Peter C. Reynolds, Stealing Fire: The Mythology of the Technocracy (Palo Alto, CA: Iconic Anthropology Press, 1991) 4.

[218] Davis-Floyd 278.

[219] Pierre Bourdieu, Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1998) 78-82.

and its relationship to collaborators' reading processes.[220] Davis-Floyd (with Joe Dummit) makes this statement in reference to the interference the authoritative application of technology causes in reproduction: infertility problems caused by environmental factors that are then corrected by reproductive technologies; the injection of petosin into a pregnant woman to speed labor after slowing it by forcing her to lie on her back, administering pain medications, and denying her food and drink.

Putting this in terms more apt to my discussion, we could consider the first punch of the technocracy to be the rhetorosocial vulnerability created when a user enters a virtual space like online dating to fix the problem of "human isolation," a notion created through the rhetoric of capitalism that abhors the single woman. The second punch might be the intervention of online screening via dating technologies. This rhetoric is both essentialist and fallacious when considering the experiences of collaborators. Further, the kind of data gathering and management Elle and other collaborators performed also speaks to how the online process makes visible the capital machinations of romance. One complaint of experienced users is that the ritual of dating became drained of both "magic" and "naturalness." This seeming contradiction, that dating was neither magic nor natural, reveals some of the tensions in the stories we create to describe what romantic love is. That a woman meeting a life partner/man could feel both natural and supernatural further betrays the patriarchal entrenchment in our love rhetoric.

Online dating sites are just one example of how our rhetorosociality tries to solve patriarchy's woman problem. As Melanie Stewart Miller describes in 1998's Cracking

[220] Robbie Davis-Floyd and Joe Dumit, introduction, Cyborg Babies: Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots, eds. Robbie Davis-Floyd and Joe Dumit (New York: Routledge, 1998) 10.

the Gender Code, even advertisements from Wired magazine that addressed women did so in a fashion that limited their roles while appearing to be offering solutions.

> [In] this frenzy [to bring women to technology and technology to women] an alarming convergence is occurring–women's rush to get online so they're not left behind in the increasingly digital world of the twenty-first century is finding a disturbing resonance in the rhetoric of mainstream political cultural leaders in the advertisements of large computer corporations. This is starkly portrayed in a recent ad from Compaq computers [figure reference omitted], which uses the idea that digital technology will allow western women to bridge caregiving and career responsibilities by facilitating home telework to sell its laptop computers. The ad simultaneously urges women to join the new information economy by consuming digital technology products and reminds them that their primary responsibilities to home and family will remain constant. They are told: "You can make sacrifices for your career. You can make sacrifices for your family. Or you can choose not to make sacrifices." The message here to male consumers is both familiar and deceptively simple: far from threatening the existing unequal relations, women's use of digital technology will actually preserve and perpetuate them.

I include Stewart for her critique of the liberal feminist view that the rhetorosociality of technology will change simply by "adding women and stirring."[221] Stewart takes to task Dale Spencer as a classic example of this utopian view of change. Spencer argues that societal values of women's relationship to technology will change–as the view of women drivers has changed since the invention of the automobile–if enough women get online quickly enough.[222] The experience of the collaborators supports Stewart and refutes liberal techno-feminists like Spencer. At the same time, I find it more significant that the collaborators held the patriarchal capitalism of online dating in tension and were able to derive (some) of what they wanted out of it, reading both other users and the sites themselves.

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[221] Melanie Stewart Miller, Cracking the Gender Code: Who Rules the Wired World, Women in Print ser. (Toronto: Sumach, 1998) 57.

[222] Dale Spencer. Nattering on the Net: Women, Power, and Cyberspace (Toronto, Garamond Press, 1995) 251-255.

Conclusion

I discuss the reading practices of the collaborators in the context of online dating's complicity in capitalism, not to resurrect critiques of the Internet as a dangerous place for women (or men, for that matter) but to empower the bio/techno/rhetorosocial subject position(s) of users. My intention has been to make visible the very real work users perform on the human and nonhuman actants around them. The collaborators' experience demonstrates how the rhetorical processes associated with online dating are shaped by online dating sites, but also how media literate users are able to craft considerable "read arounds" that attempt to reshape or re-perform the privileges afforded by the sites; they are capable of filling in gaps with their own experiential evidence and conclusions, their own set of givens and knowns. This form of inter-reading involved collaborators theorizing online dating and other uses in rhetorical and psychological terms, interpreting scanty information to create a fuller picture of a whole life, not just a whole person. The sophisticated reading/poaching processes show that users are able to co-opt the mechanisms of online dating for their own ends. The rhetorical methods of the collaborators are simply that, methods of use born of use. The collaborators' "read arounds" in part due to the intentionality of the sites' designers but also in service of the collaborators' biosociality, something the sites try to harness but largely fail to control. Further, the collaborators' reading processes illustrate the limitations of both technosociality (like biosociality) to innovate beyond the reach of the rheotorosociality that constantly changes to accommodate it.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how users write themselves into the technosociality of online dating, drawing on their reading expertise to develop rubrics of

appropriate personas, targeting potential matches by projecting a best self that triangulates the collaborator and her ideal match into an imagined, future biosociality. Further, I will demonstrate how the collaborators' efforts to write against their embodiment in technosociality indict the hypersexualization of unattached women in rhetorosociality.

CHAPTER 4: WRITING

By way of illustrating the exigence that propelled many collaborators to experiment with online dating, I offer my own anecdote: It was my 24th birthday, and I had finally broken things off with a man I had been dating on and off for four years. In a strange convergence of events, I also had no power or water at my house in the Duke Forest thanks to a freak ice storm, so I was living out of my English department office, showering at the campus gym. Over a quiet birthday dinner, I confessed to feeling I had nothing to show for the year–no real job as I crept along in graduate school, no boyfriend, no power–one of my friends suggested I try Match.com. Later that night, in my darkened office, rather than sleep, I paid a six-month subscription fee (I wasn't feeling optimistic that I would find someone datable in three months, and I was too savings-conscious to pay a higher month-to-month fee) and completed a profile. That evening spent composing, drafting, and browsing resulted from and culminated in the [rhetorosocial] framing of my biosocial identity as one that might be enhanced by technosocial intervention.

As I discuss below, the moment of intervention for the collaborators similarly blended the bio/techno/rhetorosocial worlds through on-line dating. The intent of collaborators to alter their biosocial world, changing how they lived materially, was exercised through online dating, and its technosociality was a mechanism for that change.

That change is first imagined through their online dating profiles and posts, deploying rhetorical techniques to define their technosocial selves (representations of their biosocial selves) created through discourse, writing their bodies into existence.

The collaborators' textual adventures in online dating illuminate the reciprocal relationship between technosociality and biosociality, as well as pockets of opportunity within a wider reaching rhetorosociality that warehouses the existing ways to think, and therefore live. Against this rhetorosocial background, how we perceive our actions and those of others is constantly reinvented by biosocial and technosocial experience. Further, online dating provides a new way to understand the use of technology as a tool to craft an identity and the effects of that technosociality on the biosocial realm. The triangulated nature of the bio/techno/rhetorosocial realms harnesses (but occasionally resists) the symbolic nature of online dating, oscillating between and imagined better future and the "accuracy" of biosociality.

Judiciously combining these Janus-faced imperatives--a rose-colored picture of one's self and a candid admission of one's imperfections–the collaborators crafted a technosocial persona that could be a viable "best self." None took as a given that "there were things you just should put out there," and all worried about the risk of rejection. All admitted to working hard during their tenure, past or present, as an online dater, but each found pleasure in aspects of this labor. Some found the most enjoyable parts to be the collaboration online dating made possible with their friends. Others simply enjoyed the sites as a medium for self-discovery or reinvention, even if momentarily. Troubled as they may have been by representation, efficacy, and regulation–some of the topics I

discuss below–they view their experiences lightly. Most feel that they got out of online dating what they came for.

While offering an opportunity for empowering the collaborators to pursue pleasure, their experiences also shed light on the double-edged nature of technology as both a method of gender regulation but also as a tool to resist this policing and to buy some ambiguity for invention and maneuverability outside of rhetorosociality, or more aptly within it, despite the obvious paradox.

One feature of the technosociality of online dating that afforded collaborators room to step outside of what they understood to be the strictures of biosocial relationships was the ambiguity of intention. As I discuss in the section below, rather than feeling compelled on a linear path towards a permanent, monogamous relationship, collaborators wrote their technosocial selves into a position of deflecting assumptions and expectations about their intentions. Further, because they concurrently pursued a goal less certain than marriage while remaining open to it, the collaborators redefined the success of their technosocial efforts.

Defining Intent and Success

Defining precisely what the collaborators wanted out of online dating is a harder prospect that it might first appear. Despite sites' efforts to identify these goals and write in users' motivations, such as marriage or dating, the collaborators resisted the inevitable pinning down of these efforts, asserting their own use as apart from these telescopic maneuvers. Specifically, simply engaging in a relationship was simultaneously too small a project and too large of one, both rhetorosocially and biosocially. On one hand, the collaborators rejected the notion that online dating was a ticket to a committed relationship. As I discussed in the previous chapters, the technosociality of eHarmony

that attempted to reconfigure biosocially single users into attached ones failed to craft adequately the collaborators' desires, overwriting their biosocial narratives with an intrusive and monolithic rhetorosociality. On the other hand, to say that collaborators experimented with online dating just to meet people or "date" minimizes the larger biosocial endeavors collaborators undertook. By crafting an online dating persona – a technosocial self – the collaborators began refashioning their biosociality in ways that stretched far beyond making technosocial connections. They were writing to change their lives and the way they lived them, using the technosocial to remake the biosocial.

When we in writing studies describe the possibilities for alternate online personas stemming from one physical body, we often conjure examples that are satisfying in their shocking extremes, elves, aliens, and third genders. The possibilities for an alternate self exist in online dating, but those selves are often only subtly different from the biosocial realm and demonstrate the "soft mastery" of collaborators as agents.[223] Like the collaborators, I used online dating not just as an opportunity to find love or enjoy sociality but as an engine of change in my life. Through that process, I imagined a change in myself, a refining of my identity. In his article on the rise of citizen reviewers on Amazon.com, Douglas Hesse links the texts we create (memo to memoir) to our cultural turn towards a digital world in which we increasingly mark everything with our subjective life writing. He argues "To write oneself into the information–or against it–is an act of self-constitution not only for the writer but for the reader. . . [T]he thousands of Amazon.com reviewers and a vast realm of discourse–perhaps less about books than

[223] Turkle, Life 51.

about me."[224] Essential to this writing of the personal, Hesse suggests, is the move from private to public arenas. In the vein of Richard Miller's claim that we live in a "world where all writing. . . competes on a level playing field," Hesse points out that our bio/technosocial identity is all the less knowable.[225] Hesse concludes, "When the circle of readers we know personally is too small to accommodate the selves some of us put forth, we look for bigger circles."[226] Reading between Hesse's lines, I suggest that we as writers need to declare ourselves to others simply because it is in the social network (online or off) that we actually form our identities, in the presence of "others." For myself and the collaborators, our (re)declarations of self were made through our online dating postings and profiles and the dialogue with others that these technosocial selves create.

The majority of collaborators recounted a significant biosocial event in the past, such as the dissolution of a long-term relationship, a relocation, or the starting of a new job before they began to consider the possibility of online dating. However, although they saw those significant life events as the point when they began to consider online dating, the exigence of actually beginning was some time later after they had taken off-line (biosocial) stock of the situation. This period could last as long as years. For example, Patricia was widowed in her late twenties then went to graduate school, started a career, and raised her child. It was several years after her daughter left home before she

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[224] Douglas Hesse, "Identity and the Internet: The Telling Case of Amazon.com's Top Fifty Reviewers," The Private, the Public, and the Published: Reconciling Private Lives and Public Rhetoric, eds Barbara Couture and Thomas Kent (Logan: Utah State UP, 2004) 152.

[225] Richard E. Miller, "Why Bother with Writing?" The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives Against the Grain, spec. issue of College English 64.1 (2001): 41-62.

[226] Hesse 151.

first began using newspaper personals and then eventually shifted to online dating when paper forms started to lose relevance. Suzanne, who is also divorced with adult children, allowed a significant lapse of time after the break-up of a long-term relationship with a man she was dating before joining eHarmony.

For Kelsey, like many of the younger collaborators, the process that brought her to eHarmony was more a holistic approach to her life than just her recent break-up. The first time she used the service she was circumspect on many changes in her life: She had graduated from a Master's program, relocated to the Triangle, survived a "disastrous" break-up with her college boyfriend, and started a new job where she was "the youngest person by twenty years." Although she did not get much out of her initial period on eHarmony beyond some funny stories, after another trying period in her life where she "had some stuff going on," she was convinced by a generous friend to embark on joint "life improvement projects."

> But then about a year later, a girlfriend of mine – I was going through some stuff and we needed a Kelsey Improvement Project, a KIP, 'cause she was going through the Selena Improvement Project, the SIP. So she decided she was going to do eHarmony but she wasn't going to do eHarmony unless I was going to do eHarmony. And I just refused, I said absolutely not. But she insisted and for my birthday gave me a three month subscription. It was very generous. And she sat me down and said, we are going to redo your profile together. And she was laughing at my photos. And another thing that had happened between then and my earlier thing was that I had lost a lot of weight. I had had a medical issue but I had also had lifestyle changes too. So I looked completely different. I had some stuff going on but I had a better sense of self.

As Kelsey describes it, her use of eHarmony as an integral part of the KIP was not only testing ground for a better life/new identity complete with a new profile, better pictures and a "better sense of self" but also a confidence building exercise to demonstrate to herself, rather than to potential matches, that this new self was viable.

The collaborators described online dating as an outlet to continue the work of building better self-esteem, a project that was enmeshed with dating but also independent from it. Dafina describes a similar ideation when faced with moments of non-being:

> About two and half years ago [was the first time I used online dating.] I had gone through a really big change. I received gastric bypass surgery and went under that and for a long time for me personally, I had issues with how I looked and my weight and other things like that. I'd been hit on and things like that, that wasn't an issue but it was my own issues. Surrounding food, surrounding my body, surrounding my own self-esteem. So after I went through a period where I had significant weight loss, I did some online dating…So I did it with BlackPlanet a few years ago and I met a good number of men. So I had started this basic journey with myself. I was still in graduate school. I didn't know where I was going to end up. I met [people in] different walks of life. [The second time], I had just broken up with my boyfriend and I was like, do men still find me attractive? Yes, oh good.

As Dafina describes it, the process of being approached by potential matches is in and of itself an external confidence-booster that helped her self-esteem. Patricia referred to this as "a game of 'Who likes me today?'" However, I take from Dafina and the stories of other collaborators that, as Dafina said, "meeting people from different walks of life" also helped them foster a sense of self-acceptance that could only be gained by technosocially test-driving the biosocial self. While these activities were enmeshed within the larger project that was crafting self-esteem, they also served an important escapist purpose, as Sophia elaborates

> I had just broken up with my boyfriend of seven years and I had moved in with a good friend of mine from college and she was doing online dating through Yahoo! Personals. She was having a lot of success with it, probably because she was very young and very beautiful. And she was the sort of person who would get a thousand responses to her post and have the fun of wading through them and reading the humorous responses and that sort of thing. And so she talked me into doing it. I was just interested in casual dating. I wanted to go out and have some fun and be distracted from all the turmoil that was going on around me.

Online dating took collaborators away from themselves where they could envision and enact a better self and life. All the collaborators agreed that one of the draws for online dating was that it supplied fun. Chrissie admitted to simply enjoying filling out the profiles, with no firm expectation of actually meeting anyone through the site. Elle went so far as to call online dating a "hobby" for her. As I explore in this chapter, online dating is a highly creative enterprise in which users imagine a future they have not seen while simultaneously limiting the choices available to the self inhabiting that future.

The younger collaborators also expressed that they joined online dating sites because they liked the clarity of rhetorical intent as expressed through membership. They reported that while they met possible partners in their off-line lives, these budding relationships did not necessarily lend themselves to developing in the direction that collaborators desired due to the "counter-publics" of circulating discourses about sexuality, marriage, and heterosexual womanhood.[227] Like Suzanne, who resented the rhetorosocial expectation that women should enter into relationships with men the same age and older, even if it meant the relationship was primarily one of care-taking, these younger collaborators felt their desires and motivations overinterpreted. They felt constrained by a rhetorosociality that suggested that, to bastardize Jane Austen, a young woman with a good education and job must be in want of a husband. (If she wasn't, she must be in want of a meal ticket.) For the collaborators, like Elle, Kelsey, Rachel, Antoinette, and Caroline, joining an online dating site was a gesture that signaled interest in what they termed a "serious" relationship but that did not necessarily mean marriage or cohabitation. They also felt comfortable, at least initially, interpreting other users'

[227] Coogan 465.

presence on the site as sign enough that they too were interested in the same. To put this in another way, and apply Judith Butler's argument that there is political worth in appearing under the sign "lesbian" in a post-modern moment, appearing under the sign "online dating user" is a potent enough symbol that it carries with it an implied purpose and orientation. Collaborators felt that, while the people they met in their face-to-face lives might have the makings of a good partner, discovering their intentions towards a relationship often proved too wrought. Some of the collaborators reported that they felt hesitant to discuss a relationship more serious than "just randomly hooking up" for fear of appearing "clingy" or "marriage goggled." Because the attitudes denigrating long-term relationships (and people who pursue them) pervaded their biosocial networks, the collaborators decided to look outside of those networks.

As discussed above, the exigence for joining an online dating site was often the collaborator's desire to improve her life after a life-altering situation by getting out of the house to socialize/experiment/date. When asked what ultimate goal they had in mind when they joined their first, second, or even third online dating site, the collaborators were vague in their responses. Some stated that while they were interested in a more permanent or long-term relationship, marriage or living together was not on their immediate agenda. For the collaborators like Patricia who were veterans of online dating, often the "end goal" evolved over months and sometimes years of use. Patricia reports that she would have once said marriage was her ultimate goal but after many years of "being [her] own person," she is not sure she could live with someone again. She instead locates her ultimate goal somewhere near "male companionship." She clarifies by stating that she has plenty of women friends with whom to confide and to pursue "women's

things" that interest her like lace-making and embroidery; she would enjoy the regular perspective of a man in her life. She states she has not yet located the regular companion and that fact, on one hand, is disappointing. However, because she has communicated with and been out on many dates, she also feels that she has been to a degree successful at online dating. Caroline who says she didn't really have a goal when she first joined beyond "dating, just meeting people" says she now recognizes she was "looking for a boyfriend," a serious relationship that became a marriage.

Sophia also wanted to look outside of her immediate biosocial network but for a different purpose. After the break-up of her long-time partnership and "two weird marriage proposals" from men she considered friends, she wanted to date casually, something that was impossible within her biosocial network ("circle of readers") given the currently loaded atmosphere. She confided that, like many others described above, she wanted to "have fun" and "be distracted from the turmoil going on around her," something not currently a biosocial possibility. Further, she wanted greater control to manage consequences than biosociality allowed. "Having fun" was only fun if it was strictly short-term. As she said, "I was worried [a dating relationship] would turn permanent." For Sophia, online dating provided a technosocial outlet for biosocial "fun" without triggering the relational complications associated with her established network. In technosociality, Sophia could walk away. While acknowledging that many women use online dating "for husband shopping and that can turn guys off," her pursuit of a "just for now" relationship would have long-standing repercussions if exercised within her current circle, perhaps exploiting friendships.

Using online dating sites helped the collaborators practice enacting a new identity outside of social stigma. The collaborators' association between efficiency and a desire to explore new relationships that are not strictly marriage-directed (but might be) is tied to the electronic nature of the medium. Whereas relationships that originated in the biosocial world seemed polarized–definitely headed towards long-term relationship or immovably platonic (even if the relationship was sexual)–relationships that originated technosocially provided more room for growth and experimentation. Within this maneuverability, the collaborators could write themselves a subjectivity "outside the master narrative," creating for themselves a rhetorosociality that provided them more choice and greater power to self-determine.[228]

Despite the intensely self-concerned nature of online dating and the greater life improvement projects collaborators intended to accomplish through it, other users played essential roles in that process. I will explore later how users created a technosocial persona that constructed or "wrote in" prospective matches, but first it is important to describe the process of selecting an online dating site, the doorway to finding those matches. This process was remarkable for the manner in which it was marked by the kind of partner (and relationship) the collaborator was motivated towards.

The Rhetoric of Efficacy

A site's perceived efficacy, that is, the ability of an online dating site to deliver the relationship (and partner), and through these things the lifework, the collaborator desired was crucial to the collaborators' technosociality. Further, the language the collaborators used to define that efficacy changed with use. The evolving rhetoric of

[228] Richard A. Lanham, The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993) 29.

efficacy shows the biosocial involvement within the technosocial realm and the effect of use on how collaborators related to their technosocial selves. While their long-term goals may have been nebulous and shifting, the exigence each collaborator responded to played a critical role in how she interpreted online dating sites' purposes and therefore how she chose a site for her own use. For collaborators who stated they wanted a "relationship," their motivation was to find one with the "right" person, not simply "any old person." After all, as Elle pointed out, she didn't need to spend money to go online to "just date someone to date [them.]" For this reason, these collaborators evaluated sites by how many of the "right" kind of potential matches they would have access to if they joined. It was the site's purpose, in the eyes of these collaborators, to perform a task straight out of the "better productivity with computers" mythos of the mid-twentieth century: expedite and facilitate a meeting that would be onerously slow (or impossible) in the biosocial realm.[229] Collaborators were not willing to spend time "wading through," as they often described the process, the profiles of "duds" and "no-go's" to find the few matches who might yield something interesting. This was the case even if they intended only to respond to contact, rather than initiate it. It makes sense then that they would select sites where the likelihood of meeting the "right" person was greatest. For these collaborators, the emphasis was on accessibility, both in the concentration of the right kind of people and the right kind of technosociality to help them to connect with those people.

