

NAVIGATING STATIC: A LAYERED AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT
OF FAMILY IDENTITY AND TELEVISION

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DEDICATION

To the family who loved me as continuously as the sun in the sky, supported me through the moments I thought I was breaking, and continually believed I am capable of wonders, I can never express my gratitude. You are my humble love, my loud and quiet strength, and my indescribable belief in the power of doing your small part to better the world. We will fight. We will argue. We will drift apart and come together. Still you will always be in my thoughts, my writing, my soul. Though my spinning, virtual, gossamer threads stretch far and wide, I will always hold you close to my heart.

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To the young girl whispering the words, "I wish I could look like her," as she gazes upon her television, you are an original story worth reading. Just turn off the screen and write.

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deal with basically any situation, because honestly you are so incredibly quick on your feet, you always come to mind. You deal with unbelievable burdens with a straight back and welcoming smile. You don't let people quit on themselves. You supported me when I was afraid to give power to my voice. You helped me to stick to my values in tough times. I am so glad you are you and that I've had the privilege of calling you friend, collaborator, poet, and scholar.

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We met briefly at the third DA conference. I don't even remember what was said because that ultimately was washed away. I remember sitting in the auditorium watching wide-eyed as Tami Spry danced and breathed words/poetry/scholarship across the stage. I

cried and laughed and, most importantly, learned. I could feel my mind starting to open. I could hear a whisper of a voice calling to me. That conference was the catalyst for this thesis. For us meeting more officially. For you entering my life. Synchronicity. I moved into communication classes. I remembered your name. I knew I could trust to learn from that name.

Our autoethnography class was... brilliant? Life defining? A wake up call to the idea that someone truly wanted to hear what I had to say? It was in this space I found my voice. I accepted my flaws. I cried openly through a moment of pure catharsis while reading aloud my feelings of anxiety that I had never before been able to put into words. You not only created space for voices and healing and autoethnography to one student, you created a tightly knit, loving, supportive community out of a room full of strangers. We witnessed and loved and learned from each other's stories. I will never forget the amazing educational experience of that undergraduate class. It has inspired every lesson I taught and it made me believe I could enjoy education again.

I think on my first semester in graduate school. I cried a lot. I had no idea who I was or what I was doing. I was so lost. I remember coming into your office trying to verbalize my struggle and you would just listen. Sometimes you would distract me with a story. Sometimes you give me comforting words and enough strength for the day. You are the reason I will have an MA behind my name. You stayed. You fought. You believed in us. You taught us. You created a community through bringing an international community of storytellers to a West Texas town. You are the reason people believe they can better themselves. You inspired me to become someone strong. Someone who won't let life push her around, silence her, or give up. I am still growing. I am still working to be as brave as

you. You are courageous in everything you do from your teaching style to your fierce care for students. You try and try again. You get back up. You keep moving.

When I think of this project, it's still a little too raw. Too new. The memories haven't settled and my mind is still shaken at the fact we accomplished this task. I think I expected doubt. I think I expected a Herculean trial, but no. It was a journey. It was long, but I was never alone. When I doubted myself, you believed in me. When I wanted to quit, you said that I was capable. I truly don't know if you realize you're a superhero. You have this unfathomable ability to help people believe there is more to them, that they can do more. That we can learn, write, teach, practice more in the world. You try. And you try. And you try. Even writing this, I can't do your spirit justice. What would I have done without your guidance, your mentorship, your friendship? Where would I be if you hadn't helped me to write my life? I have learned because you were willing to teach, willing to try. I have grown because you challenged me. I am a better person because of you. I believe we are soup snakes. Soup snakes meant to find each other and better each other's lives. Thank you, you extraordinary machine. Thank you.

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Thank you.

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I write to explore lived realities of family life, identity development, and the influence of television. I inquire into the constructed television narratives and realities we consume in our daily life. I use reflexive, aesthetic, critical, personal narrative to document personal and political aspects of family and identity development experienced in the shadow of television realities. I offer my stories with hopes to create space for discourse on carefully constructed, easily consumed, television narratives shared and reintegrated into family and personal culture through relational watching. We are consciously and unconsciously embodying and recreating these television narratives in our daily lives. I write resistance and recognition of how doing autoethnography allows for reflexion and critical thought on the impact television narratives have accumulated over a lifetime.

Keywords: television studies, family, identity, gender performance, relational, autoethnography, narrative

PREFACE

My thesis began many years ago. From the first time I shared a story or reinterpreted a television or personal narrative, narratives have been a critical part of my life (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). Choosing to do autoethnography, to explore television and personal narratives, was not a choice made lightly. I considered all aspects of my project, consenting for my stories to be read, interpreted by others. Ellis (2004) discusses how autoethnography “refers to the process as well as what is produced from the process” to describe the impact autoethnography can have on inquiry and the writer (p. 32). I take responsibility for my methodology. I consider ethics, others, audiences, and public spaces (Bolen & Adams, in press; Ellis, 2007). I fully acknowledge and embrace my inquiry as inextricable from my bias (Bochner, 2002). We cannot separate ourselves from our research (Bochner, 1994).

My research directly involves personal narratives constructed considering my memories of television, family, and selves. Sometimes memories are uncomfortable (Ellis, 1999). That is integral to the act of living (Bochner, 2007) because memories—happy, sad, uncomfortable, distressing, angry, traumatic, mundane, loving, etc.—are essential for growth and transformation (Freeman, 2010). My work is chosen with care and consideration, even the uncomfortable moments and memories have purpose (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Bolen, 2014; Ellis, 1999). I knowingly put these stories onto the page and into public spaces to inspire connection, creation, and inspiration to discuss the issues questioned and written about in my thesis (Pelias, 2014).

Many Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) do not require autoethnography to undergo the review process (Ellis & Adams, 2014). Angelo State University has upheld this precedent through past autoethnographic theses. IRB approval is needed when there are human subjects

(i.e., others with whom a researcher interacts with to collect data) present in a study that strives to contribute generalizable knowledge (i.e., objective, universal truths). There are no other authors or oral histories involved in this project. I offer these stories as critical and reflexive texts to be read and interpreted (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). I am tied to my personal narratives like any researcher is tied to her data, but I am not a case study. My narratives speak to moments of tension navigating the lived reality and the television reality we experience. Later addressed in Chapter 5, autoethnography does not endeavor to produce or reproduce universal, generalizable knowledge (Bochner, 1994; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004). It seeks to create space for a researcher/writer/storyteller to openly acknowledge her presence in her work and speak with more depth and emotion than the typical academic voice allows (Ellis, 2004). While ASU does not require IRB review, autoethnography's success depends upon an ongoing commitment to considering ethical implications (Ellis & Adams, 2014).

As I wrote, each story was weighed and considered with an understanding of relational and narrative ethics (Bolen & Adams, in press). The nature of autoethnography calls for emotionality, reflexivity, and working to speak to potentially painful spaces as a means of catharsis (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Axiologically, doing autoethnography is therapeutic and cathartic (Poulos, 2009). Autoethnographers write to be read; we write seeking public audiences (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). As an autoethnographer, I recognize my position as inescapably privileged. I write stories acknowledging risks. I write because if I do not tell my stories in this moment—in this project—there is a risk in the silence, in the ignorance of not acknowledging or experiencing a story (Bolen, 2014). To live and relive memories is a risky endeavor; it is a part of the daily, relational life that we all experience (Gergen, 2009a; 2009b).