Still, not all collaborators were motivated by a desire to enter a relationship, and even those who were found other motivations. Despite eHarmony's telescoping towards

[229] Ted Friedman, Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture (New York, NYU P, 2005) 57–62.

marriage, the evangelical Christian faith of its founder,[230] and its initial failure to acknowledge queer relationships, Chrissie [a lesbian] joined the site.[231] Obviously not anticipating finding a match – as she would only be matched to men--she said she was drawn by the extensive personality questionnaire. Chrissie frequently seeks out online quizzes, "just for fun . . . to see where [she] would fit" and eHarmony's *29 dimensions* intrigued her. When she was matched ultimately to a good male friend of hers, she found the experience gratifying and affirming of both her closeness to her friend and the validity of eHarmony's methods. (She joined the site during a free trial period and was never asked to declare her sexual orientation or preference.) She states that her primary motivation was curiosity about how the site worked, acknowledging that the time she spent on the site would probably not advance her own romantic endeavors. (She troubled this assertion by insisting, "you never know.") With a similar nod towards exploring an online dating site in the name of curiosity rather than results, Chrissie had also posted a profile on the Personals section of PlanetOut but opted not to pay for a subscription. The process became an exercise in self-examination, finding out how she might represent

[230] As I discuss in chapter 2, fundamental religion was source of both suspicion and concern for the collaborators. Many described it as a "red flag." That some were willing to use a site created by an evangelical Christian speaks to how well the eHarmony is packaged and its relative newness on the market.

[231] eHarmony, Inc. launched the site Compatible Partners in March 2009 for the gay and lesbian community. (It does not address bisexual or transgender people.) In the terms of service, as well as on the front sign-in page, appears the following disclaimer: "eHarmony's patented Compatibility Matching System® was developed on the basis of research involving married heterosexual couples. The Company has not conducted similar research on same-sex relationships."

Compatible Partners, 13 May 2010 <http://www.compatiblepartners.net>.

online, just to "see." For Chrissie, site efficacy hinged more on the novelty of the site and its ability to reconfigure or reconstruct rhetorosocial boundaries.

Curiosity often dovetailed with collaborators' perceptions of accessibility when assessing a site's efficacy. Caroline indicated she "played around" with Lavalife and Match.com because friends were using them and she wanted to see what it was all about. Returning to on-line dating after a relationship, Elle decided to try eHarmony because it was a novelty, it was "the new thing that people were doing." This motivation was especially true of collaborators who were under forty. Perhaps because of their histories with computers as toys (in both educational and home settings) as well experience seeing personal computers fluidly moving between work and recreation, it was easy to see on-line dating as an interesting thing to try. Here is Caroline:

> Curiosity was the prime motivator. I was interested and intrigued. I was dating people at the time but it was sort of like another venue to meet people, I guess. But it was more out of curiosity. [I went with Match after looking at Lavalife and elsewhere] because that was the one that more people were using, honestly. There were just more [not necessarily better.] There were more people. And that was the one that had the most presence, honestly. [My] friend was using it, that was the one she was looking at, and I was hearing a lot about it, so that is the one I went with.

Caroline returns to the ultimate criterion for choosing a site for her and for the majority of collaborators: perceived access to the greatest number of desirable people. Caroline understood from both the profiles she was able to access on the site and from her biosocial network that Match.com was a more popular site with the type of men she was interested in dating. The technosociality of a site was dependent in this way on its rhetorosociality; the reputation the site gathered established its perceived efficacy value.

Identifying the site with the best access–and therefore presumably the best efficacy–to the "right" kind of match became a more loaded rhetorical process for

minority women. Rachel, a Jewish woman from the Northeast, acknowledged that she probably would prefer to marry a person of her own faith but resisted using a faith-based site. She preferred access to a wide variety of men, not just Jewish men, influencing her decision to use Match.com instead of JDate. Although she read this decision as in alignment with choosing a partner who shares her faith and values, this also squares with a decision to choose an effective site.

> One thing for me, I am Jewish and my mom has talked to me about JDate and I would totally consider JDate in a bigger city. But every time I look at JDate here, I see the same guys and six months later I think "That is the same guy?" The pool here is too small, I don't want to limit myself. Hopefully, some of these guys, if these are good guys, would also be on Match or there will be still be Jewish guys on Match who didn't want to limit themselves either. But I would say that if I lived in a little bigger city. I have a cousin who married a guy from JDate and she lives in Charlotte, and she told me, it was almost the opposite logic. She told me that she didn't like most of the guys on there but she really wanted to marry a Jewish guy and it is such a small Jewish community even smaller than here that it was a good way. You find them. I was like if he doesn't exist in Charlotte, I'll have to meet him not in Charlotte. But I would totally consider it elsewhere.

For Rachel, using JDate represents too limiting a choice for a woman whose biosocial realm was located in a metropolis the size of the Triangle. The subtext to this dismissal is that JDate takes too long to meet someone of quality and is therefore ineffective. Rachel explains that "good" guys will be listed on Match in addition to JDate and the not-so good guys remain on JDate for six months or more. Match's greater efficacy is a tautology: Men who are candidates for JDate due to their commitment to Judaism are still on Match because they are ready to make a commitment now; the men who remain on JDate for months suggest they are not really interested in making a commitment. Match's turnover in membership shows it gets results. In addition, Rachel's comment reveals her implicit timetable for success by suggesting that six months is too long.

Contrast Rachel's decision to that of Dafina, an African American woman of the same age. Dafina also felt strongly about marrying a minority man and so initially elected to use Black Planet, indicating that her choice was driven by biosocial and rhetorosocial concerns.

> I think of it as knowing your market. . . I'll never be skinny. I have an ass; I have tits. Which is great, but not everyone appreciates that, type or whatever. And doing [online dating], I've gotten a lot more confidence in what kind of man appreciates me, what type of man [is] not [into] my type. Nothing personal, I am just not their type. At that time, I was still sort of bigger than I am now. And I knew at that time, I wanted to be with a black guy. I wanted to date black men. It is a mixture of both [personal and political]. It is all those things mixed together. But I don't know. A European guy. Like Clive Owen. I am waiting for him! It is just that--Or, some type of minority. Also my family. We'd have mixed kids and that is hard. I don't want beige children. Personal preference. And, if I could marry a white guy and have dark skinned children with nappy hair, that would be fine. I can't deal with the hair. I only know how to comb nappy hair. The kinds you sometimes get with mixed kids is not always conducive to nappy hairstyles. And [I] can't do this [indicating academia by lifting drafts of her dissertation chapters] and deal with the hairstyles too.

Unlike Rachel who felt a "good" Jewish man on Match would be the same as a "good" Jewish man on JDate, Dafina saw the choice to establish a profile with a so-called "ethnic" site as an allegiance to the black community. Implicit in that allegiance is an appreciation for African American women's bodies, as she says, "ass" and "tits" as well as a familiarity with the culture of her upbringing. She grounds her decision to select eventually a partner who is also a minority as a "personal preference," leaving open the validity of the choices of others who might not share this commitment. That said, she acknowledges the rhetorosocial politicization of her status as a single black woman. Dafina's statement that she couldn't deal with children who didn't have "nappy hairstyles" and academia throws into relief the multiple positions she must occupy as a woman of color in a white, male institution. To say that it is not surprising that, despite

Clive Owen's many charms, Dafina elected to not make her family a cultural borderland oversimplifies her life pressures. Anticipating the demands of family life, Dafina's "political and personal" decision to raise a family in a culturally black environment was forecasted in her rhetorical choice to "race" her online dating technology.

It is worthwhile noting, however, that when dating "just for fun" and not planning to enter a relationship, Dafina used the free site Craigslist, through which she dated both black and European men. Balanced against the motivation of accessibility was the consideration of both financial and labor expense. In her own way, each woman evaluated the cost of using a site in weighing its rhetorical value and matched that cost to her own purposes. For example, Suzanne was first drawn to eHarmony because she believed its higher enrollment fees would attract a "more serious type of person," meaning someone who was interested in a committed relationship. Here Suzanne, like some of the other participants, equated financial commitment with desire for emotional commitment. The wallet acted rhetorically for the heart, so to speak. As Sophia explains, the collapsing of money spent with investment in a relationship also accompanied a taboo against casual sex.

> [Yahoo! Personals] was also one of the cheaper options [. . .] [and] is one of the bargain basement meat markets. At least [at] the time, the tiers sort of went Yahoo! Personals, and then Match.com and then eHarmony. As far as husband hunting went. And the prices sort of went up [from there]. There was also Lavalife and MoreMarriage and Hip Urban Professionals kinda thing.

Likewise, collaborators who were ambivalent – or became ambivalent – about long-term relationships chose lower cost sites or lower cost options. As mentioned above, Dafina, after a break-up with a long-time partner and her time in graduate school nearing the end, posted on Craigslist when she was interested simply in a date to join her

for a trip with friends to the state fair. Although she was "possibly open to something more" if she met someone, she thought the genre of pay sites inappropriate. Similarly, Elle left her profile visible but failed to renew her Match membership (rendering her unable to contact other members) when her work life became hectic and she lost some of her interest in dating in general and on-line dating specifically.

Looking closer at collaborators' efforts to economize, I begin to see differences in how veteran and new online dating users understand the concepts of efficacy. Patricia, after trying other sites, including personal ads in a local independent print newspaper, ultimately settled on the free site Plenty of Fish.

> *The Independent* didn't cost anything for posters. There were a couple of times I paid to listen to some of the guys. Was [it] worth following up on? And it wasn't. So that was free. Match.com and the others--it has been so long--but I think they run like $12 a month and the more months you sign up for the lower the price goes. But I never went more than 3 months. Cause I thought if you can't get something going in three months, it is not going to happen. Somewhere along the line, I heard about this Plenty of Fish thing and I thought, well, it is free. Some guy out of Canada runs it out of his apartment. [. . .] He gets all of his money off of ads. So there is no charge for anything. And it doesn't work any better or any worse. [Laughter]

Patricia's experiences with print media personals not only influenced her writing style and expectations as a reader, as I explore elsewhere, they also influenced her perception of the need to invest personal resources into the endeavor. For Patricia, Plenty of Fish "works" well enough because she is able to compose a profile that fits her best self imperative and she is able to control who views it. In addition, Plenty of Fish includes a number of searching and metadata features that Patricia finds useful including one that allows her to see who has viewed her profile and one that allows her to see who is new to the site. These features provided good value in the sense that they are equivalent to and provide similar results as those offered on pay sites like Match and Yahoo! Personals.

Elle, also an expert long-time user of online dating, felt deep ambivalence towards the efficacy of the medium.

> I don't want to give just online dating the credit because I go back and forth as to whether it is the best medium for the long term. The long term goal is finding someone to go through life's journey with me. I am getting through it okay, but I know I would get through it better with someone else by my side. If online dating provides the medium for me to meet that person, that is fine. But I stay open to the fact that I may meet someone outside of it. I am going to brunch tomorrow with a bunch of people, one of whom is my friend X and his friend Y who I met at dinner on Friday. If Y wanted to have dinner sometime, I'd be open to that, despite the fact that we'd not met through Match. So the goal is to find a life partner, so if [online dating] doesn't, I'd be happy to write to them and say, your guarantee is crap. I keep signing up six months after six months after six. I don't know how their little guarantee works, but I am not sure how to pursue it legally.

By joking that the Match.com guarantee is "crap" and by "stay[ing] open" to the possibility she is just as likely to meet someone at brunch–a possibility that didn't seem likely when she first began online dating–Elle begins to erode the rhetoric of efficacy. Further, her decisions to "take a break" from Match may seem less like an effort to save money than a vote of no confidence.

Contrasting the notion of accessibility-as-efficacy, as Rachel described, "anyone who is worthwhile meeting on JDate will be on Match," Patricia and Elle's rhetoric of savings is typified by Patricia's statements, "if you can't get something going in three months, it is not going to happen," and "[the free site] doesn't work any better or any worse" suggest that more experienced users consider or "read" the site more thoroughly than new users who are primarily drawn in by other users. To put this another way, experienced users like Elle and Patricia, often begin to see potential dates as only one factor in selecting an on-line dating site. Their longer-term use has eroded some of the novelty of the experience of communicating with strangers on-line while exposing the mechanisms of drafting a "successful" profile. These users sometimes described

themselves as "jaded" or not "looking for prince charming." They spent less time evaluating members on the site as potentially good dates before joining. For newer users like Rachel, these mechanisms are somewhat invisible. For her, choosing a site involves almost completely a reflection of the kind of person she would like to meet.

Sherrie Turkle's discussion of "computer holding power" is useful here in understanding how the collaborators' continued use of online dating site software allowed them insight into the machinations of the online dating sites that at first were invisible. Turkle outlines the divide between hacker and hobbyist aesthetics that developed in the 1970s. Hobbyists derived pleasure in interacting with computers by building them up from scratch. In contrast to the hobbyist who focused on hardware, the hacker largely ignored the machine itself in order to develop and program intricate, complex applications. If the hobbyists pursued simplicity, safety, and transparency, the hacker walked a tightrope of workability in opacity. Hackers, in implicit competition with each other, were drawn by the danger of crashing the system as they fixed its inherent bugs.[232]

It was not until the 1980s that theorists began to formulate the aesthetic pleasures of the user, different from the hobbyists and hackers. Users gradually moved away from a traditional modernist aesthetic where they could tinker "under the hood" of a personal computer (with CPUs, DOS, UNIX) and began to embrace the postmodern simulation aesthetic of Mac's interface and MS Windows which gives the user an extension of herself within the computer with which to interact. Turkle equates this simulation aesthetic and its screen interface as what Seymour Papert called the objects-to-think-with

[232] Turkle, Life 29–32.

required for a cogent epistemology, refuting Fredric Jameson's assertion that postmodernism was only surface without depth.[233] For the collaborators, users of online dating, they interacted with the interface of the online dating sites, and through simulation experienced the pleasure of the computer holding power, at least momentarily.

Newer users, like Rachel, felt considerably more "held" by the dating sites than more experienced users. They were more optimistic that online dating sites would "work," as Patricia said, and in a timely fashion. That is to say, in Turkle's words, "if [they] did it right, *it* would do it right, and right away [emphasis in original]."[234] Chrissie, perhaps the most experienced of all the collaborators with online dating, described her ability to muster only so much motivation to make her profile "right" or "good":

> I think [the] biggest problem with queer online dating is that–and it is not like this [area] is a small area – but it is significantly limiting. It really is a finite number of people. And really the motivation to make your profile really good is just not there because you're like, I know everybody that's on here, I have seen all the profiles, and no matter how good I make mine, it isn't going to make me like theirs anymore. But now it is just kinda like I am trying to see if there is anymore sites out there [with] anymore people I haven't seen before.

Chrissie describes an issue with online dating sites that transcends just as it encompasses; she sees an online dating site's task not as creating new matches through making the people she already knows appear more attractive. Relying instead on the premium of accessibility, she views online dating sites as technosocial gateways into new

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[233] Fredrick Jameson, Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991; Durham: Duke UP, 2001) 8.

Seymour Papert, Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas (New York: Basic Books, 1980) 11.

Turkle, Life 37–49.

[234] Turkle, Life 30.

biosocial realms. When it is apparent that the site cannot perform this task, despite the user's effort, its holding power is disrupted and with it the collaborator's motivation to interact. Chrissie, like the other expert collaborators, experienced what might be termed an epistemological break with the sites she used. The consequences of this break in Chrissie's case meant that she was not willing to think-with her profile as a dating subject; she is also unwilling to think-through the dating site to consider the representations (profiles) as viable dating partners.

While collaborators' conceptions of a dating site's efficiency varied both with the writer's experience with technosociality and her understanding of the pool of viable matches, her biosocial relationship goal also influenced her choice of dating site, sometimes overriding these other factors. Further, as I explore below, the technosocial conventions of a site determined some of the writer's expectations and rhetorosocial self-presentation.

Generic Considerations

Despite being what Peter Medway might term a "baggy genre," that is allowing for many forms, much playfulness, resistance, and multiple desires, online dating sites and their requisite profiles exercise a regulatory power over the writer/user's agency.[235] As in literature, laboratory reports, and student first-year college writing, the writer (user) negotiates content within the floating confines of genre. Users must write themselves into a technosociality that shows a relationship with their biosociality while harnessing (and

[235] Quoted in Anis Bawarshi, Genre & the Invention of the Writer (Logan: Utah State U P, 2003) 92.

Originally from Peter Medway, "Understanding Architects' Notebooks: Does Genre Theory Help?" Literacy and Literature: Symposium on Genre, Simon Frazier Univ., Jan.1998.

reworking) affordances already delimited by their rhetorosociality. Following Anis Bawarshi, we can understand online dating users to be inventing with socially constructed rhetorical forms already available. Bawarshi borrows from Kathleen Jamieson's work on antecedent genres the example of George Washington's first speech to congress after winning the Revolutionary War to explain how invention is an act of "turning outward"[236]

> Faced with this unprecedented situation, the first president of the United States, who had earlier led a successful rebellion against the British monarchy, promptly responded by delivering a state of the union address "rooted in the monarch's speech from the throne" (411). That is, Washington adopted an already existing genre to respond to the demands of a new situation, a situation, ironically that had emerged as a reaction against the situation appropriate for that antecedent genre. Even more remarkably, this presidential address, so similar to the "kings' speech" in style, format, and substance, in turn prompted a response from Congress which, far from being critical of the president's speech, reflected the 'echoing speech" that the House of Parliament traditionally delivers in response to the king's speech.[237]

Bawarshi and Medway point out that the dialogic movements of the U.S. republic, while a rejection of the ideological power of the British colonial monarchy, still relied on the "style, format, and substance" of the kings' speech and echoing it to establish relationships. A similar "antecedent genre" exists for online dating. In online dating sites, although the technosocially networked nature of the mode/media is understood as profoundly different from (even a rejection of some of the hallmarks of) meet/meat market dating, it still must turn outward from that sociality and the rhetorical forms stemming from it. In this sense, the epistemological archeology, to deploy Foucault

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[236] Bawarshi 97.

[237] Bawarshi 94 -95.

Kathleen M. Jamieson, "Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraint," Quarterly Journal of Speech 61(1975): 406–415.

again, is both evolving away from the paradigm of [only] biosocial dating and using the framework of that paradigm to make sense of the new rhetorical moment within online dating.[238]

When considering how established and new genres of self and relationship shape online dating communication, I find it worthwhile to differentiate between sites that I call "strictly" dating sites and sites like Craigslist that host online personal ads as part of a conglomeration of other classified advertisements. Strictly dating sites are, of course, not "strictly" composed of dating profiles. These sites, like Match.com, JDate, eHarmony, and OkCupid often encompass a host of other features including discussion forums, relationship and dating advice, matching services, profile rating, current global and local relationship news feeds, tailored advertising, as well as videos, quizzes, and other interactive features. These "strictly" dating sites, do, however, telescope all activity on the website towards dating. General sites, like Craigslist and Salon, incorporate a smaller number of online dating posts and fewer bells and whistles. Not surprisingly, personals sites associated with online publications such as Salon and Bust Magazine attract users with strong shared affiliations to the content of the publication, despite relatively low memberships; these sites offer few features, and small profile content fields. Users on these sites frequently cite material or topics germane to these publications like particular genres of books or music, politics, or pursuits such as crafting. Like the strictly dating sites, affiliation sites ask users to establish profiles by responding to a series of prompts, thereby populating their narrative profiles with essay-style answers. The cannon of essay-style questions is relatively stable across strictly dating sites, soliciting answers about the

[238] Michel Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge (and The Discourse on Language) (New York: Vintage, 1982).

user's preferred match, her taste in books and other entertainment, and an open-ended question that asks her to write about herself. (See Table 2.) Often sites will also ask users to write about the kinds of dates they like to go on, their social "scene" or hobbies, and recreationally geared questions. Space available for responses varies from between 250 characters to 26,000 characters, with the largest allotments generally being given to those questions that ask users to discuss themselves in a non-specific sense. Rarely may users skip these questions altogether to post a profile; sites frequently post a required minimum number of characters such as 200.

Table 2 Essay-style Profile Questions from Selected Sites (Bolded if Required)

Match.com	eHarmony	OkCupid	
What do you like to do in your free time?	**Name three things for which you are most thankful in twenty words or less.**	My Self-summary	
What are some of your favorite places?	**We all have things that interest us: art, sports, music, family, faith, the environment. What are you passionate about?**	What I am doing with my life	
Share a few of your favorite things.	**Please describe two or three things that you most enjoy doing with your leisure time.**	I am really good at	
What was the last thing you read?		The first thing people notice about me	
Tell us more (Lifestyle):*		My favorite, books, music, movies and food	
Tell us more (Ethnicities):*		Six things I could never do without	
Tell us more (Faith):*		I spend a lot of time thinking about	
Describe yourself and your ideal match		On a typical Friday night I am	
		The most private thing I am willing to admit	

		You should message me if	

*Added after July 2009.

The radio button choices, so called because they ask users to click on the options that best apply to their situations, cover demographics or what is usually termed by online dating sites "basic" information or "vital statistics." I discuss some of these at length elsewhere, but it is worthwhile saying here that many of these "statistics" relate to gender, age, race, class, weight, and sexual orientation. Many of these items are force completions, meaning the user must provide an answer to establish an account. Further, rather than allowing multiple selections for items such as sexual orientation, users must select from an either/or, such as a preference for "men" or "women" or an identification as "straight" or "gay."

Attending to the technosocial self within the nuanced, conditional but strict rhetorosocial demarcations of biological existence is a feat of both intervention and invention. Both to conform to and move beyond the momentarily stabilized generic confines of online dating profiles, enacts what John Frow suggests is thought the hallmark of "good" (i.e. successful, effective, noteworthy, transformative) writing, a move that requires both critical and creative attention by users.[239] In the section below, I discuss the collaborators' composing processes in their attempts to craft "good profiles" within the generic conventions of online dating sites.

Composing Process

John Frow concludes his work on genre with these words:

> Let me conclude on this note: what we learn, in "doing" genre (in performing and transforming it), is the values we share or don't share with others and the means

[239] John Frow, Genre, New Critical Idiom ser. (New York: Routledge, 2006) 28.

> with which to challenge or defend them. Through the use of genres we learn who we are, and encounter the limits of our world.[240]

Frow writes about genre in general terms, but his is a statement with which I believe all of the collaborators would agree. By crafting a technosocial self in online dating, they explored their own "discursive limits," examining their place in the rhetorosocial realm, not only through mediation with the software to craft a profile, but also through interacting with techno- and biosocial selves of others within and without the sites.

If strictly online dating sites like Match and eHarmony provide prompts to which writers respond, thereby shaping and regulating their self construction, Craigslist (CL) users face simply a blank screen in which to compose their ads. That is not to say that CL users are not also working within generic conventions. Craigslist, which allows users to post free personal advertisements, was the platform of choice for users who expressed an interest in meeting for a single outing or meeting, such as a concert, holiday party, or as in Dafina's case, the North Carolina State Fair. Many posts, like the one below to the women-seeking-women forum on October 7, 2009, also query immediate company.

> Football anyone? - 34 (Raleigh)
> Just wondering if there is anyone in the triangle area who would like to meet up somewhere and watch football this afternoon. Just looking for some company, and always up for meeting new people.

The stated intent of a Craigslist post is a finite meeting. The single-event purpose of these posts is reinforced by the fact that they were automatically removed from the site after forty-five days, moving further down the page as newer posts are added. This is also related to the larger genre of Craigslist.org which has a history as a community-

[240] Frow 144.

moderated classified advertisement email listserv based in San Francisco that eventually grew into a global site serving thousands of local communities.[241] The transaction of a for-sale advertisement provides an antecedent genre for Craigslist posters who advertise interest in one single meeting, rather than an on-going relationship. That is not to say, however, that all Craigslist users explicitly express interest in fleeting encounters. The post below from the women-seeking-men forum on October 18, 2010, for example, combines both a suggestion for an immediate meet-up (fun this weekend), with an option for extending into a relationship (getting back into the game.)

> Looking for fun, maybe more – 38 (durham)
> Hi there, hope this finds you doing well. I'm from Durham and I'm a 38 year old divorcee. I'm getting back into the game here and thought I would start out here. I do have 2 children and a dog, lol. My ex gets the kids every other weekend...so...that means I am free this weekend to have some fun. I do like to drink occasionally and dancing is fine as well. So, what type of things do you like to do? Let me know, I'm including a picture of my self, dont [sic] be put off by the necklace, I'm really not that religious, just like the way it looks. You can see I'm a brunette and still in great shape where it counts! [Color photograph omitted of shapely young woman with long brown hair from the waist up, in a low cut orange sleeveless top wearing a large crucifix posed with her elbows bent and arms away from her sides, sitting on a couch and not quite smiling at the camera.]

The user rejects the more impersonal sales/transactional style common on Craigslist for an epistolary mode, addressing her intended audience, whom she does not describe, with a salutation, "I hope this finds you well," and a direct question, "[W]hat kinds of things do you like to do?" She provides demographic or vital statistic information about herself that would be addressed through radio buttons in her description of herself, giving her age, and marital and child status. She also provides information about her religious inclination and physical body primarily through the picture.

[241] "Craigslist," Wikipedia, 16 Oct. 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craigslist>.

Posts on Craigslist share the most in common with profiles on strictly dating sites when they show their roots in newspaper personal ads. This post combines information about the writer with information about the match for whom she is searching.

> Wanted: One Good Country Man – 40 (Smithfield)
> Wanted : One Good Country Boy...
> Must be between 39 and 45 years old, white male, between 200 and 300 lbs. If you are shaved head and have a goatee thats a plus but not nessecary [sic].
> im tired of all the games. i just want a man who will appreciate me as much as i will appreciate him. a man who will love me as much as i will love him.
> I will be honest with you upfront I am a full figured country girl so if you dont like meat on your bones then im not for you.
> Things i like to do are to go to my favorite club and listen to live music on Saturday nights and visit with friends. i also like to just curl up on the couch and watch a good movie.
> So if you think this is you drop me a line and put Good Country Boy in subject line and please attach a pic. I am attaching mine here…[Black and white headshot photograph omitted of a white woman with mid-length blonde hair, looking over her "librarian's glasses" with a small mischievous smile.]

The post above combines three rhetorical moves common in Craigslist ads that state a desire for a relationship. First, it states the writer is "tired of all the games." While referring to dating as "the game" is common parlance in Craigslist and elsewhere, writers/users who express interest in relationships often deploy this phrase to express disgust or exasperation with casual dating. (Compare this with the "getting back into the game" and "have some fun" language used in the first post.) This move when combined with the expression of desire for a companionate partnership, "someone who will appreciate me as me as i will appreciate me. a man who will love me as much as i will love him," serves not only as a statement of commitment to egalitarian partnership but also as a warning against those who might misread this poster as a passive doormat. Further, the writer subsumes a professional identity within a personal one, uniting public and private lives. These rhetorical moves also demonstrate some of what I will later

describe as a balancing of tensions as the writer relates her interests, locating herself both in her "favorite club [listening] to live music on Saturday nights" and at home "curl[ed] up on the couch [watching] a good movie." This balancing of the public self and the private self together help craft a "best self" intended to show the user as a renaissance woman adroit in a multitude of settings, domestic and social. (See "Care and Feeding of the Best Self" below for more on this.)

Whether crafting a best self on Craigslist or on a strictly dating site, learning the conventions is not a passive project. As fascinating and circumspective as online dating could be, the collaborators also agreed it was extremely labor intensive. As Dafina said, "It is a job to online date!" Many of the collaborators eventually felt it necessary to set limits on online dating work, compartmentalizing their lives into online dating time and non-online dating time. Rachel and Patricia allowed themselves to only do a set amount each day during work hours (e.g., check email upon arriving and at lunch) so as not to let the task overwhelm them. On the other hand, Elle required herself to do a minimum amount each day in order to stay "proactive" in her dating life. Many of the jobs associated with online dating had to with "sifting," the reading and sorting of potential matches' profiles and responding to make contact.

Many of the collaborators came to online dating at the urging or suggestion of a friend, sometimes, but not always, another woman. In many cases, these friends partnered with the collaborators in drafting or revising the profile materials, serving as writing partners. All the collaborators could cite at least one instance in which they performed online dating activities, such as searching out and reading profiles, drafting profile/email language, or discussing online dating experience, with a female friend. The sympathetic

responder was not always female, however. In Dafina's case, she partnered with two male friends to find dates on Craigslist for the North Carolina State Fair. The trio sat together on the couch, reading each other their posts, sounding out ideas and suggesting wording. For Kelsey, the process of revising her eHarmony profile during the "KIP" or "Kelsey Improvement Project" was not only a collaborative writing experience, it was an exercise in honesty with her friend. Selena offered not only advice on photographs Kelsey should include, but also on crafting her online and offline self.

> She looked at my pictures and said "I can't believe you put a picture of you with a parrot on your head! A real live parrot!" I was like, "It was funny! I am like quirky fun girl! What are you talking about? I am the girl who has a parrot on her head!" Anyway, so she went and said, "think about the kind of guy you are going to attract with that kind of photo." So I said, "okay the photo goes." So she actually went through all of my photographs and she and I choose the four photos you can put and ended up putting the ones that made me look younger and thinner and fun without being quirky. And so it was more like, "hi, I am world traveler fun," and "hi, I am sophisticated fun." And "hi, I am non-threatening fun." As opposed to "I am a goofball fun." I am, but we can't let them know on the first [communication.] And then we went through the profile and she helped me re-write stuff. Which was helpful because it was helpful to [demonstrating] who I am in a lot of ways. Because on like activities, she'd say, "you say you do this but you just want to do this, you don't actually do this." She'd be like "what do you actually do on a day-to-day basis?" We'd have that dialogue and that would help. It was actually the perfect way to do the eHarmony dating.

Eschewing the "quirky" and "goofball," Kelsey's friend helped her cultivate a "best self" profile that emphasized her sophistication (world traveling) and cultivated some mystery (not emphasizing her goofiness). Elle, who like Kelsey has sought the help of friends to revise radically her Match profile several times, also found the most helpful (and satisfying) experience came when she could discuss it with a friend. She cited several examples, some involving female friends. She ultimately found the most useful critique of her profile came from a male friend who was able to offer her practical advice like the kind Selena gave Kelsey. Likewise, Elle's male friend helped her "punch up" her profile,

helping her “stand out” and use “short, action sentences” that cultivated a better sense of the fact that she is “not the girl next door.”

The sympathetic responders served a number of functions for the collaborators. First, they provided support for the project of online dating, encouraging the collaborators to continue, even if the results they had had thus far were unsatisfactory. Second, their role as sounding board voiced the rhetorosocial norms of self-presentation, helping collaborators craft technosocial personas that responded to these norms, so they would “stand-out” through “short, action sentences” and photographs that captured them in a flattering way. In this sense, the sympathetic responders acted as “honesty” mirrors of the collaborators biosocial selves, but also as censors, correcting collaborators’ views of themselves to be more techno/bio/rhetorosocially desirable. In each of these roles, the sympathetic responders acted as experts, offering readings that mediated the collaborator’s profile.

Even the collaborators who didn’t find it necessary to enlist or invite the participation of others in their composing processes often crafted or revised their profile based on rubrics informed by rhetorosocial values. These rubrics were conveyed multi-socially, not only from the biosocial grapevine but from reading forums devoted to online dating or relationships (like The Ladder, a favorite of Sophia’s) or simply through the practices of other users like themselves on the sites. Each collaborator (save Caroline whom I discuss below) had a highly developed list of mistakes to avoid on her profile. Citing again the need to “make a good first impression” and, for the heterosexual users, “not turn men off,” the collaborators spoke of “avoiding cliches” like appearing too desperate for a husband (“marriage goggles”) or failing to show evidence of proof-

reading. Collaborators condemned stock phrases and cliches such as “I enjoy candlelight dinners” or “I put my children first” because “they don’t show who you are,” in effect revealing little about the user’s [biosocial] self. Failing to represent oneself, by this rubric, literally makes a user an unidentifiable, or more accurately, an untouchable sign. The rubric formed not only a regulatory tool for technosociality; it also provided an education on ways to live biosocially, i.e., developing a self that is valued rhetorosocially.

Both personal rubrics and sympathetic readers proved to be mediating forces that helped collaborators identify and inscribe rhetorosocial values onto their technosocial personas. As I explore in the next section, these “correct” personas exhibited the appropriate technosocial expression of the collaborators’ biosocial selves, that is they created “best selves” that drew in readers to a persona that is triangulated biosocially, technosocially, and rhetorosocially.

The Care and Feeding of the Best Self

I call the technosocial online dating self the collaborator’s representation of her “best self” because it is a kind of reimagining of the biosocial materialities of the collaborator’s life to create a fictionalized truth. Not only does the profile act as a showcase of the writer’s qualities, it demonstrates her universal appeal through a multifaceted catalogue of interests and creates an aspirational image of the writer in a relationship. That is to say, the profile makes a word picture that is aspiration for both the writer and the targeted reader. Specifically, the profile attempts to establish the complexity of the writer as someone with cultured and populist tastes who would be an ideal partner to an equally complex match. This best self represents a “writing against”

rhetorosocial categorization and technosocial demographics of female user and male reader as presented in online dating.

Profiles are generally written in multiple tenses, showing the writer's formative past and singular perfect present while projecting a biosociality into the future. The user couches her past experiences, such as divorce or forced relocation for a job, as helping to "make [her]who [she is] today," and therefore inherently worthwhile if not always happy. This character-building is usually elided with the writer's present, which is meant to be the dominant–if cumulative–expression of her persona. This present, the current state of being, is always constructed as one imbued with happiness and a peculiar kind of completeness. For the collaborators, portraying themselves as content and "together" in their personal and professional lives was of utmost importance. The desire for a partner is represented as the desire to "share" this happy completeness with someone else, rather than appear lonely or "in need of a man to rescue [her]." Collaborators drew a distinction between what they wanted, a companionate partnership that supplemented what they already had, and what they considered the wrong kind of desire, that for a match to complete or change their lives. Instead, their profiles created a rhetorical love narrative for themselves and the right match in which they shared the kind of happy ending that might be thought of as the rhetorosocial standard. By doing so, they drew the reader into the narrative and into their lives. When one user writes, "We could be enjoying a beer on the beach at sunset tonight!" she forges links between the reader, the future self brought to life in the profile, and herself. The narrative profile is a kind of imaginary, where the user rhetorically crafts a world inhabited by her technosocial profile self, her future biosocial self, and her ideal match.

This future-matched biosociality is a product of the best self created technosocially through triangulation, uniting the reader (as potential match), the writer (as best self), and the writer's rhetorically constructed future as a changed persona, one now "matched" in partnership rather than as lone profile writer. In crafting a triangulated dialectic/dialogic between the writing self, the future self, and the reader to create a complex representation and resist categorization by radio button choice, writers' actions make visible the rhetorical situation (to use Lloyd F. Bitzer's term) of online dating.[242] Essential to this triangulated best self is a reconciliation between seeming opposites; a writer might show herself to be someone who enjoys the adventure of travel and discovering the simple pleasures of her own backyard, who loves NC barbeque and fine wine. She is (as in the profile below, written by a highly educated, young, white, middle class woman whom I did not interview) a believer in both "cheese and cheesiness."

> All the girls write about how they like to dress up one night and go out and stay home and watch movies the next. Yeah, sure, who doesn't? Oh, and they're picky, and probably great in bed. Aren't we all. Here's some truth: maybe I'm not that picky, but I do like to go to nice places to eat (but the occasional trip to a real dive joint is always fun) and drink good wine (something from Bordeaux, if you please) and generally have a good time. If it's a gourmet meal you fancy but not going out, well, I can whip up one at my house. With an education degree, I'm now working on a master's in English so I can teach the kiddies proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation, so I expect you to use it, too. And I'll be teaching the kiddies to appreciate fine literature, so I hope you'll have that as well (I have a special place in my heart for certain female authors, BritLit and FSF[243] but am always accepting recommendations). I adore popular culture, but with emphasis on "culture," which does not include reality television, so bear that in mind. I also like to *gasp* read the newspaper, and you should, too. I like things that are cheese and are cheesy, as in I like both Camembert and 70s soul tunes; Manchego and Elvis movies; Gruyere and bad pulp monster movies. This is just a tiny taste of me... you kind of have to see it to believe it. You should be adventurous,

[242] Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation." Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (1968): 1–14.

[243] FSF stands for fantasy and science fiction.

> understanding and into honesty, good music, and of course, all of the aforementioned cheesiness.

The beauty of the cheese and the cheesiness in the profile above is it demonstrates that the narrative profiles are meant to be read symbolically. Not only do they illustrate the writer's deftness with the rhetorical situation of profile writing, they show that the writer is a woman for all seasons; or as Elle put it, "someone who can go for a run on the Duke Golf Course and then put on my little black dress for a night painting the town red." Besides using conventional grammar, "like the kiddies," the profile writer in the cheese/cheesy profile paints a picture with concrete details, and manages to showcase both her kitschy (Elvis) and refined (Manchego) tastes.

The clever cheese/cheesy profile neatly demonstrates the dialectic/dialogic of the best self imperative using a grammar of food. This grammar can conflate rhetorical moves with consumer choices by creating a bourgeoisie sense of spectrum spanning. This user's "tiny taste" of cheese and cheesiness reflects a hierarchy of food and culture while still showing her as a renaissance woman. Gruyere, dining out, good wine, conventional grammar, BritLit, newspapers, are cheese. These choices emphasize culture and reflect middle class grooming. Elvis movies, dive joints, and FSF are cheesy, lacking the impeachable values of cheese, they reflect a capacity for irony, a postmodern aura that says "I know these are suspect goods, but I don't believe in an essence." The out of bounds–what I will call "processed cheese food"--include reality TV, cliches, illiteracy, and a series of activities conspicuous by their absence such as spectator sports and chain restaurants (which have neither the prestige of a fine establishment nor the authenticity of a real dive). These symbols are taken off the table as they conjure a connotation of pedestrianism, suspect morality, and perhaps even sloth.

In food talk, the hierarchy of permissible tastes exerts a regulatory control over users' abilities to express themselves, investing meaning in a few key terms, homogenizing subjectivities, and creating recognizable patterns. As with the cheese/cheesy/processed cheese profile above, the MatchWord infometric searching system relies upon keywords in narratives so other users may search out others with similar, or similarly symbolic, interests.

Food becomes an especially potent collection of identity goods as it can stand in for a user's sexuality, the subject of which is banned on all strictly-dating and most affinity sites. For example, sushi comes to stand in for "adventurous" providing concrete proof that a user is open to experimentation, perhaps because sushi conveys an orientalist exoticism in Durham, North Carolina that it might lack in San Francisco, California. Here is an example from a Match user's "Favorite Things" section: "I love sushi. . . I am an avid reader, anything goes!" By uniting a love for reading "anything" with a love for sushi, this user shows her culinary and intellectual adventurism. "Anything goes!" could describe the embrace of things foreign, raw, unknown. The intimate act of eating, along with the intimate act of internalizing through reading, is itself symbolic. The adventurous eater/reader codes herself as an adventurous lover; her appetites are elided and sublimated through the sensual pleasures of commercial goods.

Consider a second example. Coffee takes on a similarly symbolic quality, representing the value a user places on relaxation and the degree to which he/she is able to take advantage of leisure time. Here is another Match user's Favorite Things section:

> One of my favorite things to do is have coffee on Saturday & Sunday Mornings [sic] early outside on the deck/patio and listen to the birds and the quietness of nature and enjoy the fresh air. Also, I love watching movies at home after a candlelight dinner.

Again obliquely harkening romantic intimacy and sensuality, but to different symbolic ends, this user defines her sexual sensual self without explicit sexual language but mediated through the language of consumption. She hails a domestic pastoral, placing her "deck/patio" in an idyllic setting, the perfect spot for drinking coffee. The writer further emphasizes her home, the scene of romance, as a place to screen movies and dine in style, directing attention to the materials and equipment that make this possible, that exist off screen. In this small blurb, the writer has established her identity not only as a romantic, but also as someone with discretionary buying power who uses it to cultivate her lifestyle.

The "Favorite Things" section of Match allows users to individuate their profiles with narratives of varying lengths. Other narrative sections on Match, akin to the narrative sections on all online dating sites, have headings such as "For Fun," "My Job," "My Education," "Favorite Hot Spots," and "Last Read." As the titles suggest, these sections overwhelmingly ask users to explain how they make and spend their money, privileging those responses which are cheese or cheesy (to return to the metaphor I established in the profile above). These sections call to mind the credo of the record store owner Rob Gordon from Nick Hornby's novel High Fidelity, "It isn't what you're like, it is what you like."[244] Writers are asked to create a self through bricolage, collaging together "cheese" and "cheesy" goods, marking off the "processed cheese" and erasing those things that are not cheese at all, like sexuality.

Although sites vary in the extent of information solicited through radio button questions, demographic and physical information is universally collected using this

[244] Nick Hornby, High Fidelity (New York: Penguin, 1995) 27.

method. On Match, users are asked, among other questions, to identify their income bracket, their education level, their job type, their body type, their exercise habits, and their diet. Because what users are paying for is access, match has a vested interest in creating a "quality" product. That means instructing and constructing a middle class user. A user buys his or her way into subjectivity through the profile. The squeezing of writers' subjectivity into a middle class ideology is violent, to paraphrase Judith Butler, to the realities of users whose biosocial selves become technosocially constructed through the dating site.[245]

Simply pointing out this technosocial violence and writers' efforts to combat it, however, does not do justice to the incongruities among the biosocial realities of the writers' lived experiences, their construction of technosocial online dating selves, and the rhetorosocial realm that mediates them both. Any number of social, cultural, and ideological censors and imperatives can provide the ever-shifting generic canvas on which the collaborators could draw a self-portrait.

The Visual Rhetoric of Profile Pictures

As Kelsey relates in the anecdote about her dubiously appropriate use of a "parrot-on-the-head" picture, the collaborators considered how others would read and interpret the images they posted with their online dating profiles. How to best use the visual rhetoric in the technosocial sphere was a perilous tension, often marked by trial and error. While collaborators played down the importance of their own profile images, and often felt ambivalent about how successful those images were, they conveyed strong opinions about the biosocial implications of these self-representations. As I explore

[245] Butler, Gender 66-71.

below, these representations and the collaborators' use of images, was governed in part by both off- and on-line rhetorosociality. That does not mean that the collaborators were slaves to that rhetorosociality, however. John Edward Campbell has persuasively argued against the determinist "online disembodiment thesis" in his exploration of gay male sexuality online, suggesting that the experiences of the gay male users of an Internet Relay Chatroom (IRC) #gaymuscle "circumvent" user dislocation by demonstrating the very physical effects of the chatroom on the users' bodies.[246] He offers as an example of these physical effects, among others, his own experience.

> I recall that as I continued to chat into the late afternoon, I felt the sweat drying on my skin and the growing pressure on my bladder from the protein shake. I also remember how those bodily demands were countered by the elation I experienced as Msclfreak described what he would do to me with his body–perhaps a different form of physical imperative. Indeed, it seemed that bodies were involved in every aspect of this online experience. Those sensations originating from my own body–the sweat drying on my skin, the pressure building in my bladder, the blood rushing to my groin–only heightened my awareness of the distant bodies of those I was interacting with but could not physically see. I was reading text on the screen, but I was thinking and feeling in terms of flesh. While Musclfreak may have been some 3,000 miles away from me at the time, my thoughts were focused on the qualities of his body: its thickness, its hardness, its capacity for growth. Although I had never met either NCLifter or Plutarch in person, I held a substantial impression of their considerable bulk and strength. PECS may have been giving me a virtual rose in a virtual space, but my mind never questioned the tangibility of his sculpted physique sitting before the keyboard. It was in this moment that revelation was found: bodies remain very much a part of the experience of the Internet.[247]

Campbell's suggestion of the physical effect of online experience on users' biological bodies is in some ways useful to describing how the collaborators experienced online

[246] John Edward Campbell, Getting It On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity, Gay & Lesbian ser. (New York: Haworth Press, 2004) 12.

[247] Campbell 4.

dating, but simply declaring the online experience as embodied (or not "disembodied") omits crucial factors in the rhetorical context. As I explored in Chapter 3, the collaborators couched their expressions in undeniably physical ways; this embodiment was also telescoped into a yet-to-be determined future and the physical body as the sexual body was eschewed. Further, the collaborators often chose profile images that augmented the themes they described in their narrative profile or even offered what they considered to be a neutral message.

Selecting and posting pictures was a fraught process for the collaborators, something they felt they could neither omit nor were altogether happy about given the layers of meaning every picture seemed to impart. In the excerpt below, notice how Sophia references an unwritten but acknowledged set of "rules" about pictures and her effort to send a message of not sending a message.