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My parents always ~~watched~~, ~~protected~~, controlled what I watched when I was younger. Had to be careful not to expose me to anything too adult. Too potentially harming. Nothing overtly sexual or violent or racy or derogatory or overtly... anything. My televised reality lived in unspoken approval of eight channels. Eight channels of control. But knowing even within those eight channels, I had my limits. My hand would linger over the remote when I would watch something I knew they wouldn't like, wouldn't approve of. Watching *The Simpsons* or *The Proud Family*, was an exchange of nerves versus pleasure. I would hover over the remote, half listening for footsteps, for any sign my parents would come in and "catch" me in the act of my subtle rebellion. My slight resistance. There would be a passive aggressive giving of looks and my passive aggressive acknowledgement of them through the changing of the channel. I knew other kids watched these things. I could hear the jokes I didn't get, the references outside my knowledge. I hated the idea of being sheltered, of being... protected. I hated the control.



The television shows I watch connect me with my family. Our culture, my heritage spins out from the act of watching. We share moments, laughs, cries, and crystallized aspects of self-creation by discussing the intricacies of characters we admire or hate. This act of watching and meaning making through watching connects over virtual webs that span millions of television sets weekly. My strands come through a computer acting as television. These spaces constructed as television have evolved and reached into the changing cultural lives we inhabit and construct.

We use these webs, these stories, these broadcast memories to narrate not only our reality, but our relationships and selves. We pull meaning from the screens and add it back in. Virtual moments constructing tangible actions. We construct inner heroes after our weekly superhero show. We observe people and consequences of their actions after a brush with a detective movie or television show. Our inner identities borrow from these seemingly flawed and flawless characters constructed on screens. Screens, though they are far apart, allow spinning, virtual gossamer thread to stretch from my family in Houston, from my apartment in San Angelo while we hold up stories of last week's episodes or say, "Can you believe what happened?!" while exclaiming over plot twists. We arrange these constructed selves based on our needs. Our need to connect to one another. Our need to be similar. Our need to find ourselves and our definitions of normal.



I love this show. I center my attention on it. I open my eyes and take in every image. *America's Next Top Model*. Beautiful thin bodies. The way the fabric falls on their bones and planes. The carefully beautiful features, sometimes fragile in their thinness, sometimes strikingly strong. These women aren't that much older than me. They talk like me, well if I talked normally. They obsess like me. Yes. Their obsession with looks. Their own bodies. Their thinness. I must be normal. They're on television. They're beautiful. They're thin. They must be normal. Someone must be. I must be watching normal. Structuring normal. Frissons of anxiety run through me as a cold fog creeps through my mind. But I am not normal. I know this. It haunts everything I say, everything I do. The pretty girls on the television strutting their long legs mock me. Anger wells as tears brim but are kept controlled for fear of disrupting the room. The room stays silent as my family watches this together. For

me. Because it's my show. My show. Images filling the room, my head, my mouth, my heart. Silent yet screaming, laughing yet sobbing, the anxiety filters from my head to my fingers, to my toes. It feels like fire. It feels like acid rain. It washes through me, punishing me. How dare I not be normal. Stupid girl. Worthless girl. Can't laugh right. Can't talk right. Can't move right. Never right. Always wrong.

Silent screens filling the space between. Never normal. Always watching. Always hoping to see that one show that shows me how to be normal. How to get from one end of the pool to the other. I drink in the screen waiting. Watching. Observing. Starving for the pictures. Starving for the words.

If it's on television, it must be normal.



I watch narratives flicker and twist. I flip through them quickly, lingering on some, skipping others. Static blurs memories, emotions blend and take on new meaning, and time seems to suspend. The narratives move faster. Phrases overlap each other creating nonsense, laughing splices with yelling, tears spill into intense moments. Sounds dissolve into white noise and images bleed to create a pulsating buzz filling my mind. It's too much. Too much memory and sound and feeling and... story.



My thesis project began years ago and continued through the moments of childhood identity building, creating meaning of family, of normal, of understanding while watching a shared television screen. Stories are crafted to start a discussion of the place where television meets family communication and identity formation. My thesis and narratives flicker as I write with and through memories of family juxtaposed with flashing, bright screens. I use

layers of memory, narrative, and research to track how communication in and representation of families has forever changed and evolved with the introduction of the television. Through this *layered account*, I write to render meaningful moments for culturally and self-constructed identities and communicative moments (cf. Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995). These moments reflexively examine the cultural upbringing and relational significance television has had and will have in my life. These moments “complicate what family means and how families are lived” (Wyatt & Adams, 2014, p. 2). I discover family through narrative, and I discover narrative through family.

Audiences view television not only as entertainment, but as a reflection of reality. For families and for individuals, the medium of television holds power due to its ability to shape reality through influencing visual perception and relationship formation. When so many Americans own and use a television, images seen on screen affect what we view as real or “truth” (McNiven, Krugman, & Tinkman, 2012). This power influenced the public during crucial times in history. Notable examples include men coming home from war in the 1950s. Television programs emphasized the need for women to take care of family and home (Kubey, 1990). This was the golden age for normative families on television. Parents and children rarely fought or raised their voices (Tyus, 2015). During the 1960s and 70s, the first non-nuclear families were featured while women started to become main characters of their own shows and portray independence from men. Through the 1980s and 90s, dysfunctional families started to appear in shows such as *The Simpsons* (1989-present) and *Roseanne* (1988-1997) (Fink, 2013). Attempts at diversity began with shows including *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and *Golden Girls* (1985-1992) (Hopkins, 2012; Tyus, 2015). The transitions and

struggles for equality endure today as shows are working for inclusivity of minority actors and portraying diverse elements of culture.

The nuclear family used to be a cultural ideal—the happy father with loving wife, one son, and one daughter, both who make their parents proud by being well-behaved children. The family was typically portrayed as white, upper middle class with strong, traditional family values. This idea was created through repetition in visual mediums and the notion of having a “normal” (read: normative) family (Goodall, 2005). It created a fictional family that defined the cultural standard of what was considered acceptable for television. As television and visual mediums of marketing, news, and entertainment change, the idea of family becomes more diverse and more inclusive of different family structures (Ballard & Ballard, 2011). The nuclear family is no longer the family presented in dramas or situation comedies (sitcoms). Families representing minority voices and diverse ethnicities finally have a chance to help create a new visual culture that celebrates non-white, non-straight bodies, and non-normative family structures (Tyus, 2015).

Families develop an important aspect of identity for most people (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2014; Goodall, 2005; Tyus, 2015). The experiences we have in family systems socialize us, teach us basic communication and social skills, and demonstrate how to view our *selves* and others. This space in which we first start the social learning and socialization process continues to affect our emotional and social perceptions as we grow (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2014). Family structures give people a sense of understanding and belonging. However, few people have family structures that mirror the norm or fit into an ideal of how a normal family is portrayed. Gaining acceptance of non-normative, non-white family structures and differing body types remains a difficult process (Hopkins, 2012). Fat bodies

are still used as clownish characters in movies and television shows (Mosher, 2001). Young girls are typically portrayed as pretty, smart, thin, but not too independent or rebellious (Myers, 2013). Few, if any television shows, portray children who struggle with identity issues or family troubles (Turner & West, 2003).

The portrayal of television families is complex (Tyus, 2015). Modern shows depict struggle and tension within families, but in the end, problems are resolved and communication between the upset parties occurs. This illustrates progress in the ways families relate in realistic and emotional ways (Taylor, 1989). Younger children are able to acquire better communication skills when shows they watch emphasize communication and social problem solving (Lacalle, 2015). Older generations tend to struggle with difficult family conversations (Alexander, 1993; Yi & Richter, 2004). This communication style has been attributed to the lack of conflict perceived in early years of television watching, and reinforcing the ideal of a quiet and respectful child. Current generations struggle with conversing about the behavioral shift in recent programming (Kubey, 1990).

As the Baby Boomer Generation ages, this communication gap widens. The increase of television shows that challenge the normative family ideal and portray minority bodies and genders, challenged many deep-seated ideas about what should be on television. Generational changes and technological advances will only increase the difficulty arising from communication if we cannot agree on the use of television as a relational tool able to bridge difficult conversations about values and family. Familial relationships create the experiences that define someone from first contact and throughout life. I speak to moments defining family and childhood, as communication incorporates visual realities surrounding lives and conversations.

Goals of Inquiry

My first goal of this thesis is crystallizing existing literature that documents how familial communication and interpersonal connections are changing and have changed with television. I explore positionality through reflexively acknowledging how television has influenced identity, self, body, and familial communication within these issues (Berry, 2013). I story my upbringing and the ways television has connected, separated, and co-constructed my familial relationships. I question a culture of embodying television through the showing and telling of stories (Boylorn, 2008).

In discussion of identity and body, I move to my second goal for this project. Growing up fixated on screens and television narratives, two different realities develop—the lived reality and the television reality (Alexander, 1993; Fiske, 1987). Television realities portray bodies, gender performances, and concepts of self in unrealistic and unattainable ways. As my identity, self-talk, and body changed with age, my understandings of these realities were influenced and molded by repetitive visual and personal performances (Butler, 1988). I reflex upon memories and personal stories to find moments of crisis between the lived experiences and the television narrative reality of gender, body, and self (Berry, 2013). I use lived experience as evidence for how repetitive images affect self and perception of body.

My third goal for my thesis focuses on creating a space of connection and conversation around the family involved in television and the communicative, social, and emotional impact of these relationships. I shift through narratives to find moments of pain, of love, of story to foster a personal and evocative connection with readers and their

experiences. My thesis seeks to delve into the culture of watching and sharing the stories of growing up alongside and intertwined with television through reflexive and critical narrative.

In Chapter 2, I review literature surrounding the history of television and its integration into family life and family communication. In Chapter 4, I work to connect extant research with personal moments reflecting family life and communication. My review of research includes inquiring into the history of television and the shows produced as society has changed throughout the decades. Popular culture worked to define the reality of many generations. The way generational communication was and is influenced by television ties into how these different generation relates to each other.

In Chapter 3, I articulate the process and product of autoethnographic inquiry and my methodology of doing autoethnography for this thesis. Autoethnographers work to explore self and location through viewing writing as a process of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Ellis (2004) discusses how autoethnography “refers to the process as well as what is produced from the process” as a way to describe the significance autoethnography can have on research and researcher (p. 32). Within communication studies, autoethnography embodies a praxeological approach, which allows writers and readers to examine selves and cultures through “the ability to use reflexivity, storytelling, and aesthetic devices to investigate cultural texts, assumptions about relationships, and premises of human interaction” (Adams, 2012, p. 182). This praxis, this reflexivity is where autoethnographers transform narrative into an examination of culture. By embracing these issues through engaging lived experiences in the form of personal narrative, autoethnographers create a unique space, make meaning, and interrogate the personal and cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). We use narrative instinctively and organically as part of the process of understanding

world, culture, and positionality (Bochner, 2000). Stories acknowledge that one cannot separate self/selves from research. Through utilizing personal narrative, inquiry can create concrete, evocative, and engaging experiences, which may connect with audiences while also creating spaces for writers to recognize themselves in the inquiry and their own accounts (Ellis, 2004). These accounts of family are messy and complex, pulling at memory and time to engage readers into vulnerable and sensitive topics, such as child sexual abuse (e.g., Rambo Ronai, 1995) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer issues (e.g., Adams, 2006), in personal and emotional ways. Autoethnographers do autoethnography in hopes of fostering understanding for readers by storying through these emotional, personal, and sociological topics (Bochner, 2005; Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography connects inquiry to the personal and the political of our lives through our memory and identities in/of culture (Holman Jones, 2005a).

In Chapter 4, I present personal narratives of family, identities, and television. I strive to make sense of the said and unsaid, silences, and communicative actions of my family's social watching and socialization. I engage these stories as both audience and performer to recognize privileges, cultures, and positions. Weaving between my blurred memories as television's cultural narratives wash over my storied selves (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I probe family experiences, conversations, memories, and emotional moments. I layer accounts to show critical moments and reflex on the fluid nature of narrative and memory (Rambo Ronai, 1995). I position stories critically. I question purpose and positionality to consider how watching and engaging, not only as audience but as performer, creates an inner reciprocal relationship with memory and culture (Berry, 2013; Boylorn, 2008). Layered accounts do not shy from a messy story. My account is made through borrowing pieces and phrases of

narrative and methodology to form a messy text woven with relevant literature (cf. Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995; Marcus 1994; 1998). These texts do not seek to create or cause pain, but look to lived experiences in order to garner understanding and embrace the need for recognition of voices and communities (Bochner, 2005; Ellis, 2004).

Utilizing a layered account, I seek to bridge my family stories to research (Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995). Relationships between family members create the stories that define someone from first contact and throughout life. I speak to moments defining family and childhood. Communication incorporates the visual realities surrounding our lives and conversations. Shifting between narrative and literature, I move through a non-linear timeline of memories (Marcus, 1994). To transition between layers, I use asterisks in the shape of televisions (☐) to separate perspectives and shifts in analyses (cf. Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995).

In Chapter 5, I summarize Chapters 1 through Chapters 4. I review my goals of inquiry and draw into focus contributions my thesis makes toward the relational communication of families; the examination of how television has integrated into our memories, family, and communication; and the ways in which this thesis has benefitted myself. Finally, I write through methodological reflections, ending with a discussion for future inquiry.

Summary

My primary goal for this thesis is to explore family and television as an intertwined aspect of communication instead of assuming separation. Understanding personal value and memory tied to television can help to foster meaning and sensemaking in the ways it has affected and shaped lives and communication. Working through my autoethnographic

approach possibilizes a contribution to the field on a personal, political, emotional, and academic understanding involving my selves in meaning making. I offer my thesis as an exploration in sensemaking of family, television, and identity.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Television is an integral part of the development of society and culture. Within the last seventy years, as relationships and language on television have become more complex and diverse, the ways in which people relate to each other have changed. The cultural currency of television influences identity development and definitions of visual family concepts. These concepts have progressed from stale stereotypes to an evolving visual exploration of inclusivity and cultural awareness. Concepts, tied to current popular culture and generational issues, are then reinterpreted and understood through the narrative of television and personal sharing. Narratives, both cultural and personal, challenged and continue to challenge norms as television and people create culture informed by television and personal narrative. In this literature review, I explore the cultural currency of television, history of family representation on television, a call for narrative in television studies, and relational ways television has influenced identity development—especially in relation to how femininity and diversity have evolved. Examining the story of television in relation to narrative provides a transition to the methodology of my thesis.

Theory and Ideology of Television

With the introduction of television, entertainment, news, and advertising were forever changed. The visual and auditory influences of the government, celebrity personalities, advertisers, and news broadcasts were directed into family homes and popular culture across the world (Becker, 2001). Since television's inception in the 1920's, the flickering box continues to be a media sensation. These first years of television were more focused on

nightly news and the few fifteen minute segments broadcasted on local television channels (Salazar, 2014). However, culture continued to evolve.

Television's topics and subject matter was, and still is, heavily influenced by life. Life reciprocates the cycle and is altered by television. Television's significance as a defining element of popular culture has forever changed the concept of culture and delivery instruments of culture. The constructs of television message delivery include every element of its design. Television's success and connection with its audience as a means of culture creation and delivery stems from its success in creating narratives that appear as realistic (Alexander, 1993; Fiske, 1987). This 'realism' allows for audiences to invest in the constructed visual reality portrayed on screens due to the similar visual elements in their lived realities. The semiotic deconstruction of all the elements involved in creating a final product that appears and entertains as a visual version of reality are complexly woven together and packaged for narrative consumption by the viewers (Alexander, 1993; Fiske, 1987).