> I tried to follow the rules [on my pictures] and not have one where you whited out your boyfriend and stuff like that. So I had – I think the very first one that came up, I was wearing a museum of life and science t-shirt and someone actually emailed me because of that, he worked at the Museum of Life and Science. And I had long hair at the time and it was really long in the picture. And many people like long hair. So that was the first one you saw. And the other one, it was the same outfit but you saw it from a different angle and I had my hair up. I actually look very different with my hair up and down. The first one . . . was sort of the upper half of me. The second one, like I said, a different angle with my hair up. I wanted to look good. I didn't want to show, oh, this is me windsurfing. I wanted to look good. I think I had trouble because I just didn't have that many pictures of myself. . . So I have no pictures of myself. It is very strange. This was when digital cameras were more expensive than they are now. I had a picture shortage. I had my mom take those pictures. I had one which was taken at a work function and I was able to upload. It was a group photo. It was a candid shot. I happen to look good in a candid shot, though. It was co-workers, it wasn't like, "these are my hot best friends who I will never be able to compete with." I want people to see what I actually look like and not be like be trying to tell people something, in some strange way something through my pictures.

All the collaborators who posted profiles included pictures not unlike Sophia's – an up-close portrait shot of the face and a full-body shot. The collaborators chose photos that were flattering but current and representative of "what I really look like." They all urged that they were "not trying to send a message" or if there was a message, it was, "this is who I am, this is what I do."

Although the collaborators wanted to "look good" or even "cute" in their photographs, they expressed a sensitivity that the photographs would eclipse the textual elements of their profiles, drawing too much attention to their bodies and sexuality at the expense of "the real" person, fortifying already existing fears that matches do not read their profiles before contacting them. On this score, Patricia removed a picture from her profile after receiving an email from a man that simply read, "nice rack." She laughingly recounts that, "I was like, 'yeah' and I was flattered and all but I took [the photograph] down." Similarly, Elle decided against posting a photo of herself in her Halloween costume, a midriff-baring cowgirl outfit. In biosociality, Elle felt confident in the appropriateness of the outfit, adorable and flirty, and she is very confident with her body. On Match, however, it sent the wrong message. She says, "I almost put it up so people could be like 'Wow! Look at her stomach! She is fit. She is tone[d]. Sure, I want people to find me attractive. I didn't put the picture up because I want them to like me for my personality first."

Collaborators' attempts to restrict the visual rhetoric of their profile pictures have much to do with their own readings of technosocial visual rhetoric. First, they stated as a given that they should post at least one picture, preferably two, one a facial close-up and another that offered a sense of their height, weight, and body shape, "the body shot."

Drawing on their own reading practices, several women insisted that not only these two compositions be included, but that they also be recent and "representative," i.e., not unusually flattering. Antoinette decried the practice of many men (and women) to post pictures taken at weddings or other formal events, not only for their hackneyed overuse but also because these settings did not offer a realistic sense of how one looked in workaday life. Further, she saw this as a sloppy attempt to overstate one's attractiveness by stating, "everybody looks better at a wedding." Likewise, Chrissie–and others--found the common practice of posting a picture in which the poster included a photograph featuring other people (with or without the poster), specifically children, elderly relatives, or attractive friends as ethically dubious. The collaborators agreed that "group shots" attempted to capitalize on the attractiveness of friends, garnering capital as stylish and good-looking by association. Further, user attempts to demonstrate their commitment to family by including family members in photos was considered exploitative, as it was only the user who would benefit from those pictures but the others' images were now available to strangers.

Collaborators were divided on what I call the genre of the "contextualizing" photo, one showing the user in the midst of a hobby, such as at the finish line of a marathon or atop a mountain. Some found these to be useful insomuch as they provided photographic proof that the user did actually enjoy the physically rigorous activity they claimed to in their profile. Others found these shots pointless and time-consuming in their narcissism. However, the collaborators were united in their opinion about photographs that featured a prized possession, frequently a car or boat. Heterosexual collaborators particularly thought of these pictures as both crass and boastful, as Patricia called them

"penis proxies." Male users sometimes post pictures of themselves shirtless in the driver's seat of sports cars or on the deck of a boat. The collaborators were unanimously "turned off" by these displays and rejected what they considered to be the logic of these shots. As Rachel told me with disgust, "Does that guy think I am going to date him because he has a boat? I mean, come on."

Elle posited what she saw as the woman's equivalent to the "penis proxy": the bikini photograph. She and other collaborators rejected posting such a photo because it sends "the wrong message"; specifically that the poster was "only interested in sex" or "didn't want to be respected." Chrissie, who didn't count her profile picture as a potential opportunity for matches to misread her or her intentions, rejected the possibility of posting her own "bikini" photo or prized possession photograph, stating, "no, those are stupid." She also admitted that she was unlikely to respond to either genre of photo. Overt sexuality or the overt display of possessions as a displacement for [sexual] prowess, were universally distained by the collaborators.

So, by carving out these out-of-bounds compositions as inappropriate profile photographs, the collaborators reveal some of the rhetorosocial dimensions of these on and off-line experiences. Inherent in this understanding of right and wrong technosocial messages about the body, and the biosocial implications they carry, is the double gaze women live with in a patriarchy. In the abstract sense, the collaborators viewed themselves both subjectively, as subjects of their own lives, but also objectively as objects of a masculine gaze. In the concrete sense, they formulated their own theories about men's reading practices and preferences in online dating. They felt that male readers overlooked the narrative portions of the profile and focused first and primarily on

the included pictures. The result of this was to ignore the portions of the profile that conveyed the writer's best self. The photographs rarely conveyed "who [they] really are." The message the writers' were attempting to send through their photographs, as I understand it, is "read my narrative profile." The collaborators attempted to post photographs that were enticing enough to the male gaze to urge the reader to read the narrative sections of the profile, but at the same time the photographs could not encourage a sexualization of the writer to the extent that visual rhetoric rendered irrelevant the alphabetic information.

The collaborators' determination to draw attention to their best selves disembodied from photographs largely lay in an effort to resist a reading process that converted them from individuals into sexual objects. However, many collaborators also resented the way the emphasis on visual representations elided the hard work they had put into their profiles. Profile pictures exemplify the uneasy nature of sexuality in online dating. While nominally suppressed, it constantly threatens to hijack the overt messages users attempt to express. While online dating puts the body on display, it also disciplines it, marking the (too) sexy body as promiscuous or out of control, thereby sending the "wrong message" to readers. Further, the visual rhetoric of online dating is policed by the rhetorosociality that attempts to order women's biosocial lives, sorting a feminine aesthetic into a kind of Aristotelian mind and body. From this perspective, visual rhetoric in online dating shows the limits of technosociality as a way to redefine rhetorosociality. For all the affordances allowed by online dating to craft a best self, that self still exists within a biosocial and rhetorical universe marked by divergent outlets of power.

Representing Age and Weight

The collaborators' writing strategies attempted to write against (primarily) men's reading processes and also required writing against the conventions of the site while still holding information to an arbitrary notion of accuracy. These counter currents that sometimes elucidate and sometimes obfuscate the collaborator's physical self are most visible when framing the non-normed female body. The overweight or older body, constructed as out of the center both in a bio/technosocial universe where there are sizes and then plus sizes, women and mature women. Laying aside for a moment both the existence and prominence of overweight and senior bodies in biosociality, these embodiments represent a deviation from the rhetorically constructed subjectivity of a sexualized woman; it is assumed that, among other things, she will be thin and young. These bodies may be painted as only softly aberrant in the language that codes them, with monikers like "curvy" or "active senior," yet these exist to point out the marginalization of their sign. Further, these terms are their own kind of apologia, reclaiming the pathologized subjectivity.

Technosocially, the overweight and older body create a moment which requires a declaration of one's own aberrance, the expectation being that a writer living in a senior or overweight body must draw attention to herself as such, while also setting aside the connotations. Collaborators expressed anxieties about managing these dueling pressures. All were aware that age and weight demographics are radio button categories used by men (and women) to limit search parameters and that these searches brought to bear stereotypes that they tried to combat in the narrative sections of their profiles. These stereotypes are reinforced both by other users and by the sites themselves; the

collaborators rarely made a distinction. Further, from their grapevine or forum research, they understood that there are censors on users who misidentified themselves as having a "smaller" or "thinner" body type in their profile than in real life. (This also goes for identifying as younger.) This censor extends, as I discussed above, to posting pictures that do not provide a current or accurate representation of the user's face and body.

Physicality has already been discussed at length here, demonstrating the importance of the body in online dating. Representing that body "accurately" in an arbitrarily standardized way that reflects U.S. cultural values, the overweight female body is its own kind of spectacle, in a cultural milieu that objectifies women. Despite the facets of contemporary life that make maintaining a healthy weight difficult, the trope of the fat woman as slovenly, incompetent, or overindulged persists. Collaborators who to me described their bodies as "heavier," "overweight," or "not skinny," or even "fat" felt compelled to make it clear to potential matches, or at least avoid the appearance of trying to hide it by indicating body style in radio button information and including photographs that "did not shave off ten pounds." (Compare this with reactions to issues of age below.) Collaborators acknowledged that they did not want to be accused of misrepresenting themselves as thinner or smaller than they "actually" were. Such an accusation, in a face-to-face meeting or via email would be "horrifying," as one collaborator put it. This compulsion against masquerading reveals the depths of the social revulsion of fat and the strong censor. Patricia, who had lost considerable weight before she began dating online, said she felt she was actually an average weight by statistical measures but refrained from selecting "Average" as her body style for fear that men might not agree with her assessment, given the skewed representation of women's bodies in the media. She

initially considered selecting "a few extra pounds" but eventually settled on effectively leaving the section blank, choosing the option, "Don't care to say." She reasoned, "Meet me in person and decide for yourself. Now you can't accuse me of lying." Even one collaborator, who knew herself to be thin, hesitated to identify as "slender" for fear she might be challenged.

Despite the technosocial focus foreclosing on the desirability/"date-ability" of their bodies, the collaborators developed strategies to represent themselves. As Dafina stated in the excerpt above, she depersonalized the U.S. American cultural privileging of thinness, delineating African American mores from those of the U.S. generally and stating that she wanted to find someone who appreciated her body as it was. Further, she also politicized this choice by expressing a desire to be in a relationship with another African American or other minority, who shared a similar cultural attitude towards women's body image. Other collaborators employed tactics that allowed them to use online dating while silently resisting the sites' inherent reductionism. For example, Antoinette stated that she dismissed some of the "ridiculous" language assigned to women's bodies, such as "big and beautiful" or "pleasantly plump" even though she might select those choices since she felt she had no other option. Pointing out that there were no masculine equivalents, she suggested these excessive euphemisms were just another way of commodifying women's bodies as sexual objects for men and echoed feminist research that argues that fat becomes its own identity for women, eclipsing everything else.[248] This is not to say that any of the collaborators felt untouched by

[248] Antoinette's point is made in print most explicitly by Melinda Young.

negative cultural associations of fat or had come to places of complete serenity with their bodies, but they were very critical consumers of the representations made available to them by online dating sites.

Like the women who felt constrained by negative stereotypes about body type, some collaborators felt constrained by stereotypes about age. Elle, who was in her early twenties, as well as Suzanne and Patricia, who were in their late fifties and early sixties, all described the perils of "decade turning years," like 30 or 60. Because online dating sites allow users to set search parameters, once they hit these "big O" years," collaborators felt they were significantly less likely to be contacted by prospective matches. Elle described it this way:

> It is a double standard. They [men] are forty and they are looking to date women who are 24 -36. What is wrong with a 38 year-old woman? What would be wrong with that? You are 40. What would be wrong with a 42 year-old woman? And yet if I said I wanted to date a 28 year old, people would be like "cougar." She is looking for her Ashton Kutcher or something. So I have worried that the traffic would lessen a little bit at 30. And it has, a little bit. I still get a number of contacts from people in their 20's. Which kinda surprised me because I had talked to men in their 20's who said, "I would never go out with a woman in her 30s because she has marriage goggles on." So for me, that was the big stigma of turning 30 on Match.

In the excerpt above, Elle voices feeling trapped in a lose-lose situation as she "turns 30 on Match": she is either the sexually predaceous cougar hunting younger men or the marriage goggled spinster quickly coming to her sell-by date. (This, despite continuing contact from men under 30.) In either gendered eventuality, she feels resentful that a "double standard" exists giving men wider options, including unmarked or unremarkable access to younger women. Patricia and Suzanne also made similar complaints about

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Melinda Young, "One Size Fits All: Disrupting the Consumerized, Pathologized, Fat, Female Form," Feminist Media Studies. 5.2(1995): 249–252, 18 Oct. 2010, Academic Search Premier, UNC Libraries <http://www.lib.unc.edu>.

feeling boxed in by the accepted notion that only matches the same age or older were acceptable. Suzanne recoiled at being cast into the role of "nursemaid" to "feeble" men in their seventies by eHarmony that only matched her with men 110 percent of her age. Like Elle, Patricia anticipated a drop-off in initiated contact when her profile indicated she turned 60 and rejected the role it would cast her in.

> Yeah, but I did lie about my age. Decade turner. This past October I turned 60. I took a year off my birth date so I was showing up as 58, so I had this birthday and now according to that I am 59. Which means next year I will be into the feebleminded. (Laughing.) And I felt bad about it about a month ago. Men [in the forums] were complaining about it. I read something in one of the discussion forums they had gotten some survey that showed that men lie about age more [. . .] I think men think, 6-0. And it took me awhile to list that as a range. 'Cause Plenty of Fish lets you restrict by age. So I have if you smoke or you're married, or you're looking for [an] intimate encounter - if that is one of your choices- you cannot contact me, you have to be between 50-65, anybody younger cannot contact me. [. . .] So it took me--It was a big leap to go to 60, and now 65! Still, I don't know. I look at the photos of some of those guys that I've clicked they just look like grandfathers. My grandfather. It was a big [leap] – But I figured, you'll get no mail if you make it too restrictive. So gradually it is creeping up. I don't think there are many guys in their 70's on this thing. Although I did get email at one point when I had no age range from a guy in his 70's. I was like, "no." You need to sign up for long term care. It was obvious from his profile this man had health issues.

Patricia was the only participant to admit to me that she misrepresented radio button information on her profile to appear more attractive to those prospective matches she was interested in, i.e., not her grandfather. She went on to say she would have corrected it but Plenty of Fish does not allow date of birth editing after initially posting a profile, despite allowing other information to be changed. Like Elle's, Patricia's response suggests that the collaborators are working to avoid (even to the point of misrepresenting themselves) being cast into stereotypes, specifically the feebleminded senior and the caretaker. I deal more with deception practices and the collaborators' reading strategies in Chapter 3, but it is interesting to note that a 2008 research study suggested most online

dating users lie (about 80 percent) about something in their profile, but that these fibs are so slight, they cannot be detected in face-to-face meetings.[249] In this sense, the misrepresentation may tell more of the "truth" about Patricia's self than the actual number of her chronological age. Stated another way, because Patricia is a very active, intellectually engaged person both in her career and in her social life, she cannot appear under the sign of 60, which signifies, at least to her, a state of being "feeble minded." It is worthwhile to rephrase things yet again in th language of Erving Goffman that I deploy above to bring to light to subtle sophistication of the collaborators' rhetorical moves: members of a team, such as operating room staff, must exercise discipline and loyalty, "dramaturgical circumspection," to play-act their way through common situations and invest them with dignity so that the patient/audience does not become aware of any deviation; so too does a user collude with the mechanism of an online dating site to frame her body. [250] The online dating user and the site remediate each other to develop a cohesive profile demonstrating "dramaturgical circumspection" to the audience of attractive matches.

The resistance to radio button information by the collaborators in part has to do with their abhorrence of online dating search parameters. Part of the collaborators' anxieties about issues of weight and age as they relate to radio button searches and the perpetuation of stereotypes, as I understand it, has to do with the collaborators' concerns that these small bits of information are overemphasized or over-interpreted at the expense

[249] Catalina L. Tomas, Jeffery T. Hancock, and Nicole B. Ellison, "Separating Fact from Fiction: An Examination of Deceptive Self-Presentation in Online Dating Profiles," Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 34 (2008): 1023–1036, 12 Oct. 2010 < https://www.msu.edu/~nellison/toma_et_al_2008.pdf>.

[250] Goffman 218 – 20.

of the narrative sections of their profiles. While the radio buttons might give demographic details or quantitative information, the narrative sections provide qualitative information, which tells the "truth" of who the users actually are, providing insight into the "real" person. Almost all the collaborators, but especially the heterosexual collaborators, expressed frustrations that some matches did not read their profiles and instead contacted them based simply on initial reactions to radio button information or pictures.[251] This inattention was betrayed by generic initial emails that Rachel described as "could be sent to anyone." Sophia agreed, saying she "ruled out guys who were [clearly] emailing everybody" and cited an instance when such a correspondent included a link to his Yahoo! Adult profile. Again drawing attention to the collaborator's [sexual] body, these emails also violated the "first impression rule." As Elle described this concern, although she felt lucky to have a steady stream of emails, she "didn't appreciate that a lot of men [who] contacted [her] had not read [her] profile, just looked at [her] photo." (Even Chrissie, who only dated women and said as such on her profile, reported that she received solicitous emails from men.)

The desire to be seen, recognized, and appreciated for their whole/authentic selves was frustrated by the reductionism of the radio buttons that overemphasized the importance of age and weight, "vital" statistics that lead to misrepresentation and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes that the online dating sites were implicit in, if not completely responsible for. In the case of weight, euphemisms like "big and beautiful" became what Antoinette felt her "whole profile was about," eclipsing the many other facets of self and practically forcing her to chose between tropes of apology, celebration,

[251] Caroline provides an interest contrast to this feeling and I will discuss her approach to dealing with both the radio button and narrative sections below.

and defiance. Constraining the rhetorical positions available to the collaborators sometimes resulted in an alteration of the facts for dramaturgical consistency, such as in Patricia's age, an instance in which Plenty of Fish is complicit.

More than simply restricting the rhetorical positions available to users, the collapsing of radio button information with whole representative profile selves denies the labor that users put into crafting their narrative profiles. Using the narrative profile sections to create their "best self" which resists the reductionism of the radio buttons and the static sexuality of the visual rhetoric portrayed in the photographs, the narrative sections created the most dynamic parts of the profile. These were the sections over which the collaborators felt the most ownership, using them to talk freely about their intangible, unquantifiable passions and interests, not simply their "vital statistics." It is no wonder that they dismissed potential matches who didn't take the time to read these self portraits.

London Review of Books: A Case of Contrast

The profile best selves balance tensions between making a good first impression and acknowledging enough (potentially self-deprecating) radio button information to pass the "truth" test. The self-deprecating material is included not only to hedge against accusations of lying, but also because these admissions are also considered sublimely endearing. That all writers will be flawed is understood as a given and the self-awareness that one might possess irritating habits has the effect of creating an approachable profile, meant to invite contact rather than repel it. Further, these profiles are created within a technosocial environment that liberally applies superlatives like "ideal" and "favorite" to user information. The best self exhibited in the profiles above are contrasted by the

ironically self-deprecating profiles of those found in the London Review of Books. Consider this one:

> This advert formally ends the period of my life I like to jokingly refer to as 'the years I spent a lot of money on drugs' and begins the phase I hope will be known in the very near future as 'the weekend I had sex with that guy." Woman, 32. [Contact box information omitted.][252]

It is hard to imagine any of the collaborators in this study aligning themselves with both drugs and casual sex in their profiles, whether or not either of these behaviors actually represented in their lives. The ethos of the best self profile requires a "writing against" the misinterpretation that irony promotes. Further, by U.S. internet dating standards the ad above contains virtually no information about the poster, failing to give a "good first impression" or craft a "best self." It does not even give the ever-important racial marker nor the "polite" disclosure about height and weight that online dating profiles I studied suggest are essential to even the most minimal profile. The London Review of Books doesn't even allow pictures!

But of course the London Review of Books (LROB) ad does contain some important information; it lets the discerning reader know how clever the writer is. *New York Times* London correspondent Sarah Lyall refers to the description of oneself as drunken, illiterate, "old enough to be your father," flatulent, sociopathetic, or any other of what would be considered by the collaborators in this study as totally inappropriate, labels meant to attract others as "*an inverted form of bragging*" [emphasis in original].[253] In her "field guide to the British," Lyall writes,

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[252] "Classified," London Review of Books, 17 Feb. 2009, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/classified/#PERSONALS>.

[253] Sarah Lyall, The Anglo Files (New York: Norton, 2007): 151.

> One advertiser I spoke to said she'd had little success with conventional ads, such as the one in which she described herself as "gentle, curvy, tactile, educated, and funny." A potential date who did respond bragged that he was free of infection. ("I did not get the feeling that he was trying to be funny," the advertiser told me.) Another announced that he lived without electricity in the woods, in a house made from trees he had chopped down himself. The woman changed tactics and wrote another ad: "I've got a mouth on me that can peel paint of the wall, but I can always apologize."
>
> "That got a lot of responses from alcoholics," she reported.
>
> The magazine's approach brings to mind the counterintuitive advertising featuring consumers recoiling from Marmite, the curiously popular – though controversial, because it is so vile–gloppy-as-molasses yeast by-product with multiple functions: sandwich spread, snack, or soup (just add boiling water).[254]

As Lyall points out, writing (to say nothing of reading) ads of the LROB ilk does not operate strictly on the idea of attraction to a slightly air-brushed representation of self. Rather, the "fakes and double-fakes and insincere sincerity (or sincere insincerity?)" do two things.[255] First, they provide a way of drawing attention to writer's qualities through obfuscation, the way a magician's sheet conceals the mystery of the canary in the birdcage beneath it, teasing the awaiting audience who expect the reveal. Second, they create a kind of exclusivity. Marmite can be hard to appreciate, but so can *foie gras*. Not everyone enjoys the brown smelly spread, compared on the manufacturer's own web site to used motor oil.[256] As the grandchild of a British war bride, I was trained (through repeated exposure) to love the stuff then told that my love of Marmite was a badge of courage, if not peculiarity. *Foie gras*, the liver of forced fed geese, an expensive Frenchified treat controversial for its production, called cruel by animal rights groups, is also extremely high in saturated fat. *Foie gras* appeals to the high-brow taste, but

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[254] Lyall 150.

[255] Lyall 151.

[256] "Birth of Marmite" Marmite – History, 23 Sep. 2011 <http://www.marmite.co.uk/hate/history/birth-of-marmite.html>.

Marmite cultivates the same sense of exclusivity. Only those in the know, on the inside, can see past Marmite's repellant qualities to enjoy its subtleties and nuances. This exclusivity is the definition of cultivation, of elevated taste.