Scripts of television shows are written and constructed to appear as real dialogue people hold and exchange. These written scripts are influenced by cultural ideologies, writers of shows, and television networks. Layers of gender discrimination, stereotyping, classism, religion, and many other problematic ideologies are written into scripts, dialogues, and character histories. Characters bring covert and overt ideologies into constructed conversations that move along plots or stories. These conversations are reified by conversations in the "real world" (Fiske, 1987; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999). Ideologies are not only shaping and defining the reality of television, but the reality of the viewers watching and taking in the shows.

Television's ability to influence reality by creating a reality within a show has had unmeasurable impact on numerous viewers over the years. Viewers consume television as entertainment representing realistic situations and then reinterpret the narratives of television through conversations that repurpose structures and/or ideologies of television narratives (Alexander, 1993; Himmelstein, 1984; Fiske, 1987). This passive acceptance of what is "real" warps our shared reality. Audiences reproduce conversations and situations (narratives) seen on television screens thereby subconsciously, and sometimes consciously, reinterpreting and reifying harmful or biased ideologies and actions layered with ideologies of these television shows. My next section reviews television programs by decade. Each decade has distinct generational issues and struggles. Television, as mentioned earlier, draws inspiration from these struggles. This next section traces how changing representation of family, gender, and politics led to evolving conversations, dialogue, and both television and personal narrative.

Family Communication and Family on Television: A Review

Families within the post-World War II era were dealing with transitions. Television would become forever linked with the idea of family, as families became the target demographic (Du Mont, 1945). In the post-World War II, most families were trying to settle into the "normal" way of living (Comstock, 1989). Television fit naturally into that need of families trying to learn the new normal.

Golden Age. The Golden Age of television in America was dawning. American television was suddenly seen in a different light, as advertisers saw the value of the flickering screen. Advertisers could now speak directly to consumers in their homes (DuMont, 1945). Daily and nightly news informed viewers of local, national, and international news. Politics

became accessible in a completely different way, and presidential elections and addresses to the nation were televised to the American public. The television screen in family rooms became a conduit to culture (Hutchinson, 2012). The shows, television personalities, and newscasters were idolized as the new entertainment, celebrities, and trustworthy voices of the times (Upshaw, 2009). Consumerism became the new encouraged normal and led to the U.S. government working closely with television content production, which led to a guiding ideal of traditional gender roles within family (Nussbaum, 2015; Weinstein, 2004).

With the inception of entertaining television programming, families who could afford a television in their home had one. Shows, such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), were early television favorites that targeted families as their audiences (Du Mont, 1945; Nussbaum, 2015; Tyus, 2015). These shows established and reinforced the importance of traditional, normative family values, relationships, and communication. Such values were seen as needed and valuable in a time of readjustment for veterans, women returning to the home, and children looking toward the future after a world war (Hutchinson, 2012; Weinstein, 2004).

On television, wives stayed at home to take care of children while husbands earned the income. Women were only portrayed as homemakers and those holding a career were few and far between. Children tended to be seen and rarely heard—always well-behaved, never a burden. These families were happy, normal, and always had the shiniest new appliances (Ponte & Gillian, 2005; Taylor 1989). People's lives adapted to the screen and families changed schedules and social time to be able to watch their shows together. These shows aired at strategic times of the week—intentionally creating time and space for families to meet and socialize/watch television together (Hutchison, 2012; Tyus, 2015; Weinstein,

2004). Socially, the changes television brought into the family were substantial. It followed the trend radio and print began. Television programs created a fictional family that defined cultural standards of what was considered normal or acceptable for popular culture. This defined norms for television because shows centered on families as a key demographic (Jenkins, McPherson, & Shattuc, 2002). The relational aspects of the early family friendly television show worked to idealize a happy, normative family. Families performed their day to day problems set in comedic situations with minimal conversational conflict inside comfortable homes—with men holding comfortable middle to upper class jobs. The families were white, happy, and wholesome with values aligning with patriarchal, heteronormative, privilege based backgrounds. Shows, such as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), were the epitome of how these values were performed (Taylor, 1989).

Toward the end of the 1950s, few shows had black characters. There existed only two shows where black characters were the focus of the show (Tyus, 2015). Both of these characters' lives revolved around the white families or characters in their stories such as in *Beulah* (1950-1952) in which a black maid's story was told through her work with a white family. The representation of these characters' and their on-screen lives showed the lack of diversity and cultural understanding current television family had and lack of conversation in American culture at the time in relation to how race was discussed or thought of.

The 1960s. Moving from the 1950s into the 1960s, television brought civil rights issues, war, government and political protests, presidential elections, and assassinations of civil and political leaders into the homes of American families. The nuclear family was still strongly represented and valued in prime time broadcasts and shows. The nuclear family

ideal was created through repetition in visual mediums and the notion of having a “normal” (read: normative) family (Goodall, 2005). However, the 1960s brought about the first non-nuclear families with shows like *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968) and *My Three Sons* (1960-1972) (Vaughan, 2004). The importance of these families reverberated throughout television’s structures. These families existed as seemingly “whole” without a character fitting the defined mother role (LaRossa, 2004).

Television creates and replicates culture (Fiske, 1987). The 1960s signified a pivotal point in time for how people not only understood the culture of the nation, but how they chose to engage in the culture. The representation of non-nuclear families opened up the conversation for families to exist in new and different relational ways and introduced different tensions comprising family communication and relationships (LaRossa, 2004). Minorities were still not well represented within network shows. The politics of the era allowed for exposure to issues of civil rights and race. The broadcast following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy’s death changed how the American public perceived television. The rate of information dissemination following the news of Kennedy’s shooting and the news coverage of his death was unlike anything the American public had experienced before (Sneed, 2013). It was the moment television transitioned from purely distributing entertainment to delivering cultural and historical moments and news of impact.

The 1970s. From the 1960s to the 1970s, television started to shift in response to the issues of the era. Characters dealt with struggles spanning more than one episode. Shows like *All in the Family* (1971-1979) portrayed changes writers brought to television through strong characters that epitomized personalities existing in a household different from television’s Golden Age characters (Himmelstein, 1984). Situation comedies (sitcoms) of the time started

to address current issues and how they were affecting families (Hutchison, 2012). These shows visually portrayed verbal conflicts relative to families. Archie Bunker was the embodied performance of a temperamental bigot who would argue issues from a prejudiced, ultra-conservative point of view. Arguments were conversations that delved into the structures of racial issues (Taylor, 1989). They dealt with the most controversial issues of the period while deconstructing ideologies of a character's dialogue and actions.

The 1980s. With the resurgence of political conservatism in media, 1980s sitcoms shied away from difficult storylines of the 1970s and returned to a modified version of a stereotypical maternal role (Ponte & Gillian, 2005). After the 1970s' exposure to new ideas of family and familial tension, audiences pushed back against this obvious return to a heteronormative, stereotypical family (Taylor, 1989). Voluntary families on television were reinforced with the show *Golden Girls* (1985-1992) (Spigel, 1992). This new family archetype carried on with strong audience approval and relatability into the 1990s. *Roseanne* (1988-1997) and *The Simpsons* (1989-present) presented dysfunctional families with emphasis on portraying children expressing different opinions from their parents or older characters on the show. These families addressed some of the more difficult issues in culture by integrating them into the family's world, but also still creating affectionate bonds, albeit sometimes through unconventional methods for television (Gray, 2006).

The other pushbacks against past representation came in the form of how black characters were portrayed. While most black characters were storied through the means of white characters' narratives, there was a shift from the blatant stereotyped characters of the past. *Family Matters* (1981-1997) signified movement away from comedy predicated on the idea of the comical "ghetto" and more toward a strong father figure in the household

(Cummings, 2004). The idea of family was finally being moved into a more flexible, critical space.

The 1990s. Television's idea of family and relational ties were tested and reworked in a number of 90s sitcoms. Voluntary families were powerfully represented in shows such as *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Full House* (1987-1995). Audiences flocked to these shows as well as a plethora of shows that prioritized the adult relationships within a family (Tyus, 2015). Children who had grown up with sitcoms were now able to relate to the family struggles present when children are not the source of familial tensions and quarrels. Family structures were experimented with as well within the blended family of *Step-By-Step* (1991-1998), a modern take on *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974), and the multiple families of *Full House* (1987-1995) (Spigel, 1992). Representation took a positive turn with shows like *Family Matters* (1989-1998) and *All-American Girl* (1994) bringing progressive depictions onto the television screen. These shows centered on minorities surrounded in their culture without their lives centering on white characters. Minority character had ownership in their race and positionality in culture.

Audiences were still struggling with systemic racism and stereotypes in regards to minority narratives of family. Other shows that incorporated the idea of a voluntary family were *Ellen* (1994-1998) and *Will and Grace* (1998-2006). These shows brought a necessary representation of gay and lesbian voices to television as well as highlighting the relational importance a voluntary family can have when dealing with complex identity issues such as sexuality (Tyus, 2015). These characters were not as developed as the typical family sitcom. Their sexuality was discussed, but rarely actualized through physical interaction with other characters.

The 2000s. From the early 2000s to now, family has moved into a more fluid space than ever before. Reality television has created the idea of a perceived and manipulated reality that idolizes fame and celebrity. Families like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (2007-present) have catapulted individuals from the family, and the family name, into celebrity status and developed a completely new definition of how family dysfunction can entertain. Volunteer families continue to allow for a family-esque feeling in shows that highlight the workplace and friend groups over a stereotypical family.

As television and visual mediums of marketing, news, and entertainment change, the idea of family becomes more diverse and more inclusive of different family structures (Ballard & Ballard, 2011). Families representing minorities' voices and diverse ethnicities finally have a chance to help create a new visual culture that celebrates non-white, non-straight bodies, and non-normative family structures (Tyus, 2015). Family tensions and complexities are still a major source of plot or concept behind a television show. Shows parrot values in popular culture while also creating what is popular in culture, but they also challenge viewers' beliefs of what is "normal." Shows like *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), *Transparent* (2014-present), *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-present) *Jane the Virgin* (2014-present), *Modern Family* (2009-present), *Girls* (2012-present), and *Looking* (2014-2015) challenge a history of race, mental illness, gender, sexuality, and family portrayal on television. They work to subvert stereotypes and incite discussion about the Other in ways different than the nuclear family of the past.

Future of family. The portrayal of television families has a complex history. Modern shows produce narratives with struggle and tension in families through more complicated interactions on dramas and sitcoms compared to the first families of television. Progress has

been made in the ways families relate in realistic and emotional connections (Taylor, 1989). The televised narratives of minority voices are still in desperate need of representation and complexity of character development and story. The future definition of family is changing as divorce becomes a prominent part in many families' accounts and as a part of families' narratives on television. Volunteer families are no longer the outlying type of family, but instead a common occurrence as more and more people who grew up watching shows that demonstrated these family structures embrace the idea of choosing their family through friend groups or work associates (Thompson-Hayes et al., 2009). Ideas of family, performances of family, and television's production of family narratives, are changing rapidly as television changes its definition and portrayal of normal.

Call for Narrative in Television/Media Studies

Alexander's (1993) work inspires me to write personal narrative to explore media. Her work speaks to the ways family spaces and media socially construct our norms. Family spaces facilitate relational watching, identity building moments, and discourse about topics. These activities are subsequently repurposed into narrative understanding (Gergen, 2009a). Alexander writes,

Another approach toward a fuller understanding of the power of media in the domestic sphere is to examine the relationship of media's storytelling function to self-narratives and family themes. The generative force of conversation and storytelling as audience members take up information and narratives from the media has tended to be overlooked by media scholars. (1993, p. 58)

When considering the context and meaning of television studies literature, the relationship and history television has with popular culture is significant. The amount of

television narratives that have entered family spaces and homes is exponential. These stories are controlled and cultivated for optimal consumption (Fiske, 1987). By writing narrative, researchers can create their own narratives exploring how television's narratives affected their lives, perceptions, and communication. Yet, as Alexander (1993) notes, few researchers have embraced the idea of meaning tied to using personal narrative to explore the narratives of television. In this next section of literature review, I explore aspects of relational communication that inspire my personal narratives written in Chapter 4.

Television Viewing

In the next two sections, I discuss relational ways television has impacted our culture through (a) social and family aspects and (b) individual aspects. Television, and its placement in family living rooms, created and continues to create a space for group and individual enjoyment. It becomes a relational tool and understood aspect during the act of watching.

Social and family aspects. Theoretically, relational maintenance has been tied into television studies through the ways in which television utilizes culture as an item of conversation and social engagement as well as how television's narratives provoke conversation (Alexander, 1993; Yoshimura & Alberts, 2008). Relational maintenance refers to the actions one takes in a relationship in order to strengthen and maintain current connections with another (Ayres, 1983; Canary & Stafford, 1992). Family systems are a complexly woven map of relationships. The amount of relational maintenance and the ways in which it is executed is crucial when understanding family culture. These different ways can vary from relationship to relationship, but television has a history of shared social meaning and engagement (McQuail, 1987). Television creates a space in which people talk

or perform another activity while still engaged with the television. This talk, which may not appear to be a constructive aspect of a relationship, serves to create a relational framework for two or more people (Patulny, 2010). Casual conversation taking place in television spaces is part of the mundane elements of communication that build the rhythms of a relationship's language and helps to create moments of understanding (Duck, 1995). Two types of television watching activities grow from this: monitoring and viewing. Viewing is closer to the experience people share in a theater, so little to no conversation takes place during this act. Monitoring is when the television becomes a part of the conversational experience and relational space. Talk that happens when watching television can be inspired by or stimulated by things happening on television (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). Yoshimura and Alberts (2008) found television creates a space for relational sharing and humor as well as close proximal space between those engaging in monitoring behaviors.

Taking into context the romantic relational maintenance research done by Yoshimura and Alberts (2008), the ways in which small talk or mundane conversation maintain familial relationships fits in with the knowledge most television families share. Families use television as a meeting place. They can come together to share an interest, share small talk or self-disclosure, or just share close proximity with each other while engaging in monitoring behavior of whatever television program is on. The relationships and stories on television help inspire actions and ways of being in personal relationships through building visual frameworks (Alexander, 1993). The role of family in television and the history of television has created multiple families for people to be influenced by and embody in their actions and relationships.

Individual aspects. Enjoyment of television is derived from its ability to stimulate many areas of viewers' lives and ability to engage viewers in compelling narratives. While historically television viewing has been a group activity, recent trends show people engaging in individual viewing and enjoyment. Trends in engagement have ties to research on parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships people form with fictional characters, celebrities, or public personas (Lacalle, 2015). People feel as if they have personal relationships with these characters in media because of their accessibility (Roe & Minnebo, 2007). These relationships, however one-sided, still evoke emotional responses from those who participate in them (Lacalle, 2015). Television characters become role models, friends, and even a source of attraction to some fans. Others develop a fondness for the character and strive to embody decisions that make them feel more at one with the character's thoughts and feelings (Chory, 2013). Emotional attachment influences the viewer to incorporate aspects of this constructed character or show's narrative into their personal understanding. This individual relationship is kept alive through parasocial forms of relational maintenance. A fan might watch the show, use social media to talk about the show and characters, or take further steps to maintain their connection (Turner, 1993). This strong emotional connection to a fictional character can also be an identity building aspect that someone chooses to engage in.

Influence on Identity Development.