If the U.S. profiles above seem bland in comparison to these LROB ads, it is useful to think about the differences in rhetorical orientation. As Kelsey pointed out in her discussion of the need to revise her initial eHarmony profile, U.S. profiles strive to be appealing to the largest number of appropriate partners. The British profiles, on the other hand, take a more targeted approach. Rather than being appealing or even accurate, these advertisements trade on a shared sense of humor. If Marmite is a cultivated taste, then the British personal advertisements expect people to read and write for unhinged from the collaborators' "first impression." A quick comparison of the two approaches might suggest that U.S. profiles demand a rhetorical ease of digestibility or accessibility while British personal advertisements (or at least those in the London Review of Books) demand reification or elitism.

Before I travel too far down that path, allow me to put a few caveats in place: I did not interview any British women for this project, so I can only draw from second-hand sources as to their motives for writing. In addition, comparing online profiles to newspaper advertisements elides essential media differences. Finally, it seems to me to be a pointless, not to mention a disingenuous, line of inquiry to suggest that British daters are better or more sophisticated writers than U.S. writers. With those qualifications in place, the LROB advertisements are helpful in pointing out larger cultural forces that inform the rhetorical context in which the collaborators in this study write.

In light of the LROB ads, the best self imperative of the profiles I examined reflects the expectation of a renaissance nature to U.S. women's lives. As we expect them to have an appreciation of both sushi and barbeque (cheese and cheesiness), we expect them to write in a way that can express intimacy and accessibility, traditional professionalism and an emotional literacy that privileges the work required to maintain a healthy relationship. This combination is a tall order, one that is more akin to a contemporary superwoman than the hilariously flawed person described in the LROB ads. Further, the online dating profiles I examined suggest that these superwomen must be friendly and likeable, welcoming and competing for our scrutinizing gaze.

Our gaze, rhetorosocially produced, is technosocially enacted through the basic infometrics of online dating. The technosociality of online dating profiles is complicit in the privileging of a highly developed "superwoman" persona, allowing a seemingly infinite amount of rhetorically structured space for alphabetic and visual representations. That users *can* write more about themselves in online spaces creates the expectation that they *should*. Profiles that lack information not only fail to measure up to the "first impression" and "best self" tests, they present an invisible online persona. Not only are the radio button selections the basis for organizing profiles, they are also the mechanism of online dating filtering, or searching. Keyword searches provide an added layer of accessibility. (LROB ads would fail in this system too, I believe. Who would search for the keyword, "alcoholic?") For this reason, LROB ads are meant to be read in their brief entirety by humans, but online dating profiles are intended to be technologically searched in their entirety by computers. Profiles with the most complete information are the most

visible, not just to the human reader but to the ever-present match-making machine that offers up potential matches to users. In effect, an empty profile is a non-existent person.

Simplifying the differences between LROB advertisements and online dating profiles as I do above ignores the rhetorical space a woman might navigate slightly beyond the technosocial gaze. As I discuss below, one collaborator's "empty profile" proved to be an exercise in the conservation of gendered power through technosocial silence.

Special Case: Caroline

Caroline employed a tactic in her Match.com profile unlike those used by all the other collaborators, one that might be judged a failure for its inattention to the "first impression." Rather than attempting to craft a technosocial best self through a narrative profile, she filled out only the radio button information required to establish an account, ignoring even the optional radio button information. Further, instead of waiting to be contacted by men, she searched out potential dates, looking skeptically at those who contacted her.

> Basically, I put up my name. I was protective of my [real] name. I put up my screen name. I did a search looking at people. And initially it was out of curiosity. [Back] then there were many [single men on the site I was using], a few people who caught my interest for whatever reason. Their picture. Or what they did for a living. Or something quirky they said. Or whatever. And then I looked a little more carefully at those profiles [with a mind to contacting them.] [. . .] I didn't respond to emails. Because I was like, who is emailing me? [No], I do not put myself out there.

Caroline acknowledged that her choice to appear largely technosocially invisible was informed by biosocial concerns, both safety-related and related to the veil of privacy she felt necessary to effectively conduct her career in the medical profession. But beyond

these concerns for biosocial integrity, she rejected the common wisdom that she had to create a best self or "put herself out there." By applying a different rubric to her own profile than she did to potential matches, she was able present herself through emails while focusing on her assessment of matches, rather than their assessment of her. She says of her approach

> I remember when I first emailed [my husband], what it said. I'll tell you what intrigued me about his profile is that – Most people put their best picture up or whatever. He did not have his best picture up. He had this very goofy picture up. And I thought he would make me laugh. So I emailed him. And I said, something on the lines of, "you're kinda cute", something like that. Very short. And he emailed me back. Like I said, there was nothing on my profile. My screen name and maybe my age. Maybe. He emailed me back and said that he didn't usually talk to people unless they had a picture up. But then he said that I said that he was cute and that won points. So I sent him pictures and he emailed me back this very long email.

Caroline did intend to "get to know" potential matches through exchanges via email and web cam chats, but she was strategic about her communication. Unlike other collaborators with comparable amounts of time logged on online dating sites, Caroline only communicated with men she seriously considered dating. Further, by pursuing relationships through communication within and outside of the site, Caroline determined the pace that suited her, abandoning unfruitful flirtations and deciding when to progress from intra-site emailing and using a web cam to talking on the phone:

> So I did Match.com in the old days before they had winks or anything. You emailed or you didn't. So I think I ended up emailing two or three guys but then sort of interest there fizzled really quickly except with my husband. But one of the things you can do with the site, I am sure you can, is having a web cam and seeing the person too.[257] So I did that a little bit. And then with my husband, we had emailed for a little while. And then we graduated to the web cam thing and then

[257] Web cam chatting features on dating sites have largely lost popularity and have been replaced with instant messenger features. Perhaps the desire to communicate alphabetically remains a favorite because it provides some physical privacy and the ability to self-edit while still offering "instant" feedback.

> we graduated to the phone call. And then, I guess I liked him well enough to suggest that we meet out one night. It was the beginning of the end [of my time using online dating.]

Cheryl Glenn points out in Unspoken, that Caroline's failure to post a profile is not paraphrasis, an inability to speak, but rather a choice not to.[258] This kind of gendered silence works as an exercise of control across the Match discourse community[259] to both silence unwanted messages and shore up Caroline's technosocial power while conserving her biosocial labor. She sacrificed the regular positive reinforcement of "who likes me today?" emails from strangers and the possible social obligations they bring, classifying those contacts as aberrations–"Who is emailing me?" Rather than using her profile as a means to attract potential matches, she chose this form of rhetorical silence so that she could contact the men she was interested in, ignoring those she wasn't. Not only was her silence a means of controlling others' access to her, i.e., keeping her information private, it also firmly places Caroline in the role of pursuer, negating the rhetorosocial gender stigmas–marriage goggles, professional dater–by which the other heterosexual users felt constrained.

Rather than developing a self through a narrative profile, she develops a self through controlled revelation. As she recounts the initial exchange of emails with her match, they play out like a courtly love ritual with the parts reversed. Caroline takes on the part of the suitor, her match the wooed. She not only contacted her match, she initiated the "courtship" in a strictly traditional way by flattering him, calling him "cute." Her match responded coyly, registering hesitation. However, he goes on to award favor,

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[258] Glenn 11.

[259] Glenn 36.

giving “points” because of the well-placed flattery. Ultimately, it was her match who responded with the long, time-intensive email. Caroline continued as the steward of the relationship, as demonstrated in the progression from computer-mediated contact to a face-to-face contact at her urging.

I am not prepared to hold up Caroline’s case as a shining light of representing empowerment against a field of oppression. Caroline’s use of online dating was neither wholly empowered, and her choices were not always consciously made to liberate her from cultural or technical constraints. Nor were the other collaborators who elected to use online dating differently more or less constrained by cultural stereotypes or the limits of online dating. However, I feel safe in concluding that Caroline judges her use of Match.com a success because she ultimately married the man with whom she describes the interaction above. I also feel safe in concluding that the other collaborators would consider her profile (or lack thereof) a failure because it 1) fails to make a good first impression and 2) does not give a “best self” representation of who Caroline is biosocially.

Caroline’s apparent failure was actually a success, showing the connectedness of the rhetorical, technical and biological realms while affording determinism to none. As she negotiated the gendered power relations distributed through Match technosociality, and as these concerns collided with biosocial realities like safety and professional behavior, she was able to re-write the rhetorosocial expectations of romance and female sexuality, by deploying her own rhetoric for self-representation and relationship.

By opting for a rhetorical silence, Caroline re-defined both the kairos of her online dating experience and pushed back against the rhetorosocial and technosocial demands for a "best self."

Conclusion

From a materialist perspective, it is useful to think of the technosociality of online dating as a tool for the collaborators. Because users are able to do meaningful work on their biosocial realities, they ultimately innovate within the rhetorosociality that gives meaning to that work. Further, from this perspective, I acknowledge that interacting with any institution limits and delimits identity and agency; such is the nature of genres and conventions. Without these conventions there could be no moment of invention, no deviation from the rubric, that challenges constraints. That online dating provided space for collaborators to experience joy and do work on themselves and the wider world that they deemed valuable is a proscribed kind of freedom.

A more enlightening path to understanding online dating, perhaps, is to think about the role self-improvement–or life work–plays in contemporary U.S. women's lives, especially the lives of accomplished women like the collaborators. That the collaborators' reasons and methods for using online dating were both so knotty and diffused speaks to the power of the rhetorosocial to create biosocial desire. It is impossible to get away from the collaborators' framing of their online dating experiences as attempting to solve the problem of the unattached woman. Although the technosociality of online dating gave them avenues to self-define in ways that resisted the constraints of stereotypes and stigma, these moves glossed over the telescopic inevitability of the incompleteness of a woman who selects a single life.

CHAPTER 5: REFLECTING

My formulation (or "fabrication" to use Latour's choice of words) of the rhetorosocial remains messy and nebulous at the end of this dissertation. As I acknowledge in Chapter 1, "ideology" could sometimes act as a synonym for "rhetorosocial." At moments in this text, rhetorosociality looks like the coercive force of heteronormativity or capitalism. However, I wish to close by reiterating the mediating role of rhetorosociality in online dating. I have argued that concerns like the rhetorosocial (or techno or biosocial) are composed of constantly shifting and often-contentious associations, and they have an ability to appear all encompassing yet be resisted by the actors and actants they constrain.

In Chapter 2, Representing, I discussed the biosocial, technosocial, and rhetorosocial rhetorics that define online dating users, online dating sites, and matching software. I demonstrated that the blending of sometimes contrarian rhetorics through sites like eHarmony brings to light the interdependence of biosociality, technosociality, and rhetorosociality. eHarmony's attempt to technosocially correct the biosocial relationships of collaborators resulted in failure. This failure came about through eHarmony founder Neil Clark Warren's rhetorosocial inability—expressed technosocially through the patented *29 dimensions*—to recognize users' desires and appropriately construct on-site identities for them.

The rhetorosocial dimensions of eHarmony and collaborators' rhetorical efforts to resist this misrecognition and to poach the eHarmony technosociality for their own ends parallels Warren's own resistance to the rhetorosocial framing of eHarmony's history as an evangelical Christian enterprise. eHarmony's scientific logos of expertise mixed with a pathos of romantic love demonstrates the role of associations and assemblages that can be traced among the rhetorical, technical, and the biological, as well as the way actants/actors fit within and may resist these constructions.

Similar tracings reveal how capitalism informs the online dating experience. Online dating sites remediate online shopping and job-hunting experiences into dating experiences, meanwhile propping up middle class standards of alphabetic literacy and commodity fetishism. This remediation and its mobilization of market rhetoric reveals the presence of the rhetorosocial. However, the collaborators' poaching of online information in their reading processes (often with the help of techno and biosocial mediations) demonstrates how these actants were able to "read around" the rhetorosocial to empower themselves.

These "read arounds" are especially apparent in the collaborators' crafting of best self online dating profiles. The collaborators acknowledge rhetorosocial shaping in these profiles, often harnessing symbolic meaning. The rhetorosocial becomes available to collaborators for dialogue and self-definition. Discursive and technical examples show how single women are constructed as deviant but also how the collaborators rejected stereotypes that constrained them. While these rhetorosocial, technosocial, and biosocial assemblages remediate the online dater's self-definition, the collaborators also demonstrated the means to become aware of and further remediate these concerns.

While viewing online dating through the shifting lenses of the rhetoro, techno, and biosocial prohibits me from fabricating causality about how (or why) these assemblages mediate one another, it allows me to take as ontologically *real* the collaborators' responses to these concerns. I have theorized the existence of the rhetorosocial by demonstrating their connections with my collaborator actants and the efforts those actants have put forth to resist or work within these assemblages. In this sense, I have tried to perform a critical move that "learns the actors' language" to describe agency but that does not disintegrate into "unrepentant positivism."[260] I ultimately hope this view, while not absolute, provides a clear enough tracing to act as a social critique. Mine is an analysis of discourses and actants that hopes to bring to light the agency of women (and men) in the biosocial, technosocial, and rhetorosocial realms.

The danger of my kind of critique is embedded in Latour's warning about the relativism of analysis, claiming "anti-anti-realism" as the only honest methodological position.[261]

> The urge for debunking has become the best way to protect the analyst from even hearing the scream of those they misinterpret, while draping themselves in the role of courageous iconoclasts who alone "see through" the mysteries to which ordinary people are naively attached.[262]

Latour cites the positions taken by global warming skeptics and members of the 9/11 Truth Movement as the undesirable but inevitable result of a social critique that sloppily strays from empiricism, or rather allows, the very pluralistic metaphysical ontology he

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[260] Latour, Reassembling 108.

Latour, Steam 241.

[261] Latour, Reassembling 90.

[262] Latour, Reassembling 100.

advocates in ANT to become a "knee jerk" deconstruction of empirical certainties.[263] Latour blasts conspiracy theorists and academic critics alike for seeming to tear down the fetishistic icons of popular belief systems ("naïve belief") only to erect icons of their own.[264] He differentiates between the fetishism of religion and the science of fact fabrication

> *[B]elief is a caricature of religion exactly as knowledge is a caricature of science*. Belief is patterned after a false idea of science as if it were possible to raise the question, "Do you believe in God?" in the same way as "Do you believe in global warming?" except the first question does not possess any of the instruments of reference to move on, and that the second is leading the interlocutor to a phenomenon even more invisible to the naked eye than God, since to reach it we must travel through satellite imaging, computer simulation, theories of earth's atmospheric instability and high atmospheric chemistry.[265]

To stop the caricaturization of both science and religion, Latour posits the "factish," a refutation of belief-as-knowledge and fact-as-reality but instead a type of action that is between those positions, fabricated yet real. Going further, he dismisses the postmodern position that construction equals reality, arguing again for the "rhizome-like" nature of the factish as actant.[266]

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[263] Latour, Steam 225-230.

Latour Reassembling 100.

[264] Bruno Latour, "What is Iconoclash? Or Is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?" On The Modern Cult of the Factish Gods (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 67-98.

[265] Emphasis in original.

Bruno Latour, "'Thou Shall Not Freeze Frame' Or How Not to Misunderstand the Science and Religion Debate," On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods (Durham; Duke UP, 2010) 121.

[266] Bruno Latour, "On the Cult of the Factish Gods," On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 1-67.

The rhetorosocial (and its co-influencing techno and biosocial) might be best thought of as factish, as an action/actant involving humans and nonhumans, without origin or control, "not even an anonymous field of force" but with effect.[267] From this perspective, my fabrication of the rhetorosocial might be messy and fluid because the rhetorosocial is messy and fluid. The rhetorosocial as factish is hard to pin down, its "consequences are unforeseen, the moral order fragile."[268]

In Chapter 1, I call this dissertation a study of conventionality. Indeed, "conventionality" might be yet another synonym ripe for replacing "rhetorosociality" except that "conventionality," like "ideology" or "heteronormativity," does not aptly describe the assemblages of originless actions, involving people and their worlds, that enact change on those people and that world and is changed itself. "Conventionality" does not give credit to the complexity of collaborators' moves and motivations, nor does it account for the effect of those resistances on the technical and biological environment.

Perhaps the apt question is not "Does the rhetorosocial exist?" but rather, "What might we find if we trace the consequences of the rhetorosocial?" We cannot fully answer the latter question, but as an initial gesture in such a pursuit I offer these responses.

[267] Latour, Factish 33.

[268] Bruno Latour, "The Slight Surprise of Action: Facts, Fetishes, and Factishes," Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999) 288.

CODA: RESPONDING

I include the transcript below of four collaborators discussing my initial analysis for a number of reasons, all ethos-driven. First, to acknowledge the subjectivity of the collaborators, I felt it imperative to give them a symbolic "last word" that visually represented how much they contributed to this dissertation and offered them the opportunity to talk back to the research. Second, I hope this act of transparency will help contextualize my findings by locating me within them. Finally, as with all observations committed to the page, this dissertation offers only a keyhole image of evolving phenomena. This transcript may serve as an invitation to the wider, broader, and next questions.

This group discussion took place after I had completed all individual interviews and my initial analysis but had not yet begun to write. I invited all nine of the collaborators to participate, with the ability to accommodate four. Dafina, Elle, Patricia, and Sophia kindly agreed to meet with me for two hours on a Saturday afternoon in the Spring of 2008. I attempted to make this group discussion as relaxed an affair as possible. I provided lunch from a bakery chain restaurant and asked the collaborators to enjoy the food as we spoke. I began as I might in a seminar class, with an overview of what would transpire, moving on to cover requisite IRB privacy issues. I then presented an overview of my analysis up to that point using a PowerPoint presentation. (See Appendix C.) I then asked a few questions of the group and provided an opportunity for collaborators to

question me, leaving some time at the end for general, unprompted discussion so that the collaborators could take the conversation where they wanted it to go.

The collaborators spoke often and eagerly, speaking to each other as much as to me. Engaging in the kind of talk that I regrettably had to omit analyzing in this dissertation, collaborators spent some of the discussion time storytelling about their dating experience, particularly commiserating about bad dates and sharing knowledge about men's behavior. They also solicited and shared advice with one another, continuing the informal kind of collaboration that I describe in the preceding chapters.

Many of the conclusions I presented appear in this dissertation and seemed to resonate as valid with the collaborators. In the group situation as in their individual interviews, the talk drifted between accounting for their use of online dating sites as "personal" and therefore beyond the need for judgment regarding the ramifications of the software's ideology and critically reading their use and the use of others of and by the sites.

If my conclusions seemed acceptable to the collaborators, I can only triumph in that conditionally. As much as this is a "group" discussion, my voice is the most prominent. Further, the collaborators who were willing and able to participate were also those who were the most gregarious in their individual interviews. Their interviews tended to last longer, they were more likely to contact me after the fact with follow-up information, and I am aware that their perspective may be over-sampled in this dissertation. After all, the decision not to attend the group discussion is its own kind of rhetorical judgment.

Transcript

Me (Stephanie): [Slide 1] Okay, the recorder is on. This project wouldn't be if it weren't for you so you all deserve some lunch. Let me just talk about what we are going to do.

[Collaborators rearrange] [Slide 2]We are just sort of going to talk briefly I hope about my preliminary findings which won't be what the dissertation is going to be. These are the initial nuggets so I can get your feedback on that. And then we have time for you to ask me questions if you have any. You are welcome to ask anything. I might not have the answer to it yet–I might not have the answer to it ever–but please ask. We'll end with just talking. I am going to ask you some stuff. If it all goes to zen you may be talking to each other as much as you are talking to me. That would be ideal.

[Slide 3] Okay, so the three things I wanted to get done here: Check my findings with you to see if they feel authentic or meaningful, [so I can] hear what you have to say about them and in this wide world of internet dating if there are things that I didn't get. Also, I wanted to feed you lunch and say thank you.

[Slide 4] I want to go back to talk about privacy. You've all signed the note of consent so we don't have to do that again, but I wanted to let you know where you are on the confidentiality versus anonymity things. It will be confidential in the sense that your name or identifying features will not be in it but a transcript of this discussion will appear in my dissertation and possibly in publication. [Dafina gives me a high five.] That publication that means that it won't just be here in this room with other dissertations it will be in libraries; it will be accessible.

Elle: So the transcript will have our actual names in it?

Me: No, the transcript will have a pseudonym, which you may choose. I will give you a pseudonym no matter how you identify yourself today. And anything that I feel might end up being identifying or something that might be revealing for someone outside of this room will be redacted. Also I ask you not to repeat what you hear in this room. I can put

checks on my own behaviors with the information. But like Vegas, what happens in group discussion stays in group discussion.

Do you have any questions?

Dafina: Can I just say that my guyfriend that I met online wanted to come today. But I said it was for girls only! I said "I'll talk about you okay?" [Laughter] [Funny deep voice imitating a man] He was like "okay.'" He was like "I am dating online."

Me: [Slide 5] And all the stuff that is out there right now is really about him anyway. [Laughter] Maybe we could introduce yourself in the way you'd like to be referred to. If you'd like a name tag there are some over there. I put one on myself because how could I be even more dorky than I already am?

So you can just call me Stephanie.

[Gesturing around the room to collaborators]

Elle: You can call me Elle, its fine.

Sophia: Sophia.

Dafina: Dafina.

Me: Okay, great. That will be easy for me to remember.

Dafina: You can change them later. Change to our spy names.

Me: Right. If you have a request about your spy name, take me aside later.

[Dafina makes a joke about the spy name she would like, prompting laughter.]

Me: I am sorry, that would be an identifying feature.

[Slide 6] A little brief bit about my methodology for this. I am trying to stay away from jargony overly theorized approach in this dissertation. I hope the end product if it ever appears in mass print will be accessible.

Sophia: You are not going to use the word “alterities?”

Me: “Problematic,” that’s another one I am trying not to use.

Dafina: “Problematic.” I love that one. I love to problematize things.

Me: What I am doing for this last phase is ethnography. You all might not feel the burden of this and that is fine, but I really think about your input as collaboration rather than my subjects. I also did some content analysis. I’ve read at this point about 1500 profiles and ads.

Dafina: You read one of my ads.

Me: Yeah, I did.

My goal is to honor your experience in a way that isn’t patronizing or diagnostic. [Here I made air quotes with my fingers] Also I wanted to include my own experience and a personal narrative in this so I am treating you as equals is one of my priorities.

Dafina: This is a very small project you have. [sarcastic]

Me: Because this is ethnographic, I am more interested in the “what” I am recording rather than critiquing or diagnosing.