Families are a primary agent of socialization (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2014; Goodall, 2005; Tyus, 2015). The experiences we have in family systems socialize us, teach us basic communication and social skills, and demonstrate how not only to view others, but how to view ourselves. This space in which we first start the social learning and socialization

process continues to affect our emotional and social perceptions as we grow and move into new spaces of family and understanding (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2014).

Family structures generally root people in a sense of understanding and belonging. However, few people come from family structures that fit into the ideals of how normal family is portrayed in media—specifically visual performances of family (Adams, 2016). As the preceding literature indicates, the nuclear family as an ideal is still strong among visual representations. While volunteer families through work, school, or social circles have created family structures that allow differing types of socialization and social learning to occur, gaining acceptance of non-normative, non-white family structures and differing body types remains a difficult process (Hopkins, 2012). Few, if any, portray children who struggle with identity issues or family troubles (Turner & West, 2003). Overall, representation of minority voices that break stereotypes is low, but growing with each year. Recent shows such as *Jane the Virgin* (2014-present), *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-present), *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-present), *Black-ish* (2014-present), and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-present) bring minority voices front and center in network programs. These characters are critical through their takes on topics of race, sexuality, gender performance, and mental health. While not all of these shows are age, rating, or content appropriate for children, their endorsement on networks show a movement toward creating narratives and characters whose identities and family structures are storied from backgrounds different than the stereotypical ideals of the past. Television is not only a space for pleasure and enjoyment, people find truths in the shows they watch (Oliver & Raney, 2011). By creating shows with more diversity and deeper critiques on culture and life, television helps create pleasure and truth for viewers. It shapes their identities by way of helping them through difficult topics or ideas.

Younger children are able to pick up better communication skills when shows they watch emphasize communication and social problem solving (Lacalle, 2015). Older generations tend to struggle with difficult family conversations and discussing the changes in diversity and representation (Alexander, 1993; Yi & Richter, 2004). Media has a large impact on communication when viewed through age differences and changing values (Kubey, 1990). As with most children and teenagers, they do not feel that their parents understand popular culture and the ritual it has on daily life. Parents disapprove of values popular culture imparts upon their children (Manning, 2014). This cycle has repeated and started anew with each generation. Conversations surrounding television construct the importance of television in family culture. Simultaneously, the families of television define, redefine, and introduce new social roles and meanings into current television (Manning, 2014; Ponte & Gillian, 2005). The conjecture of television's effect and affect has been studied by some, but further qualitative research is needed to explore the ways in which story has effected communication within families.

Evolution of femininity and diversity performances. Visual performance of gender has been discussed by many different scholars (e.g., Butler, 1988; Lotz, 2010). Femininity and masculinity are ideals that have been reinforced and reinvented time and again throughout the ages. Visual, auditory, mental, and ideological ways of performance have reified themselves through media, literature, and philosophy (Butler, 1988). While new ideas or challenges to the heteronormative, white femininity/masculinity ideals have emerged over time, particular aspects of these performances are repeated visually through television.

Women were the first targets of product placement as advertisers quickly jockeyed to get their brands into the hit shows of the time (Comstock, 1989; Hutchinson, 2012; Spigel,

1992). When advertisers realized how much of their demographic was female, they started to work with television shows to create programs that would feature characters with certain gender performance and hidden product placement. Even with the progress that has been made with female representation and gender performance on television, women continue to experience an onslaught of commercials that comment on how to perform gender and body properly through specific purchases (Tyus, 2015). These commercials and television shows create a narrative of unrealistic body standards reinforced over the course of history (Alexander, 1993; Myers, 2013).

As culture and ideas evolved, both women and men whose bodies differ from the ideals of television have not found acceptance. Fat bodies are still used as the clownish character in movies and television shows (Mosher, 2001). Young girls are typically portrayed as pretty, smart, thin, but not too independent and not too rebellious. These images are impacting our youth. Both girls and boys are having their perceptions of gender—and a great many number of things—defined before they even have an understanding of their own selves (Myers, 2013). There continues to be a call to push at the boundaries of what networks and television programs portray as feminine and masculine ideas/ideals.

Exploring the Narratives of Television

Narrative is a defining factor in television. It is an industry based in the market of appealing stories and exciting plots. People flocked to television. It allowed them to “view” a better, more intriguing life. As television evolved, the humor and beauty of mundanity integrated into programs and people’s homes. Elements of television life mixed with lived reality, creating a new shared space where the television started to define the measures we used against our lives (Adams, 2016). Simultaneously, the more lived reality expressed an

interest in certain elements of popular culture, the more those elements were woven into the reality conveyed on television (Alexander, 1993). Autoethnography deals with the mundane, with popular culture, with “lived” reality (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). It creates a space for us to explore how mundane aspects of life have great impact on cultural happenings and wonder. The stories we live voice how the mundane—the simple act of watching television or how a family relates to television—has caused ripple effects throughout personal and public spheres of family communication and dynamics.

For all of the television shows surrounding the family dynamic, there are few personal narratives that speak to the struggle of growing up in front of a television and constituting one’s identity and perception of reality from this action (Adams, 2016; Alexander, 1993; Ballard & Ballard, 2011; Goodall, 2005). Television has affected families for over seventy years now. There is a need for recognition of personal stories and narratives exploring aspects of how television introduces family and identity into our communication (Turner & West, 2003). The relational aspects of television are easily found in narratives such as Boylorn (2008) and Ellis (2000b).

Boylorn (2008) explores the critical racial representation of current television compared to the television of the past. She speaks to these shows as an important part of family and growing up to understand her racial positioning. Ellis (2000b) tells the story of taking care of her mother through the aging process. Their moments of watching television provided a space where Ellis examines her mother-daughter relationship. Watching television can be an exercise of identity building and self-reflection/reflexion (Adams, 2016). For example, Adams (2016) speaks to classism and how reality television positions new groups to be taken advantage of or exploited through how they are storied to audiences. There is a

need to tell stories of family and television. There are spaces to be explored by storying the communication, memories, and lives affected by television narratives.

Summary

In this literature review, I have briefly reviewed a history of television. I traced the impact of cultural currency, popular culture, and the change television has had on viewers. This cultural shift has a history tracing from the Golden Age of Television with nuclear families to the wonderfully dysfunctional families of today. The changes in diversity and social roles in families has come and gone in response to social and political conservatism. Overall we are seeing a shift toward more progressive roles and writing. This opens up potential conversation within families to change family culture and create new opportunities for identity building moments. The constructed narratives of television are cultural tools we take for granted, using them to build social understanding. Television is also used as a relational maintenance tool. It is a social and individual element in our lives and social conversation. This review of research shows a need for personal narrative to explore the affect and effect television has had on communication in self and families.

In the next chapter, I will discuss my autoethnographic methodology. Autoethnography provides the history and tools to utilize personal narrative to explore these issues and story the family and television. Doing autoethnography involves writing self, other, and the reflexive nature of exploring both in a creative manner. It can be engaged to explore the mundane while drawing attention to spaces of culture connecting with unheard voices.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

I discover family through narrative. My thesis began years ago and continued through moments of childhood identity building, creating meaning through watching a shared television screen. Stories are crafted to start a discussion of places where television meets family communication and identities are formed. Stories are the beginning, middle, and undefined future. We are storied people. Walter Fisher (1984, 1987) argued we are a species born out of story. Our cultural consciousness is the core of our human history. He dubbed our species “homo narrans” in honor of this. Families were and are the first stories and relational understandings of the world for everyone. We are born into story. We create our history and culture through sharing stories and memories. Stories not only carry us through life, we integrate stories into every facet of our society and culture. We use television narratives as a means of relational maintenance, identity building, and social understanding. Television narratives are re/worked and remembered in the culture of my family. Television is not only a story we choose to engage in, it is the center of our family room, our relational space.

As an autoethnographer working to explore and expand methodology, I strive to understand said and unsaid, silences, and communicative actions of my family’s storied history and culture. In this chapter, I explore personal narrative by doing autoethnographic inquiry. I engage my stories through writing to recognize privilege, culture, and positionality. I engage television as both audience and participant of its culture and as a means of cultural critique. Weaving between memories, my memories blur and bleed into static as television’s cultural narratives wash over my storied self, over my familial self (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I

probe family experiences, conversations, memories, and emotional moments as I do autoethnography.

In this autoethnography, I write to render meaningful moments for culturally and self-constructed identities (cf. Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995). I reflexively examine moments, cultural upbringing, and the relational significance television has had and will have in my life. These moments “complicate what family means and how families are lived” (Wyatt & Adams, 2014, p. 2). This chapter outlines elements of my process from what autoethnography is and why personal narrative has such a strong possibility for impact in television and family studies. Moving from discussing autoethnography, I examine criteria and foundations of autoethnographic inquiry critical to my writing and doing of autoethnography. Afterward, I consider ethical implications of my writing while also addressing criticisms of the methodology. Finally, I review several genres my writing engages and embodies. I also offer criteria to consider and evaluate my autoethnography.

Autoethnography and Personal Narrative

In communication studies, autoethnography embodies a postmodern praxis allowing writers and readers to examine selves and cultures through “the ability to use reflexivity, storytelling, and aesthetic devices to investigate cultural texts, assumptions about relationships, and premises of human interaction” (Adams, 2012, p. 182). According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). This writing is where personal narrative is transformed by the autoethnographer into an examination of society, culture, and communication. Autoethnography is communication praxis that makes it possible for researchers/writers/storytellers to engage in inquiry that

works through and with painful experiences and/or cultural occurrences. Expression becomes a tool in inquiry instead of stifling creative and emotional involvement of scholars (Adams, 2012). This praxis was born from a crisis of representation within the field of qualitative research. It is usually defined by a rich and detailed description of one's lived experiences in a culture and a need for culture to be understood by others (Ellis & Adams, 2014).

As with most epistemological shifts, the past few decades have been defined by scholars struggling with their positionality in relation to their work. Little conversation addressed the ways in which research isolated self from recognizing positionality, culture, and the subsequent crisis of representation that scholars and researchers experienced in their research (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Autoethnography developed as a means to recognize the importance of human difference, to write into previously silenced spaces, and to give voice to lived experiences developed and deepened through the process and product of the autoethnography (Ellis & Adams, 2014). This crisis of representation helped produce a wide range of new approaches, which were committed to giving voice back to scholars. There was a drive, a need to be able to share the autoethnographic "I" of research and connect what was happening in academia with social issues and injustices (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The postmodern space of autoethnography created "a turn, a change...of how we think,...do research and relationships, and how we live." (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 21). Autoethnography not only changed research, it changed the idea of researcher.

Autoethnographic writers have grown from a space hungering for reflexivity, fluid criteria for qualitative inquiry, and a history of exploring the idea of writing as more than an objective act separate from self (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Autoethnographers work to

explore self and location through viewing writing as a process and method of inquiry. Ellis (2004) discusses how autoethnography “refers to the process as well as what is produced from the process” to describe the impact autoethnography can have on inquiry and autoethnographer (p. 32). This section of my thesis provides a brief background on how doing autoethnography differs from postpositivistic communication research and why I chose autoethnography to explore family relationships, family communication, and television.

Personal narrative and television. The use of personal narrative in doing autoethnography is a cornerstone and one of the aspects of autoethnographic inquiry that makes writers and products connect profoundly with reader (Ellis & Adams, 2014). Sharing and telling of stories creates spaces for connections. The narrative turn in communication inquiry embraced ideas of emotionality, activism, active engagement and embodiment in inquiry, and recognition of lived experiences and existence (Bochner, 2001). Bochner (2001) calls for narrative as a space applicable to all social sciences and a method of doing inquiry that helps dissolve the restrictions and limitations other dominant methods may have on exploring human experience. I write autoethnographic narrative as a careful and thoughtful exploration into the way I story selves, family, and cultures surrounding the cross sections of the two. Narrative inquiry accepts and explores the potential of the critical, personal, and cultural through an invitation to readers. The invitation accepts vulnerability and asks readers to engage in research in a relational space (Berry & Patti, 2015).

Autoethnography and Family

Autoethnographic inquiry in families has a rich history. Families are the first connections to relationships, positionalities, cultures, and identities. They foster aspects of self growth and learning while also developing communication skills, how to acknowledge

and discuss difference, and understand social locations of body and self (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2014). Families create. Families, or their absences, are the beginnings of communication, our cultures, and identities. Adams (2006) details the complexities of his coming out to his father and the ways in which the relationship unfolded over time by engaging personal memories and examining them through fluctuating emotions, homophobic family culture, and a desire to understand his relationship with his father. Rambo Ronai (1995) pioneered the integration of layered accounts into narrative work by engaging in sociological introspection of her experiences being molested by her father and living as the daughter to a mentally retarded mother. These two accounts (Adams, 2006; Rambo Ronai, 1995) of family are messy and complex, pulling at memory and time to engage readers in experiences of child sexual abuse and sexual identity issues in personal and emotional ways.

Holman Jones (2005b) does autoethnography to understand the complexity of social roles in families through her struggle with adoption. Autoethnography is constructed by the autoethnographer to create understanding for readers by working through these emotional, personal, political, and sociological topics (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2004). The family is emotional, personal, and the beginning of one's socialization into culture. I write into and explore my family as culture, story, and storied culture. Television represents both stories and family through its visual history. I write to find personal in popular culture (Adams, 2016). I use the stories of autoethnographic inquiry to write into ways television narratives have had a profound impact on my family and our culture.

Foundations of Autoethnography

Determining limits or meanings of what constitutes criteria for autoethnography is a highly controversial conversation in social science communities. For autoethnographers, it

has been a long fought and emotional battle. Autoethnography contests the limits of conventional or traditional social science by challenging the idea that objectivity is obtainable in research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Research maintains personal culture, privilege, and positionality whether intended by the researcher or not. By embracing these trappings through lived experience in the form of personal narrative, autoethnographers create unique spaces to explore personal and cultural happenings (Poulos, 2013). Bochner (2000) outlines how we use narrative instinctively and organically as part of the process of understanding world, culture, and positionality in and between the two. Ellis (2004) emphasizes how stories acknowledge one cannot separate self from inquiry and, by utilizing narrative, narrative inquiry can or may create realistic, evocative, and engaging experiences that create opportunities for connection with audiences. In the following sections, I discuss elements I consider crucial to my process of doing autoethnographic inquiry in this thesis.

Autoethnography utilizes many literary devices. There are characters, plots, dramatic tensions, and emotional moments to show—not tell—reader how the stories matters (Ellis, 2000a). However, autoethnography takes this a step further through reflexivity (Berry, 2013; Boylorn, 2008), evocative stories (Adams, 2006), aesthetic moments (Bolen, 2014), and reframing lived experiences as means to understanding human behaviors and actions (Rambo Ronai, 1995).

Reflexivity. Critical to the work of personal narrative is recognition that “fact” and “truth” are subjective within contexts of inquiry. Narrative truth with a reflexive turn seeks to fully develop and explore a story in order to portray a deeper and more critical understanding of what stories mean to writers and what they mean when read by readers. It is an accountability of selves to readers (Berry, 2013). It is the process of making sense of memory

and working to portray essences of experiences rather than historical truths (i.e., what “actually” happened). If I attempt to write my stories as historical truth, my project becomes fatally flawed (Tullis Owens, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2009). Reflexive writing seeks to turn back to self and critically examine the interactions with others and culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I write my reflexive narratives to critically examine family, communication, and culture. I write to hold my stories accountable and to recognize the others written into my narratives.