[Phone rings; it is Patricia who is locked outside. I stop recording and ask someone to remind me to turn it back on. Other members eat and Patricia enters and introduces her self. Go back over privacy issues and methodology quickly. This portion of the transcript has been omitted here.]

Me: [Slide 7] Skipping to rough approximation of what my chapters will look like, I’ll talk you about demographics, talk about what I heard from participants about writing a profile, reading a profile, and the business of talking to other people online went down. If you have any questions I’ll ask that you save them until the end mostly so I can keep

track of what I am saying. There ended up being 9 women who spoke with me. I sent out about 212 solicitations. [Collaborators murmur, “Wow!” “That is a lot!”] This was a difficult thing. Many people did not want to talk about this.

Patricia: We are an elite group.

Me: [Slide 8] You are an elite group.

Eight white women, one African American woman, not to point any fingers [I look at Dafina who laughs and strikes a pose], eight hetero women, one who identified as queer. Age range from 23 to 64 actually. Everyone I spoke with had some sort of post baccularеate work or were involved in higher education.

When we say a “pretty elite group”, this is an extremely elite group. Top one percent of the population. I’ve just listed here just some of the sites that people were currently using or had used in the past or were using concurrently. And this is kinda like a data cloud version of it.

Patricia: Actually I think it is Plenty of Fish not Kettle of Fish.

Me: Oh! Thank you!

Elle: What is that one? I’ve never heard of that one.

Me: It’s a free one. In fact, we should probably talk about that one at the end.

If you’d be okay with talking about it? [To Patricia, who nods assent.]

Elle: I’ve heard of most of these but I hadn’t hear of that one.

Me: I realized I forgot to put one on there too

The overwhelmingly popular one was Match.com

[Slide 9] Something else I was particularly interested in was how these particular women came to understand themselves as computer users. Even people who topped the scale in

my proficiency scale sort of hedged their ideas of their own proficiency. Many said things like “I know a lot but not as much as some people.” What people in my field think about how women come to computers, particularly women who are not digital natives like many of my students are, was that there was usually some man in the woman’s life who was the lead figure or point person for learning about computers. By and large though many women talk about family members who are users, more often than not there was an institutional setting where women were first introduced to computer use either mandated through work training or in school, mandated or elective course. The family member who figured large was the mother. Women were inheriting an interest in computers and computer literacy from mothers as opposed to fathers.

Sophia: My mother was the first to buy a family computer.

Me: My mom too.

Dafina: My mom did it.

Elle: My mom went to computer classes at a local women’s college.

Dafina: Really?

Elle: Yeah. My father still doesn’t know how to compose an email. He just hits reply.

Sophia: My mom checks my dad’s email for him.

Dafina: My mom makes fun of my dad. “You’re dad’s stupid.” She doesn’t say stupid but you know what I mean.

They make fun of each other, that’s how they entertain each other. I think it’s a weird sort of foreplay for them.

Elle: They antagonize.

Dafina: Yeah, I know.

Me: [Slide 10] Okay, so a little bit about the profiles people were writing. Most people choose the format or the service based on what they wanted out of it. I was surprised there was such a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of what people wanted.

Elle: Like they used a casual dating site versus "this is a site for relationships".

Dafina: Uh-huh.

Me: Yeah. And rather than being consistent with the mystique of the site I thought I would find when I started this, no matter what format they choose, no one was in the life partner business. Everyone just wanted to get out of the house more. That was the prime thing. Meet more people. Everyone spoke about writing their profiles in a way to write the many sides of themselves. This required balancing a lot of tensions like often it was showing off how accomplished someone is without making themselves seem threatening. Also there was a strong collaborative aspect to everybody's profile. They were showing it to friends. They were reading other people's profiles before they wrote their own. And this created an interesting tedium but pleasurable thing. Many people said they enjoyed writing about themselves in this way but [it] could be reducing yourself to the lowest common denominator. And addressing inane questions was very tedious.

Every woman wanted to transcend bodily expectations. There was a feeling that men looked only at pictures. And that the profile section was in some way meant to draw attention to the whole person and not just the body.

Something that was really fascinating to me, and I haven't thought enough about yet but I hopefully am going to start writing about next month, is how women including myself dealt with the idea that profile should have accuracy but at the same time give a good first impression. Everyone I spoke to felt it necessary to be as truthful as possible except when

it came to age. There was the perception of a stigma associated with certain ages, those ending in zero. Those were pretty big. Those created a noticeable change in the responses they got and that was skewing. There was also the general feeling that it was possible that men were lying about everything on their profiles. The pictures were a very strong sense of visual rhetoric, what was expected from their own pictures but also the resources it took to come up with a good picture. One of the last things women spoke about when they talked about their profiles no matter if it was an obligatory section in a template profile or an open-ended advertisement, there was a real importance on framing exactly who they were looking for. That had to do with describing the person but also activities, and I'll talk more about this in a second. Finally, everyone said they wrote their profile with the expectation it would be read and understood. And any person they might talk with will have read and understood it. It was not a place holder.

[Slide 11] Moving on to how women read other people's profiles. Many women talked about [how their ideal match's] profile should resemble their own. A rubric of compatibility, "we need to share these basic things to have a possibility." Some of those basic things were education and sort of religion or philosophical outlook if religion isn't the right word. This a Bourdieu term, but all the profiles needed to show a linguistic capital that means they needed to exhibit education. Degree was less important to most people than the ability to write well. And though spelling and typing errors were important and most people were forgiving of small errors like that if the person was able to play with words, a grasp of language, grace and ease in his writing. Also there was reading for verisimilitude. Things should appear in his profile as they do in life. And that first thing should be a rhetorical awareness that the profile should be a first impression.

And that the writer should understand that the reader is reading it with an eye for first impression. Concrete examples were pretty important. Something I wasn't prepared for was how critical and how savvy readers are about other people's photos. Is it fuzzy, is it not fuzzy? Is it situational? Are there other people in it? Are all the pictures from a wedding?

Elle: With the girl cut out!

Me: Or the intention.

Sophia: It's the male equivalent of Glamour Shots!

Dafina: It's like just their chest – I hate that.

Elle: Yes!

Dafina: But I like when they have a picture of a girl who is clearly a friend. [Hoots of agreement]

Me: Everyone was very clued into what those pictures said.

Elle: I also think those photos where they are like looking into their little web cam are like mug shot photos. I am sorry, there is no excuse in 2008 for not being able to get a friend to take a picture.

Dafina: They can say, "hey take a picture of me."

Elle: That is not winning you any awards.

Me: Almost last section. You guys are doing great. I just want to get through this last bit so we can devote the rest of time to you talking.

[Slide 12] Connecting and Responding. In this section participants talked about how they communicated with other people. A very established or and in some way personal idea of netiquette or what constitutes courtesy some of which had to do again with rhetorical

awareness. That if someone is approaching me via email is that email should both flatter me and invite me. And that was again expecting linguistic capital. Most importantly the email should demonstrate that they had read my profile. And that is through citation of something. One of the problems of an email versus a wink or poke or a nudge is that those did not convey the necessary impetuses or invitations or sometimes offer some kind of face-threatening behavior. On this slide, this section is me receiving an email and this side is me responding. If an email didn't exhibit these things, I am in a grey area. My burdens once I received an email one is that I need to respond in a timely manner. The timing has to be good. Mostly it couldn't be within two seconds of receipt but it also couldn't be like a week later. There were two kinds of ways to deal with rejections. The negative rejections had to do with not meeting these etiquette requirements. The positive rejection which was a reciprocation email but still a rejection. An acceptance email retriggered all these things. Most women talked about the need to meet all of these expectations in their email.

[Slide 13] Okay, any questions for me? I hauled through that. No? Okay?

Let's move on to discussion.

How true to your experience is this narrow sort of quick box of what I am writing about? How does it sound?

[Murmurs of agreement.]

Sophia: I don't think I had such quite high standards.

Me: Can you say a little bit more about that?

Sophia: Hmm. We'll I have to say I was being really shallow. So in terms of someone responding in an email I know I talked about a lot in our discussion about things I was

looking for, sort of screening criteria. Like the first thing I would do when someone emailed me was check their profile. And my response would be much more based on their profile than necessarily the content of our email. Though obviously, "hey baby wanna fuck" their email is going in the trash. [Laughing] Beyond something really glaring, I was going straight to their profile.

Me: Is that fairly unanimous? Everybody would check profiles after reading emails and deciding they are acceptable?

Dafina: You have to know if they are compatible, you know. I think it best if you wait, if you are girl for them to come to you or whatever. And you know if they are coming to you, you have to have some sort of discernment.

Patricia: The site I have a profile on lets you see who's just looked at your profile. And as soon as I see someone new has looked at my profile I look at their profile. Is this someone who–if they sent me an email–would I be interested in?

Me: So would you say this is kind of advance work?

Dafina: I just wanted to say that I just found out–or I've know for awhile I guess–that Black Planet is basically for convicts etc. [Laughter] And I found out and I was like "Oh my Gawd!" [Laughter]

Me: What was your initial impression of it?

Dafina: It was just–remember–for me to be really, really tepid. Get into the dating scene here and work with some issues I was going through and stuff like that. You know and I wanted to specifically date a black guy because of where I was and things like that. And so because of that. But apparently Black Planet is really bad right now. My friends were like "they're convicts" and I was like "no!" But they have just totally taken over.

Patricia: But you know if they are they won't be cheating on you!

[Laughter]

Dafina: We'll maybe you don't know these days! Seriously, I think it is like a fresh out of jail type thing.

Elle: Actually, can I say something to that? Professionally, I work in marketing and I was aware of it but I was even more aware of it after we talked that I had used eHarmony and now Match has Chemistry.com a new off-shoot but built on the premise that eHarmony offers but they begin every add with someone that was rejected by eHarmony. Which reinforces this notion that eHarmony is very conservative and very woman-meet-man-they-marry-and-have-babies. Like that the [messages] I take away from eHarmony. And even though I would very much like to get married someday and I might want to have children someday it seems very claustrophobic. It is just so not appealing to me. It doesn't make me want to do Chemistry either but now it is interesting to watch online dating sites in their outward messaging what people where already kinda saying like Jdate is where you go for this and or Black People Meet is where you go for that and Yahoo! Personals is casual and Match is a little less so. You know? Kinda that urban feel.

Dafina: I feel that if you do eHarmony you're like ready to get married and pop out some kids.

Sophia: People I know who've used eHarmony and I [have] personal close friends of mine who met on eHarmony and got married and that was the goal. They were like I am going on eHarmony, Chris was like "I am going to get married." He went on eHarmony, met the woman of his dreams and six months later they got married. And that's not the

first couple I know, I know other people who met on eHarmony. It's a totally different mindset.

Dafina: Yeah. It scares me cause I am like "I am not there yet." You know, once I am there I'll definitely do the eHarmony thing.

Me: Can I ask just a general question–and I've done eHarmony–what about this idea that a computer can match you better than you reading profiles on your own?

Is that a model of efficiency or a creepy Hal-Is-Eventually-Going-To-Kill-Us thing?

Elle: I don't think it is a unique thing. Take the ABC show "The Bachelor" there are people who just want to be on the show but they all have to take a compatibility test and they do try to pick people who match up, similar to the eHarmony thing. I also years ago tried eHarmony and I hated eHarmony and I think I hated it because I felt like I had no control.

Dafina: Oh. Hmmm.

Elle: I kinda want it to be organic but I was getting served people. I had no way to go out and see who was out there for me. I felt like I was missing out because some of the most fun interesting people I met through match are people I am not a "mutual match" with. Cause I think the mutual matches is so arbitrary because I felt one way because the sun was shining. I was in a good mood so I answered this question one way but tomorrow I could be in a crappy mood and answer it in another way and get matched with totally different people. [Throughout Dafina is nodding and murmuring, yes, uh-huh.]

Me: I distinctly remember taking that like 3 hour survey and by the end I was just kind of hitting C, C, C just to be done with it. Thinking at the time that it would all come out in

the mix but at the time that this one experience wouldn't set the tone for everyone that I met. And that might still be correct, I don't know.

Sophia: You say your experience of just sort of passively receiving versus actively looking sort of ties into what people using eHarmony, present company excluded of course, of the idea of that people who really, really want to get married now and the marriage is the goal--and the kids--that is the goal with someone who fits the checklist. Of course these are people with mental checklists and degree/job/height/income and if someone is kind of looking for eHarmony to do the work, so to speak. There are people out there who meet their checklist and there people who aren't. But it is sort of like a weird cart before the horse kinda thing.

Dafina: Also, one thing that I am thinking about like color and race coming into it. And the idea that going into the successful black woman syndrome "Black women have out-educated black men"--

Sophia: You are too successful for your own good?

Dafina: We are too successful for my own good. [Laughter] You know, it is horrible but also the fact that the men I am attractive to and find attractive and would set up are blue collar types. That is what I like, I don't need another academic in the family. Another crazy anal type A personality. Excitable, and two excitable people together don't work for me. I know some people are very happy in that. But I don't want that for me. I need someone saying "it's just a book, Dafina" and bring that sort of perspective to it and that sort of practicality is what I admire in the men I date. And my fear is that eHarmony would kind of get that out of there sort of like "If she has this she won't be compatible with this type person." The sexiest thing a man can do is fix something for me. You

know. Or if there is a roach or something or a rodent, you kill that. Hey, you know, I like the alpha male butt crack showing type. [Laughter] You know I don't meet those where I am and what I am doing at all. Even when I date outside of my race I date those guys that are, you know, who can do these other types of things with their hands. And I fear that that sort of aspect will be taken out of it.

Elle: [O]ver time [I worry]--I struggle with this personally a little bit--that any of them [dating sites] allow you to be more shallow. Where you just kinda have a check list [gestures to Sophia], and I think for me personally it is when you step away from that checklist then you are really able to and see people and it is even on match a very rigid checklist. I remember I emailed a guy and because the rhetoric of his profile was really engaging he seemed really bright and interesting, and I thought we would have a really great conversation so I did my whole picking something out of his profile to send in an email to make him feel special and loved and he sent back "I agree, I think we would have something in common but we'll disagree about politics. Good luck." And I was like "oh my god!" and I even am pretty careful about keeping my politics pretty–it is clear that I lean to the left but I am not in your face about it because I don't like–one of my closest friends is a staunch Republican but to me that's not important and I have an aunt and uncle where she is a hard core Democrat he is a hard core Republican and to me that is not a reason not to date someone. But it is amazing to me that in an online format how quick people are to dismiss you because you're not tall enough you don't have big enough boobs or didn't you know – had too much education. Or didn't have the right politics. Or doesn't exercise enough. Some completely lame reason.

Sophia: The height thing I think is really weird because I've seen – I've told you how I've done a lot of reading about online dating – and height is the biggest thing for women. It is the first thing they rank on ahead of everything else. Money, education, and marital status and children or no children aren't really important too but height is up there. And that is why men lie about height. And sort of analogous to women lying about their body size because no one wants to put Rubenesque. Even if that's what you are 'cause guys think sticks are fat. But it is sort of analogous to body size. [Dafina nods.] It's like height for me. It's really weird.

Dafina: I have a guy friend who I met; I met him through Craigslist. We're just friends now and he's like "I don't understand" and he freaks out when I am like "this guy I am dating is really tall" and he is just like "you're lovin' the tall thing." But he's like 5'8" and he's really, really like "I don't understand its something I can't deal with whatever" And my other guy friend, he is like 6'3" and Steve is like "It's something I can't change". He's like, "I can always loose weight. I can always change this. I can't change my height. It is never going to change." [Elle murmurs, "yeah."] But guys really feel that.

Elle: I've been guilty of that. As a short person I've always been attracted to tall guys on some like stupid like–I don't understand biology very well but if I marry a tall guy my children will have a chance in life. [Laughter] It is totally stupid. I have met a few shorter men in my life that I have found very attractive. But I didn't meet them through Match, I met them in person. And because I met them in person they had the opportunity to warm me up. So I was like, I'd make and exception. But in the online format I am like why should I make an exception? There are all these people out there, shouldn't I be able to get it closer to what I've created in my mind as sort of ideal minimum.

Dafina: Um-hmm.

Me: That is something I have been thinking a lot about right now. The idea that–thinking about–metaphors for use. There's a dissertation conceit for you right there. One of the metaphors I've been thinking a lot about is shopping.

Elle: Oh I call it that. My friend Marie calls me and is like what are you doing right now and I'm like "I am shopping for boyfriends online." I call it that.

Dafina: I think a lot of people see things like you do.

Me: Another metaphor I think is equally strong is one of research. That somehow what you're doing is researching this person, you're getting background information on this person. The phenomena of Googling someone.

Elle: Oh yeah!

Patricia: Definitely.

Dafina: I have Googled myself but I feel that is kind of imposing. Yeah, like it's not my business. Its like we are going on a date in a well lit area and if you have something going on . . .

Elle: I have been Google-stalked. I had a guy who we exchanged a couple of emails and I knew who he was in advance through mutual friends and I didn't tell him that but would let it come out when it was an appropriate time. Once he got enough information about me and he knew where I worked he started Googling me and he came to our first meeting already knowing a fair amount of information about me.

Dafina: Really?

Elle: Yeah, I think people Google stalk and they go to Facebook and they go to Myspace.

Me: Did it freak you out that he knew this information?

Elle: Um--

Me: I mean, was it meaningful information that he knew?

Elle: I knew there was nothing out there to be–I knew its all work related. Like all of the citations of me online have something to do with my job. So it's nothing I would be uncomfortable about, so no. And I'll say it didn't bother me because I'd have done the same thing. If I didn't know already–if I didn't have my friends vouching for him, I might have done the same thing.

Patricia: I've gone way beyond that because I – a couple years ago I did a presentation on identity theft and identity abuse and had to research on that. And if I had a person's name and their phone number I can tell you if I know what county they're in I can tell you what year car they have and what its value is and I could tell you how much they paid for their house.

Elle: Uh-huh

Dafina: That's pretty scary.

Patricia: It's all public record.

Dafina: It just seems to me that–Maybe this is my whole trusting issue where I am just like, you know--I wouldn't do that to someone because I wouldn't want them to do it to me. Not that I have anything hide or whatever it is just like that oh well they'll eventually tell me that if we move to a certain point in our relationship.

Elle: Yeah.

Dafina: It's like all those kinda things are going to come out. And I am one of those people who give you a certain amount of trust until you break it. You know . . . maybe

that's my naivete or something like that. It's like okay, here I'll take what you say at face value. 'Til you do-

Patricia: I don't tell the person that I've done this and I think if they ask me point blank I'd say yeah I've done some research but I've found it–I mean the voting records are public, you can tell what party they've affiliated, and how often they vote if that's important to you. You can find out, uh, I mean I've found–maybe it's the age range that I am looking at.

Dafina: Right.

Patricia: I mean a lot of these guys say, you know, that they aren't married that they are single and the age range that I'm looking in it is unusual to be that age and that single.

[All laughing.]

Patricia: And so, you want to know. Is there another person's name on the deed of this house? And are they still married? If not, why is his wife still co-owning the house?

Sophia: I've seen worse. It's not something you want to walk into but you want to know if this guy is still tangled up with his ex-wife. He is living in what is technically her house or you know whatever.

Elle: I'll say when I've done it is never been malicious. There was a guy I dated last summer and, uh, he just moved to the area to take a job here and he has a very extensive background in the arts and--and I mean and I was wowed by his resume. We didn't have chemistry, but I stuck around a lot longer than I should have. I was in a place in my life where I was falling back on the resume as opposed to the person. But I mean I loved his resume, I loved his background. Cause I used to have an arts background and I was going online just to hear his interviews on NPR and things like that because I felt like it gave

me more of an understanding of who he was, then when we were in conversation I could impress him and be like and your work with such and such festival. For me, I wasn't forcing myself much about getting out there and having minimal success, but I could be like "look how much I know about you!"

[Laughter]

Elle: It was just understanding his background.

Patricia: I don't think it's much different than maybe asking a girlfriend maybe who has gone out with this guy. That information is probably more pertinent than what's on the public record. And I've done that where I've had friends who were also dating around in this area and because there aren't many men in this area looking on these sites you see the same pictures, you know. And I'll ask somebody "look at such and such picture" and "do you know this guy?" And I've had people say "oh my god, don't go out with him," you know. "He just uses women like tissue paper," and it you know to me it is just basic research to protect yourself. And like I said, I don't throw it in the person's face and "I saw [nods to Elle] you were with that guy." It's not for bitch slapping or [whatever]! "What a stupid thing to do!" sorta thing.

[Laughing]

Elle: I assume if I am doing this, they are too.

Me: It seems–And I am just trying to make sure I understand more of what you are saying–It kinda like there are a couple of levels of this research which is the providing context thing if you haven't met them before, if the relationship didn't start face-to-face.

Dafina: Yeah.

Elle: Like with the vouch of friends.

Patricia: We've lost that friend setting you up.

Dafina: Yeah.

Patricia: That "we've vetted that person for you."

Dafina: Yeah.

Patricia: We have to do it ourselves.

Elle: And another thing I like about it too is that for our generation is that I grew up with the idea that my parents met in college. I remember when I graduated from college having this really strange feeling of wow you know those four years are gone and I didn't meet the man I was going to marry and spend the rest of my life with. So now I am going out in this wide, wide world and I am supposed to find him, and I had these four years where there was this select pre-screened group so to speak with a common network–

Dafina: Uh-huh.

Elle: So now you lost that common network which in a way vouches for it. So I think that is another reason why you go out and research to create that context when you are just blindly meeting people.

Sophia: I have to say I looked somebody up and broke a date because I found a less attractive picture of him which was more recent. He'd used a picture much younger, much better looking, much more attractive. I feel very shallow about that, but it was one of those gut level things finding a picture of what the guy really looks like and being like oh.

Me: Could that be, if you hadn't broken the date like postponing the inevitable?

Elle: Right.

Me: Like the face-to-face meeting was going to be . . .

Sophia: Did you see "The Office" on Thursday?[269]

Elle: Yeah.

Sophia: The whole "can she fit in a row boat" thing? I comfort myself by telling myself I let the guy down easy, but you know.

Patricia: There was this guy I Googled and there is this CV at NC State – that's public right there—and he is like online on the dating sites he is getting younger and younger. And now he'd have to be like 13 when he got his Ph.D.

[Laughter]

Patricia: He started out – when I met him for coffee –he was older than me and now he is about 7 years younger than me.

Dafina: Oh my god!

Sophia: Wow!

[Laughter]

Patricia: Yeah, something like that and a nine to ten year difference. Fudging on a year or two is one thing. I told you, I took a year off.

Me: You are not the only one, I am sure.

Patricia: But when it's like we're talking eight years . . .

Dafina: Yeah

Patricia: That's just not right.

Dafina: That's another generation.

Patricia: And I just – okay, it's caused me to have a judgment about these guys but how could you be so stupid to think people won't figure it out? They'll see your CV when

[269] "Chair Model," The Office, perf. Steve Carroll, NBC, 14 Apr. 2008.

they tell you what department they are teaching and the first thing you know let's see what courses he's teaching and then I wasn't capable of doing math? If he got his PhD in this year then he has to be at least this old.

Sophia: I think that matters what site you are on. If you post on craigslist for a casual encounter and you lie about your age or whatever. But if you are anything remotely resembling wanting to have a relationship with somebody then you can't really expect, I mean, how soon until they find out you lied about your age? The first time you leave your wallet on the counter . . .

Patricia: When you get a marriage license you have to show your driver's license! And when you loose your driver's license and you have to show your birth certificate! And then they look at that. Oh my!

Elle: I am interested in what you say about it being the same guys because I've been on Match now for awhile and I really do feel like it is the same people so it is exciting every once and while you see someone new and you're like oh my god! Maybe they'll be interesting! One of the things I find the most amusing are the people who [have] more than one profile.

Dafina: Really?

Elle: I'm like how stupid do you think I am? I just saw you two pages earlier. You were in my search as joeschmoewhatever and now you're bravo123 and the pictures are all the same. The headline's different, but it's clearly the same guy and it's like, do you honestly think that nobody can figure that out? And to go back to your point, [indicates Sophia] about the photos it really irks me when people take this like high and mighty "I am not

putting my photos out there because you should like me on the basis of my profile first." I am like that is bullshit.

Me: It is a bad idea in an online format?

Sophia: It is a really bad idea in an online format.

Elle: Yeah, in an online format like that its bullshit. It comes back to the whole shopping thing, shopping metaphor. If I was in the store, you wouldn't get me into the fitting room without showing me the cute shirt. And then I'd say hmm, maybe I'll try that on. Let's see how that fits. But I am never going to get to the fitting room if I can't see the shirt. You have to like put the photo out there. I don't like people who don't put a photo up. Or they say "Oh if any of my colleagues saw me on here they would give me such crap about it."

Sophia: Those guys are asking for a world of hurt. Probably the ones that are like I am a nice guy, women don't like nice guys. But they are asking for a world of hurt if – say someone asks them for their picture and they show them their picture and then they look horrible.

Elle: You set yourself up with a bit too much mystery.

Sophia: Yeah.

[Murmurs of agreement]

Patricia: I think at least in the forums I've participated in, if [you] don't show your picture if you're a guy, you're cheating. You're trolling and you don't want anybody to see your face. So the site that I'm on you can say, you can check this thing, that if they don't have a picture they can't send you email.

Dafina: Oh, okay.

Elle: That sucks.

Dafina: Now I do understand something like Craigslist not putting your picture up there. Um but like open exchange on something like Match, no. I put an ad on Craigslist for someone to go with me and my guy friends were going to the fair and we were all single but we were like hey, he put out one on the girls and I put out one on the guys and it was like we are going to the state fair with a couple of friends, a group thing, very casual so it really helped. I got like three dates that week. I ended up not going with anyone but guys apparently get no play on Craigslist but girls apparently do, and I had all these guys emailing me, and he was like, "just one." One. And then he was like, oh I got a second one but she is like 15 years older than me. He was like – and but it was cool and that's where I met the guy I hang out with now and uh --

Elle: Did you post your photo? Or not? Did you just—

Dafina: I didn't post my photo. I was like you know--

Elle: What did you say to get people to respond?

Dafina: It was like a bunch of people and me–it was state fair time–a bunch of people going to the state fair, it was very casual and I was, like you, know, I am a 29 year old black female. I was like "I really want someone who can talk about a wide range of things from like Britney Spears' most recent meltdown to China's most favorable nation status." You know, our growing debt to China. I purposely put a wide range of things that I like so one could get the type of person that I was. And I was like and that's it. My guy friends are really useful for doing these profile type things. They're like "Don't use the bridesmaid picture, it just looks like you're trying to get married."

[Laughter]

Dafina: It's like this collaborative thing, and I keep dating, but I keep collecting guy friends. More and more guy friends. I am like, okay, this is not working out.

Elle: I know it is funny I now have growing single guy friends. Most of my female friends are now in , and they're married and some of them have children. I find myself now when I am going out in a group it is me and my single guy friends. It is a really odd dynamic because I've never had so many guy friends in my life.

Dafina: Me either! I am totally there.

Elle: It is very, very, very strange. And it's a stranger thing too when they start dating because then I sit there and I go "Should I have liked them?" Should I have been sexually attracted to them? Because somebody else thinks they're fabulous. Did I miss something?" I am on the fence. But it is interesting. You said something too that made me think about this. Having your guy friends help you with your profile. I've had two very different reactions from guys. One guy is a friend from college and he helped me write my current iteration of my profile. And he was, like, and he knows me pretty well, and he was like "I think it needs to be a little edgier." Because I don't think of myself as the girl next door so I don't think your profile should sound like the girl next door. I really like my profile right now. I think it is a fair estimation of balance and it has the punch of personality and the wide range, but interestingly enough one of my guy friends here is like he thinks of himself as a sort of average guy and his feedback is, you know, "I tried to put myself in the shoes of an average guy and I think I'd be intimidated by your profile or I'd feel like it was really hard to impress you. Or that I'd be so stressed out trying to find a way to get an in with you that might just not email. Just the fact that I know you are beautiful and smart I would be"--I thought that was really interesting

coming from him like there are a lot of guys–I don't mean to sound–I think there are a lot of guys I would consider simple--like wanting very simple things--approach me all the time. Like you said they could maybe talk about the Britney Spears but not get to China. They are kinda just the one but they don't have that broad range. And they email me all the time and they don't say fuck but they are just looking—

Sophia: Hey baby you looking for a good time?

Elle: I'm like let's have coffee! It is really interesting too then cause then you sit there and say Gee is my friend Steve right or is my friend Sean right? Like who should I be listening to? But then hell, it's me; it should be my profile. So that's a struggle too.

Dafina: Yeah.

[Pause]

Elle: I don't know if we've gone too—

Me: No! No! But are we ready to move on to another topic? Sounds like we are.

Dafina: I had something but I forgot it.

Me: When you think of it, shout it out.

I was going to go back to something that you said, Dafina, and something that I had talked about with a lot of women–Things just tend to work better if a guy contacts you.

Sophia: Uh, huh.

Elle: I agree.

Me: Is that general experience?

Sophia: I don't know. I contacted a lot of guys. And I didn't get many responses either. Which is kinda weird because guys complain nonstop on forums that women aren't contacting them. I contacted so many guys, and I got very few responses. I contacted

some guys who clearly had given up after a week. You see they haven't checked their profile in a week, three weeks, a month. I am like "Just check your profile! I emailed you!"

Elle: Yeah.

Me: For me, I contacted my husband. And it took him, I swear to god, three weeks to respond. It took so long! Um but I kinda—I am just this kind of person–I just go and I did it. I actually didn't think much about the fact when I was using Match or eHarmony that I should be worried about the contact. But I had a lot of people who didn't write back either.

Dafina: I also think it is kinda what you want. Um, I am very strong personality and that can be overpowering and the guys that work best with me also have strong personalities and won't take a woman coming.

Me: Yeah.

Dafina: Because I can so easily walk over a guy not meaning, but also then I think that any attraction I have – not that I need a guy to beat my ass or anything – but you know, I need another kind of strong personality for me. So, you know, those types of guys like to be the chasers or something like that. And things like that. And I also worry about–my thing is my body issues, and you know I have come to a much better place than I was then and also the fact that I am not a thin girl and I usually generally assume that guys, especially guys who aren't black or Latino, want a thinner girl so I never want to be the fat girl that's running after you.

Me: Okay.

Dafina: It is kind of a weird amalgam of all those things. That are coming together.

Me: I think another perspective on that is it is a hell of a lot more work to keep up with all the new people, send them emails if you are interested in them, do more searches It was much–it was during a period when I wasn't actively doing Match for whatever reason. It was much easier to sort of manage my match time. It was much easier so I guess–although I am not at all interested in thinking about is online dating feminist or not or anti-feminist – BUT is it a feminist problem that things work a little better when men do the contacting?

Elle: I don't know I think it is kinda weird because I have heard mixed things from both guys. I think some guys prefer to make the first contact and some guys think it is really sexy when a girl contacts them. Most of the people I've dated on Match are people I've contacted. Though in most incidences the guy ended it, not me. And in the few instances—there have been very few guys who have contacted me that I've been interested in. Probably less than on one hand in the years that I've done it. And some of the people I've found are interesting, like you said Patricia, I'll look and see who's been checking me out, and then I'll go and check them out. Cause often there are people who don't come up in whatever mechanism you're using to search to show you your matches. That's were I've found interesting people. One thing I've learned to do over time is I've backed off on how much I put in my introductory email anymore because I've tried to go a little more when I've been active. I've been a little more passive lately because it is work more kinda on the advice of my friends and my mother–my mother is totally willing to slut me up–I've this one friend who said "quantity over quality." She said, "you have go home tonight and email ten people." I was like, "ten people! There aren't ten people I want to email." She was like, "You've got to do it; you've got to just go and

fire away. That's what guys do. Just do it." So for me it is a big event in a night if I email two people. It is like progress. I don't know-it's weird. I feel like it is often older men are the ones who reach out to me. Not guys my age–I reach out to them, and I reach out to some of the younger guys. Which is an interesting dynamic. I am at the top end of the range and I'll introduce that. [Voice lowers.] I'll be like "I am at the top end of your range but you seem like a cool guy." And actually the ones I have reached out to who have been young have been really responsive. I may be a cougar yet.

[Laughing]

Patricia: God I hate that term. I do. [More laughing] I don't know it has this predatory air to it that, just, I think it demeans women.

Sophia: And that there is something wrong with it.

Dafina: I don't know I kinda like it.

[All collaborators talking at once.]

Sophia: It has this idea that you are pouncing on a little animal and ripping it apart with your fangs.

Dafina: Nah, nah.

Sophia: And feeding on their life blood!

Dafina: I think there is kind of a power in it. And the power of "This is what I want", you know, "this is kinda woman I am and this is what I want and I want to do this."

Patricia: If it was "lioness" maybe, but "cougar" just has this crudeness.

Dafina: Yeah, I guess I can see that.

Elle: To be devil's advocate, I sit there and I have guys who are fifty and sixty winking at me. And their age range of women they want to date is like 22 to 37.

Dafina: Yuck.

Elle: Yeah, and I'm like, "you're 52–reality check." And frankly, I am not actually I am really disappointed in men who are like 37 and most of their age range is like 26-32. I am like, what about all the fabulous 36 year old single women? What is wrong with a beautiful 36 year old woman? And I am not that age but I am just–that is actually a turn off—

[Collaborators all talking.]

Dafina: Me too.

Elle: If I see on their profile that they are unwilling to consider women in their immediate peer group then that is–there is something about that that rubs me the wrong way.

Dafina: There is something about it, a power dynamic. ["Yeah" and more talking.] And I really think they are trying to take advantage and I think it is a little too slick. If you happen to wind up with some–but you are purposely doing this age range or something like that–I don't like that at all.

Patricia: I think most of these men are divorced, and they are thinking you know, "I need someone I can mold. Somebody younger would be better."

Sophia: I know a lot of guys in their mid thirties who are just in denial. They think they are that guy in the trailer park ["Earl" played by Jason Lee in the Fox television series My Name is Earl] who is going to date that hot chick from the show so–[wild laughter]–And, its not like they're the business man or academic guy who wants to date some cute young thing cause she is going to go on his arm, but there are a lot of guys who are in denial that they are now balding and paunchy and, you know, they are like "I am athletic and toned."

Elle: You know, “Actually, you are about average.”

Patricia: And the ones that have the big pot belly and they are like “work out and athletic body type.” I give that about an “average.”

Dafina: “Come on! Be a little more truthful.” And I really hate that there is no–I hate when there is no “curvy.” Cause I am not BBW but –

Elle: What is BBW?

Dafina: Big Beautiful Woman. But you know, I am curvy. That is my body type.

Me: I think that women also feel – maybe this is just me making an assumption–but I think we move ourselves down rather than move ourselves up. That being truthful actually means being overly modest or conservative about how hot we are. And men feel no impetus to do that.

Elle: They really don’t.

Sophia: Some of it is the incredible let down. Guys can be so cruel about that kind of thing. You say you’re “slim” and they are like “no you’re not.” That first meeting and that total disappointment or feeling that you have misrepresented yourself. It would be better to make it a pleasant surprise, so to speak ,than have to deal with some totally jerky guy.

Patricia: It was Glamour Magazine or Marie Claire, one of those, that said average weight of an American woman today is 160. That’s the average. So I am like then, anything below 160 we are gettin’ towards slim.

[Laughter]

Patricia: Feel free to do what you want to with that. I am not puttin' a few extra pounds if I am at average or below. Men haven't figured out what the average weight of a woman in this country is yet.

Elle: I was thinking – because we have talked a lot about image and how it relates to pictures which drive some of the connection. On one of the channels they've been showing the movie You've Got Mail. And I think You've Got Mail is actually a horrible example of what online dating is.

Me: I have been talking a lot about that, actually.

Elle: That two people would meet anonymously in a chatroom and have this organic connection, and in many respects that was my experience with eHarmony where the person I met didn't reveal their picture. And I really struggled with this, but you know our first initial emails were really engaging and I let myself continue to have this connection with this person and I had no idea what they looked like. And really over time--over two weeks' time--developed a very good rapport with this person. And what a tremdendous, tremendous, tremendous let down it was when I saw them in person because I knew within ten seconds that I had no physical attraction to them whatsoever. And now have signed myself up for a two-hour dinner and it will be really hard because I had developed an incredible emotional connection to you but I have no desire to see you naked.

Dafina: Oh god, I just had that happen.

Elle: In a way, I think that is why online dating is just so very different than meeting people in real life. In real life you see the book upfront, you see the cover, and then you open it up and start to turn the pages and you see if those pages tell a story that you want

to buy in on. Whereas in online dating, you [are] kinda immersed in chapter 13 or whatever that might be so you are reading along and–. And it distorts what the priorities are.

Dafina: Yeah.

Sophia: In real life, you meet someone and there's a spark or there is not a spark. So you are just going after the spark. You can see somebody and know that is an interesting and compelling person. And [online] you are trying to create a spark from what they have written or whatever.

Elle: You are assuming that common interests yield a spark. And they don't necessarily. The last guy I dated from Match, we could not be more different. He is like this hippie who went and spent three years volunteering on a trust in India. Has no—like totally impractical for me, like you know, he is just a poor, funky hippie. But what a fun guy he was to date. But then rarely do you—I don't know.

Dafina: I think you can be a little more forgiving of stuff like that in real life because people you meet naturally, you see them – A lot of the guys I end up dating, the first weekend, I am like "Uh, I don't think so." But then I am pulled in by charisma and stuff like that. That sort of stuff starts to reveal itself. And the people that's happened with, I didn't necessarily meet them online. But when I did meet them on line, I was like "No" but then we became friends, that would kinda develop after we were like we're not going to date. I like the reveal or something like that but I think that will happen more in a non-online sort of thing.

Elle: I think there is a lot of pressure in online dating. That first coffee meeting, there is a lot of pressure to make sure there is that instant connection. And one of the things that I

have learned over time is that I am an extrovert and I need to be sensitive to the fact that I might be dating an introvert and it may take more time for them to warm up over the course of an evening and I need to give them more time than a coffee date. And that has been hard for me to learn and have that own self-awareness that for a lot of people they don't get beyond that first coffee date, and so if you can't put it all out there on the first thing you're screwed depending on the person you're meeting.

Me: One thing–and this is to change directions a bit but I was thinking about it as you were talking–that I am thinking about and puzzling over as I am working on this project is that I married the guy that was not the best writer, whose picture–I actually thought he had a facial deformity–

Elle: Oh my gosh!

Me: Who I kinda emailed over a whim. "Oh, I'll just send one to him." He kind of–I read his profile and thought, he seems nice but not stupendous. There weren't sparks flying off the page, I wasn't dying to meet this guy–But, we are great together. I am trying to think, was I, someone seduced by the word–I was emailing all those great writers no matter what they seemed like–Did I not recognize my own kind of blindness to that incompleteness or diversion or whatever?

Sophia: The same sort of thing happened to me. Stephanie and I talked about this before too. I recently got married–a year and month right now. So I haven't online dated in a while but you know the guy I married is nothing like the search criteria I had built for myself. If he had had a profile up, I would have never have picked him up in any of the hits. But he is a wonderful guy and so I wonder about that. Though, in hindsight if I had

to wade through every single profile–You have to have some kind of screening technique. But it is amazing how things work out.

Dafina: The guys I actually wound up in a relationship with and intermittently date and not so much have a relationship but just sort of occasionally put myself back out there. The guy I dated when I was kinda looking for – I'd thought I'd get a boyfriend from online but it put me in the mood to be receptive to men's attention. You know, I have specific goals when I date on line and after I broke up with my boyfriend in August and then waited a couple months to kinda test the waters. So it was kinda like "Oh, men find me attractive! I'll be alright!" or whatever. So those sort of things like kitzmet just happen and I think that person will be right and I think something will eventually happen. [Pretending to cry] Except [in a few months] when I move to a place where there are no black people. And then I think, "How beige are my children going to have to be?" [Laughing]

Dafina: Anglos and Mexicans, that is all it is going to be! I am going to have to break it to my dad that, "I am sorry but I am marrying a person of a different color." 'Cuz this is clearly not working. [Laughing]

Sophia: But hey, you've got a deadline. You've got to find somebody before you move.

Dafina: And I was kinda looking for another relationship. Apparently, I was single for a reason so I was like "okay, I am quitting trying," and I think the online process helps me learn more about me than other thing, sort of relationship thing, coming out of it. All those questions and what type of guy am I looking for and in to and who do I like and why didn't I choose that guy – I think for me it is a much more selfish process because it

is kinda like about me and me finding where I am in my life at that point. So, I don't know.

Me: If you had to characterize--We don't have a whole lot more time, so I am just going to ask a few more questions and if they are interesting to answer, answer them. And if not, don't bother.

One thing I wanted to pick up on that I had heard you say was that [dating online] does do work on you [it changes you.] Do other people feel that way? Was this a pleasurable experience?

Sophia: It definitely made me more confident. I wasn't inundated with responses like some women are but getting any responses was good, you know?

Elle: My perspective is a little different, I think since I have been on it for so long. I have used it off and on probably since I was 25. I noticed a distinct shift when I turned thirty and that was saddening to me. It was really disappointing to see that tick and the amount of–like–when I was 25 I was getting multiple emails a day and–I was chocking a lot up to photos–and now I get a couple of emails a week and most of them are in the trash. Most of them are not emails I want to respond to. And that is kinda disappointing cause then I sit there, and I am like finding myself running searches in other geographic areas thinking okay maybe it is because I am in the South and everyone gets married young here. I don't know. I start thinking about all these stereotypes: oh my god, do people think I am an old maid because at 31 I am single, and do the guys look at my profile and go what is wrong with her? How could she 31 and pretty and live in the South and not be married? Surely she must have some kind of complex. But I actually think it has not been as healthy for me in recent years and found that some of the people I have enjoyed dating the most

through it have not made my “screen” initially. Though, I think it has forced me to step back and think it is there, and it is a “nice to have” and not a “have to have” method now to meet someone who is a life partner because that’s not what it has been yielding for me. And I’ve thought about just taking my profile down for a couple of months and just putting it back out there. I just changed my photo this weekend, and the number of people who looked at my profile and the number of emails I got jumped. It is amazing how you can make little changes like that and they think you’re somebody new because they don’t recognize it is you.

Patricia: I have found that if you change your headline in your profile and you change your pictures you get a little bit more action. So I’ve decided that like once a month I’ll change things.

Dafina: It is so–Does anyone watch those HBO specials, The Hookers At the Point? Whenever the new woman comes on the block she gets all the play and that. Not that we are hookers or whatever but I think it keeps that male dynamic–they call it the fresh meat and she can’t turn ‘em away fast enough. It is that fresh meat phenomenon.

Patricia: Before online dating I did the Independent Personals which is even harder because you’ve got 20 some words no picture but then they do give you–-of course they don’t do this anymore because they have discontinued that service—but they would give you a mailbox so you could answer these questions so somebody could listen to more. And your ad would only run for like three issues, you’d have to put something else up. So I’d put new stuff up every time and I had this one guy like three time he contacted me. Because every time I put something out there he didn’t think he knew me. Even though I pretty much said the same thing in my phone message.

Dafina: And your voice, you'd think he'd know your voice.

Patricia: Yeah. And finally–we'd had coffee, we had coffee! [Laughter]—and finally he left me an email address. I said I am not calling this man but he left an email address and I sent him and email message that said we had coffee and you didn't call me. I wouldn't have gone out with him anymore. He–told you this story [pointing to me], he failed one of my first tests even before he didn't call back and that was not having his fly zipped the whole way. [Laughter] That is just basic competence. [Laughter. "Yeahs."] So I am like, "no, you can't go to the bathroom and redress yourself. I just can't go out with you." I can't handle that. Being the woman with the guy who is half mast. [Laughter] Come on.

Me: Patricia, could you talk some about Plenty of Fish? I have done some looking and it is pretty unique, I think.

Patricia: Yeah. 'Cause I actually paid for some time on Match.com and Yahoo! Personals and I never did eHarmony but I met some women at a Speed Dating event that had been on eHarmony and that told me that if they had been on eHarmony and they are at a Speed Dating event with me and they paid for eHarmony. I am not paying for that.

Dafina: It is really expensive.

[Murmurs of agreement.]

Me: It is the most expensive.

Dafina: It is like 100 bucks or something?

Me: Four hundred bucks. For something like 4 months.

Patricia: I am thinking, "they paid the money and they are still here with me with these other women" so I am like forget that one. Somebody told me about this one, its called Plenty of Fish. It is a guy in Canada started it, he runs it out of his apartment. I think he is

like multimillionaire now ‘cause he gets all those ad dollar revenues. But there is absolutely no charge to put your profile up to send email. With Match.com if both people aren’t paying then you can send all the email you want but they have to pay too [to connect] so they can respond. They have all these forums and there are people who say, “I am married and I am just here for the forums.”

Dafina: I hate that.

Patricia: Yeah. They have a lot of space and you actually have a minimum you have to do for your profile. You can’t put “just looking” you have to put more stuff to read.

Elle: “Like walks on the beach.”

Patricia: Yeah. They have–you can turn on or off–you can tell if people look at your profile. I found that as I read the forums I wanted to see what someone who put something up in a forum, and I’d think “where did that come from?” and I’d look at their profile. And then they would look back and say “I saw you looked at my profile” and I just got tired of “I just looked at it and I wasn’t interested in you as a date.” You can limit things like must have a picture, cant’ be married, doesn’t smoke, doesn’t drink, you can have an age range and if they aren’t in this age range they can’t send you email. You can set geographic limit, only people so many miles from you. So–like I said, the main thing about it is that it is totally no charge for it. It says as you log in “100% free, put away your credit card.” Cause I didn’t’ get–I paid for like three months on Match and Yahoo and I didn’t get any dates from it.

Dafina: I opened an account and then I closed it. I felt like, that was when I hadn’t gotten any jobs, and I hadn’t heard about my post doc yet and I felt like “I have given all of my life to this damn PhD and I don’t even have anything to show for it. I haven’t gotten a

husband or anything! I am going to date! I am god damn going to get a life!" So put up my profile and worked hard on it and then I got my job and I was like "oh, okay" and clicked it off. So now I am declaring my PhD as my husband because it is what I do. [Laughter]

Me: And it is a very long lasting relationship.

Patricia: Like my daughter said, "Some people say you need to find someone special in your life"–we are gettin' together for dinner with a bunch a people–and she said "I've found someone special in my life and it is me." [Laughter]

Patricia: But you know, I can get hopeful, but I've reach a point now where I want to put down "I am not a nurse, I am not—I will not nurse you in old age." Some of these guys are in the age range I am looking at are just looking [coughs] – I don't want to be following you around and changing your diapers. Oh my god. You know.

Sophia: That came up in one of the forums.

Patricia: Yeah, I read one where it came up with "Would you date someone with a serious illness?" and these women were being castigated for being shallow because they wouldn't take on somebody who [had] some kind of serious illness. And I'm like, you know, if I go for a coffee date with someone and the next day I find out they have cancer I am not sure I want to start a relationship. And I am not sure that is shallow.

Dafina: One thing they had on the BlackPlanet thing when I was doing it was that they had a thing for disabled and handicapped. So they had it for–and I always found that kinda great.

Me: Validating, yeah.

Dafina: You know, whatever, I happen to be this way.

Me: I have a friend in Florida who is a cancer survivor–well, she is in remission, I should say–She was having all these awkward moments where, "At what point do I say?" She put it in her profile for awhile and nobody contacted her. She was like "I just want to go out!" And she was healthy at that point but she was like "What's the right time and"--

Dafina: There was a funny article about that a few years ago.270

Me: Yeah. Actually, I think my friend wrote that.

Dafina: Did she find someone? It think she had found someone.

Me: She actually found somebody through kinda a cancer survivors' sort of meet and greet kinda thing. He was a survivor too so it was a non-issue. And her feeling about it was that if you put it up front, it sounds like you need care. And she was like, "I don't want care from you. I just want maybe coffee and some sex." [Laughter] And I think the way many of these sites kinda create a normative nature, they are very–most of them are pretty heteronormative and pretty class normative. That is just another extension of the collapsed idea of date-able maybe.

Dafina: You said something about the Black People Meet thing [pointing to Elle].

Elle: My boss used it to find her husband.

Dafina: Really?

Elle: Yeah, she was in her 40s and she had kinda been single, I think she had been engaged two times and then single all through her 30s and gotten to 40 said "You know what, I don't need a man to have house and child" so bought a house and she adopted a

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[270] This article has been reprinted in many places but has been accessible through the Tampa Tribune Online since July 2005.

Suzie Siegel, "Laughter is the Best Medicine," Tampa Tribune Online. 3 Jul 2005, 27 Oct. 2010, < http://tampatrib.com/Baylife/MGBRHXOEOAE.html>.

child and sort of created this life for herself but then decided she still wanted to meet somebody. So I am pretty sure the website she used was BlackPeopleMeet.com. So she actually found herself a younger guy, he was divorced in his mid-30s, and they have been married now almost three years.

[Pause]

Patricia: Are you doing any Meetup sites?

Elle: That was suggested to me, you know, that notion of community. MeetUp.com is one. Finding people with a common interest. When I looked at the meet ups in the Triangle, my thing was that one of the things I'd do was knitting, and I am not going to meet a guy at knitting. Not to stereotype, but . . .

Patricia: My sister is always fussing at me, the things you enjoy are the things that only women enjoy. You go to these embroidery groups, knitting groups, lace-making groups.

Me: I've been to bridge [meet ups] and it is me and people in their seventies.

Dafina: I like Spades, and stuff like and I used to go to a group and there were a lot of single guys. It was chill, just us playing a game and whatever.

Elle: One of my friends and her husband–who she met on Match–actually I know four people who met through match and a lot of others who are in relationships from Match but her husband is a brewer with Triangle Brewing here in the Triangle, and they have been having their tap nights at all the local bars and the Raleigh Meet-up club has been a big fan of Triangle and they go to all their things and I was at a beer meet-up at Tupelo's for Triangle and there was a guy there and I was like "oh my god, I emailed you two days ago and you have not responded." I was like, "do I talk to him, do I not talk to him?" And he was the brother of the head of the beer meet-up, and the brewer introduced me to the

brother and that lead to the conversation with the guy. He never, ever, in the entire evening picked up that I was the girl who emailed him. I sent him an email the next day and was like "nice chatting with you at Tupelo's." And he was like, "I just found someone or I would like to get together." I was like "thanks." That is my MeetUp.com experience.

Patricia: Is he still online?

Elle: He is not, no.

Patricia: That ticks me off when they are like "Oh, I just met someone" and week after week they are still on.

Elle: No, he–after he emailed me he took his profile down. I think he had one or two dates with this woman and I had just happened to email–

Dafina: Right at that point, yeah.

Elle: It was a timing thing.

Sophia: There is a rabbit meet-up group.

Me: Is there really?

Dafina: A rabbit?

Sophia: Yeah. They meet at the house of this person who has six rabbits.

Dafina: What does it smell like?

[Laughter]

Sophia: I don't go. Rabbits don't smell though. I have one.

Dafina: I am sorry, that is just me.

Me: One question we can maybe finish with is–and this is my segue–Is online dating ubiquitous? Is it seamless from offline dating? I think the meet-up is seamless in a way.

Sophia: It is a weird hybrid.

Me: Is this just–We went from handwriting things to using a typewriter to now using--when we write it is almost assumed that we are using a word processing machine. When we date are we–do we assume that we are using online dating? Some kind of online dating idea.

Dafina: I think it has to do with again the class and you know "the regular people." People who aren't overeducated as we are. Like they do regular dating a lot. I've found that more as you get into upper echelons, you have people who do online dating just because of the time factor, it's a close knit group. I think it is almost incestuous. Especially if that's not your type, you need these other ways out of there. Church and these other things. My grandfather wanted me to get with a minister, and I am like "No!" I can't do the things I want to do with a man of God. [Laughter] I'd feel God was always watching! [Laughter] I can't do it.

Patricia: And the ladies of church would know.

Dafina: God, I know!

Elle: I think we've moved to a place of general acceptance about online dating. I think about–and I think it has taken awhile to get there and I think here is still some work to go on it, but I still think how do I explain to my grandmother, "Nana, I'm dating someone I met online." It is a little harder for her to process. It is not hard for my mother to process. It is probably something my dad is like, "Are you safe?" I think it is something that is the norm and people get it. But I think it is very much a personal experience thing. And I do think it has to do with having more education. I still don't think for me it has ever replaced sort of that connection of meeting somebody and having that kind of immediate

– I don't want to say if feels artificial but I think when I first approached it could be a great way to meet someone, I don't see as that anymore. I see it as this thing that is kind of over in the background. It is kinda there and running, but I am not really tending to it or viewing it as a vehicle.

Me: It sounds like you understand it as a mediated way of meeting somebody, [the experience] is mediated through a thing that can distort as much as it can reveal.

Elle: I do also think and this is something I find very puzzling although I just signed up to be a part of this world of social networking. I dated a guy at one point who was really into Myspace and I really was sort of–not disturbed by–I just didn't get it. He spent a lot of time on Myspace and was using it as a way to connect with a lot of different people. And I am like, if I want to connect with different people, my friends, I'd just pick up the phone and call them or send a postcard when I am traveling. Or send them a text message. Why write on their wall? And I find that–it is part of the whole online thing–they work you longer hours and are staying connected to their work through things like Blackberries and there is the expectation that you are in a salaried type role that you are checking email over weekends. There is this new expectation on how much we work and how little amount of personal time we have. And I do think a lot of people will use the online medium as a way to meet people because, like, I know I should do more things. I know I should join a soccer league. I know that if I went to church I'd meet somebody. I know there are all these things I can go out and do and add to my already busy life as a way to meet people, but I just don't have the time and energy to do that. And I think that–I do see the online way medium as a way to meet those people and have three coffees or I

could go to soccer practice one night, and beer meet up the next, but I might not yield anything from there.

Sophia: I think to get back to your main question, I think at some point online dating is going to reach a saturation point. Because there are still a majority of people in this country who don't have computers at home and don't have regular internet access. And that is the truth of it.

Me: The digital divide.

Sophia: Right. And online dating will only apply to a certain segment of the population, and it is going to hit a technological wall. And it is also going to be— there will be vast swaths of people who will be underserved by online dating. If you're not photogenic, if you are not a particularly good writer. And there are a ton of people who are just kind of boring.[Laughter] The people who do the best at online dating are the people who are perky and creative and who stand out yet in a normal, socially accepted way. You can stand out being a mortician but no one is going to date you.

Dafina: That is a great job, I am sorry. It really is.

Me: I know.

[Laughter]

Elle: So is being an electrician. I think, why did I go to school when I could be making seventy thousand dollars being a plummer.

Me: And you could be your own boss.

Dafina: And if something breaks, you can fix it! I don't think guys value how sexy that is. You know, can my officemate do that? No! He can't!

Sophia: Bug squashing. My husband's roommate actually called him up to come because there was a roach. It was really sad. Clearly that guy is not dating anyone.

Elle: I want to come back to what you said about the people who have the really perky and interesting profiles, and I am not trying to toot my own horn but I do think I have a really perky and fun profile and I get a lot of compliments on it. You know, your profile outpaces others. But it is not giving me – it is not yielding the people I want to date. That is something that is hard for me. It is not that people aren't writing me, it's that they are not the people I want. The people I want are not writing me.

Patricia: I don't think the guys read the profiles 'cause I have had emails and they'll ask questions–The last one that wrote, I just wrote back and said "If you want the answers to those questions, they are in my profile." Everything he asked about me, he would have already known if he'd read my profile which indicated to me he was just looking at the photos and shooting off the emails. As much as you tweak and tinker with the writing, I am an introvert so I really have to work at putting myself out there and making myself sound appealing and also because of the age range I have to make sure I am not looking like a retirement fund and that sort of thing. I think it is a lot of work and not very–it is not necessary. You know, you are a woman. I took this picture of myself, with a web cam, in my office and got a lot of action from that. And it was like, getting mails like "nice rack".

[Laughter]

Patricia: You know, yeah it is! He didn't go anything past that picture. And it wasn't a sharp picture either but he didn't go past it. All that writing, and maybe it makes you feel better, but it is not the draw. Not in my experience. I think it is the photograph and I think

it is your age, especially that matches what they are looking for. I don't think there is any proximity either because I keep getting mail from people who are in Virginia, in Missouri, Indiana. I am not relocating and those guys that say "Will relocate to any place", those scare me. That means they don't have any friends or hobbies. It's like "what's wrong with you?"

Me: That is something that I've heard women over 40 say more that the relocation idea is out there. One woman, a participant, had dated only guys who lived in other locations. And she was doing it strategically to manage the time. "I can go and see him for a weekend but if he is a creep he is not down the street from me." I think that is much more ---I noticed that idea, "I'll relocate anywhere" as being suspect.

Patricia: Well, it certainly eliminates the possibilities of stalking if they are too far away. As I told you in our interview [nods to me] any man that would stalk me in the age group I am looking at, I almost consider date-able because that shows initiative.

[Laughter]

Patricia: My friends said don't do this because you might end up with a stalker and I said these guys will not get out of their lazy boys. These guys who would stalk [are] showing energy, initiative, interest. I'm like, he's got a lot of things going for him.

Dafina: I had a stalker. I didn't meet him online, I met him through a friend. And he's 30 something and ready to settle down.

Sophia: Maybe he can move to Houston with you.

Dafina: He talked about it! He was like, "we have stores" because he works for Roses. He is a manager there. No sexual attraction whatsoever. He is in women's buying and from

New York. He is just a little too metrosexual for me. I don't believe he is gay but he is not masculine enough for me.

Me: We have about another minute or so left.

Elle: I can stay a little longer if you have questions.

Me: We got to all of mine but are there other things you'd like to say?

[Silence]

Me: This has been just a fantastic experience. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me!

[End of discussion.]

APPENDIX A

Online Dating Sites Discussed in this Dissertation

BlackPlanet (http://www.blackplanet.com/): Site launched in its current form in 2001, targeting African Americans with free profiles within a larger social network that includes news feeds and employment, low monthly fee to contact other members (under $15).

Chemistry (http://www.chemistry.com): Match.com companion site started in 2001 that matches users based on personality test and profile keywords, moderate monthly fee ($20-$35) with limited access for free.

Craigslist (http://craigslist.org): Personals advertising on free local community-based forum.

Compatible Partners (http://www.compatiblepartners.com): eHarmony's companion site established in 2007 for open to gays and lesbians, matches users based on patented *29 dimensions*; premium monthly fee charge (over $35.)

eHarmony (http://www.eharmony.com): Founded on Neil Clark Warren's patented 29 Dimensions of Compatibility which matches heterosexual users based on an extensive personality profile; premium monthly fee charge (over $35.)

JDate (http://www.jdate.com): Targets Jewish community in North American with moderate monthly fee for profiles and optional matching, founded in 1997 but now owned by Sparks Network, the largest online dating conglomerate.

Lavalife (http://www.lavalife.com): Founded in 1997, its original incarnation, Webpersonals.com, was a free service. It now offers free profiles for members and charges a transaction fee for each contact a user makes.

Match.com (http://www.match.com): Industry leader founded in 1994 offers profiles and keyword matching for moderate monthly fee.

OKCupid (http://www.okcupid.com): Matches users based on answers to lifestyle-based questions; provides charts and diagrams of user trends; now free.

Plenty of Fish (http://www.plentyoffish.com): Primarily fee site with optional matching, profiles and communication for North American and British users, offers premium “serious member” status for low monthly fee.

Perfectmatch (http://www.perfectmatch.com): Moderate monthly fee site featuring the Duet® Total Compatibility System designed by Pepper Schwartz that markets itself as a matchmaker.

True (http://www.true.com): Uses scientifically tested compatibility matching system to match users, conducts criminal background checks, moderate fee charge.

Yahoo! Personals: Now defunct (Match.com is now Yahoo! online dating provider), offered low monthly fee for profiles and communication between members.

APPENDIX B

Interview Question Guide

Interviewer Prompt:

This interview will be a lot like a conversation; please speak freely and candidly and for as long as you like. All of these questions will be open-ended, asking you to talk about what is important to you. Never is there a right answer. I might ask you about something you have said and you should ask me if you don't understand a question or what I mean.

In addition, you should feel free to ask me questions about my own use. I would not ask you a question that I would not want to answer myself and I would love to share my experiences with you as you share yours with me.

This interview will be broken up into several sections- general questions about online dating, questions about how you use the site, questions about how you wrote your profile, questions about other people's profiles, questions about other ways you use computers, and then some basic demographic questions.

This interview will be audio recorded.

If you do not feel comfortable answering any question, you may refuse to answer.

We will spend approximately two hours together. Once we reach the 2-hour mark, if I have remaining questions, I will ask you if we may continue. You of course may refuse.

Please enjoy the drinks and snacks available.

If need be, I'll contact you for a follow-up interview.

General Use Questions:

When and why did you begin using online dating?

What sites have you used? Why did you choose those?

Did you tell other people that you were using these sites?

Did you recommend these sites to others? Did you talk about your use with others? Do you TELL other people that you use this site? Do you respond when asked about it?

Connecting Via Dating Sites:

Tell me about how you and a potential date connect.

> When you contact or respond to contact, what do you say? Do you have a format or template? What form does that contact take? How soon do you meet a date after first emailing? When do you give out your phone number? What if someone wanted to meet sooner or later than that? Do you wink/poke?

What do you consider before contacting/responding?

Do you have rules or guidelines about how and what you will say? How did you set these? Do you ever "break" them?

Do you ever worry about using on-line dating? What are your worries? Do you do anything to address those concerns? What/how?

Writing Your Profile Questions:

May we look at your profile?
> Profile specific explanation.

Have you revised your profile since you first posted it? Why did you revise?

How hard was it to write?

Did you share it with anyone, seek feedback?

Did anyone/any resource help you write it?

What kind of qualities or characteristics where you trying to convey with your profile? What impressions where you trying to avoid?

What kind of pictures do you have posted?

What impression do you want people

What kind of dates are you trying to attract? To avoid?

Other People's Profiles Questions:

What are characteristics of a really good profile? What would you like to see a potential date say/do on a profile?

What are turn-offs in someone else's profile?

What are key phrases, attributes, words, you look for in a potential date's profile?

If applicable- Do you look at profiles of other women-seeking-men?

Do you look at profiles for reasons other than trying to find a date?

Tell me what you think about pictures on a profile.

> How important are pictures when it comes to evaluating the potential of a date? What is a great picture? What is a bad picture? How do you feel about pictures with people in them other than the potential date? "Non-representative" pictures?

What is the first thing you look at on a profile?

How do you find profiles? Do you search? What kind of searches do you do?

How do you feel about these examples:

- Sexual language
- Phrases like "I am looking to meet new friends"
- typos
- misspellings
- humor/wit
- ironic profiles
- Graphic pictures/ pictures of naked bodies

Computer Use Questions:

What kind of computer do you have?

Do you use a computer for work/school? How? For what? Where is this computer? What kind is it?

Do you use a computer for pleasure? How? For what? Where is this computer? What kind is it?

Do you ever use your computer to communicate with other people? How?

How much time do you general spend on a computer during any given day? What do you do on it?

What websites do you go to frequently?

I am going to read you a kind of Do you do any of the following on a computer-

> Email

IM
Send text messages
Read news
Read blogs
Compose a blog
Look at/search for pictures or share photos
Social networking/facebook/myspace/other
Bank
Shop
Search for information/read knowledge databases
Play Games
Which ones?

What else?

Computer Proficiency Questions:

Can you name a word processing program?

Name three Internet search engines?

What is an operating system?

What does RSS do?

Can you name an object-oriented programming language?

Demographic Questions:

Race/Ethnic Heritage

Sexuality

Hometown

Career/occupation

Level of education

What are you interested in achieving through online dating?

Are you using other methods to find dates? Match-making service, blind dates, social networking, going to bars/grocery stores/etc, meeting people at school/work, meeting people through friends?

What are some of your other interests?

APPENDIX C

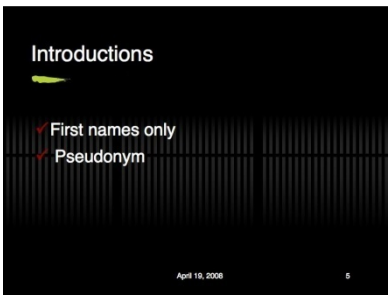
Group Discussion PowerPoint Slides

Slide 1

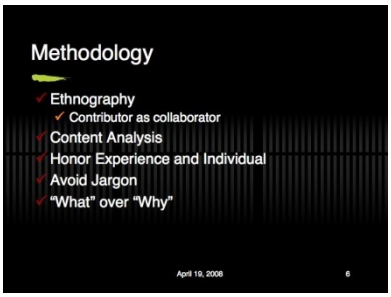
Slide 2

Slide 3

Slide 4

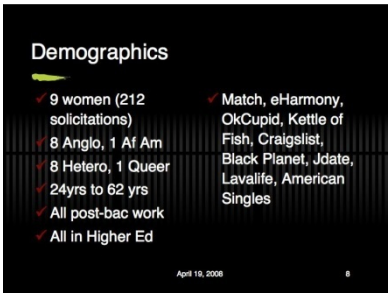


Slide 5

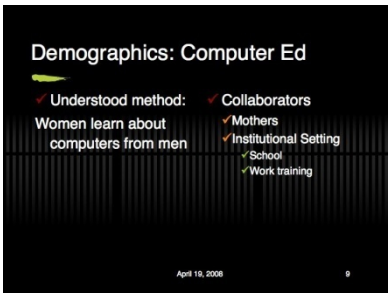


Slide 6

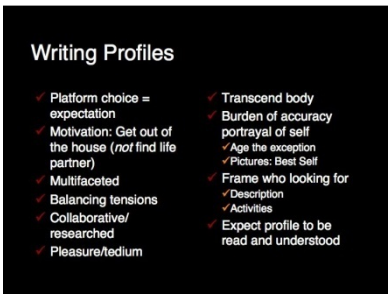
Slide 7



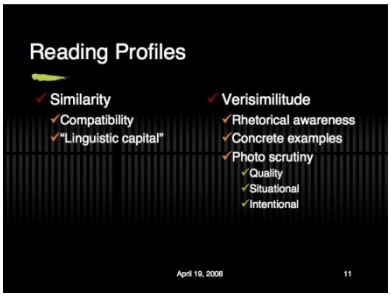
Slide 8



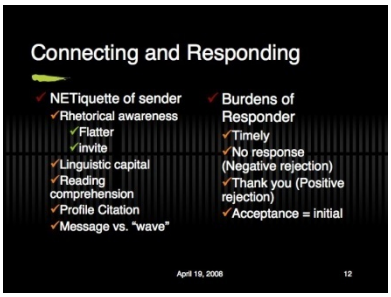
Slide 9



Slide 10



Slide 11



Slide 12

Slide 13

Slide 14

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