Evocative stories. Evocative autoethnography calls for emotionality and feeling through stories rather than the separate and distanced academic voice. I write in the first person and make myself the object of inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I work to dissolve boundaries between ideas that I must be separate from my inquiry when it concerns a topic critical to my selves. Writing with memories and feelings strengthens my connections to stories and readers. Writing with emotion also creates space in which to speak to pain, personal struggle, and release. Doing or reading autoethnography can create spaces for cathartic release through inviting readers into writers’ lived experiences. Autoethnography creates a community of call and response that cultivates larger conversations about topics such as homophobia and self acceptance (Adams, 2011), child sexual abuse (Rambo Ronai, 1995), and critical examinations of race in a family home (Boylorn, 2008). These stories bring readers into painful or uncomfortable memories with purpose. I strive to do the same with my stories.

Aesthetic moments and merit. Bolen (2014) writes of aesthetic moments in relationships inspired by the study of relational dialectics. These moments are inspired by the idea that when relating with others, there are moments of relational closeness or

connectedness without that moment being verified by others. I write my aesthetic moments of family by storying my reflexive memories. I share aesthetic moments and my epiphanies inspired by our talk and shared acts of watching. Richardson (2000) speaks of evaluating autoethnography through consideration of its aesthetic merit. Moving from the previous point, aesthetic moments (Bolen, 2014) and aesthetic merit (Richardson, 2000) inform my doing of autoethnography by recognizing moments where my relationships with others have created moments of understanding between selves and cultures. Also, I work through creative writing, complex and rich description, and evocative presentation to give my narratives and relational aesthetic moments aesthetic merit.

Reframing lived experiences. Doing autoethnography requires writing personal experience into stories that relate to a writer's audiences and cultures. I position my memories and selves as texts to examine through writing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). I want to "offer complex, insider accounts of sensemaking and show how/why particular experiences are challenging, important, and/or transformative" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 27). I assemble these experiences based on knowledge I have now. I choose my stories carefully and navigate complex memories. As I write stories, I become them (Richardson, 2000). I live stories as I write and rewrite reflexively.

Ethical Implications

My family, my writing, my memory, and my stories inhabit a complex ethical space. The nature of autoethnography calls for emotionality, reflexivity, and working to speak to potentially painful spaces as a means of catharsis. As autoethnographer, I have a privileged position of being able to define readers' perceptions of my family and myself through how I tell stories, even if I were to separate myself from story—an impossible task (Ellis & Adams,

2014). My stories are told from my perspective. I can only ever tell stories from my perspective. There are no ways to remove my bias or perspective from a story, hence the idea of the task of separating myself from my stories impossible. As writer and autoethnographer, I must take into account the relational ethics of my thesis. My family knows the topic of what I write, but they will potentially never see the written product if they do not ask for it. If asked, it would be freely given. I aim to write stories that weave between emotion, memory, dialogue, and reflexive spaces. I labored to portray my family and my selves as complex characters while also addressing communicative issues and spaces. I find guidance in the works of Ellis (2007) as she discusses the inherent difficulties surrounding topics such as relatives or family. Ellis notes “doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self” (p. 14) and the struggles of written representations of relationships and memories. I do not use names of my family or others in my narratives. While it would be easy to find their identities, that layer of anonymity helps speak more to the constructs of family and social roles in an effort of connection with the audience. I write my stories from my memories. There is the possibility they would write themselves differently and choose to change the story (Bochner, 2001). How then are we to ever decide which version of the story is “truth?”

As established, writing from narrative and memory is working from a space of recognized construction of narrative truth rather than an assumed truth (Bochner, 2001). The idea that one could reflexively and emotionally write her/his version of a memory and then have that disrupted by another’s claim to her/his interpretation of memories and “truth” only creates a chain of never finished alterations to the original purpose of the written story. Many Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), including ASU, do not recognize the need for

autoethnography to undergo the review process (Ellis & Adams, 2014), including Angelo State University. The responsibility of representation of the people in my writing is one of the many ways I must embody narrative ethics by maintaining constant vigilance of the narratives I create/story/embody/engage. I work to story and acknowledge relationships, present people as complex characters working through the process of life and culture, and reflexively engage memory and culture (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

Layered Accounts and Messy Texts

I employ a layered account to assemble story juxtaposed with other observations (Ellis & Adams, 2014). In this layering, my texts can be messy. They are fluid and not bound to linear time constructs. Writing in a postmodern critical space, I juxtapose stories to create tension, highlight uncomfortable moments with/against the aesthetic relational moments (Marcus, 1994). I write to interpret memory differently from the authoritative meanings that positivistic research presents. I write messy texts to promote open stories that evoke different readings and meanings (Marcus, 1998). I layer my stories messily, critically, politically, and personally.

I layer accounts to expose critical moments to reflex the fluid nature of narrative and memory (Rambo Ronai, 1995). I position these stories critically. I question purpose and positionality to consider how watching and engaging, not only as audience but as participant, creates an inner reciprocal relationship with memory and culture (Berry, 2013; Boylorn, 2008). Layered accounts do not shy from a messy story. I look to the piece as a whole, an account made through borrowing pieces and phrases of narrative and methodology to form a messy text woven with relevant literature (cf. Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995). These texts do not

seek to create or cause pain, but look to lived experiences in order to understand and embrace a need for recognition of voices and communities (Bochner, 2005; Ellis, 2004).

Constituting a layered account, I seek to weave my family stories to narrative inquiry (Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995). The relationships between families create stories that define someone from first contact and throughout life. I speak to moments defining family and childhood as communication incorporates visual realities surrounding our lives and conversations. Shifting between narrative and prose, I move through a non-linear timeline of memories. To transition between the layered accounts, I use asterisks in the shape of televisions (☐) to separate perspectives and shifts in analyses (Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995).

Evaluating autoethnography and calling for criteria. Autoethnography is not a method for solving problems or definite fixes (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It works in the realm of human existence that raises more questions than answers. I find guidance in the work of Ellis (2000a) when constructing how I evaluate my writing. In the call for criteria, autoethnography evokes emotionality and engagement. Centering in postmodern praxis, I define my stories as objects of study as I write and move between memories (Marcus, 1994). My stories' criteria and evaluation lie in how well they embody the previously mentioned foundation of autoethnography. Readers find themselves in shared spaces of authors' stories. These stories should be sound enough that when examined, critiqued, and questioned there is depth and a further understanding created between reader and writer. If writing is inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), then the reading of such writing creates a relational inquiry.

Writing stories that engage and evoke call on elements of personal narrative mentioned earlier in this chapter (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011). Characters should have

fullness, story plots and tensions, and the overall work should achieve goals and speak to places of social need for action (Ellis, 2000a). Questions I want my readers to consider follow. Has this current work engaged and evoked readers emotionally, socially, and cognitively (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)? Did this work create social impact and understanding (Richardson, 2000)? Do the aesthetics of the piece create a space for reflexivity and express an experience that fully realizes an account of the cultural, social, or community sense of understanding within and outside the piece (Bolen, 2014)? In a postmodern space where inquiry raises more questions than answers, critical questions are called for in spaces of doing autoethnography.

Summary

The purpose of my autoethnographic inquiry is to offer story speaking to the spaces of family and selves discovered in acts of watching and embodying television. It is important to examine spaces in which families come together to communicate and observe, to watch and relate. The stories found there can help to round out the field of television studies (Alexander, 1993). Shifting between narratives, I move through a non-linear timeline of memories. To transition between the layered accounts, I use asterisks in the shape of televisions (📺) to separate perspectives and shifts in analyses (Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995).

In my next chapter, I write memories and storied moments with reflexive, critical, aesthetic intentions. I layer stories messily and purposefully (Marcus, 1994; 1998; Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995). I write moments that explore family, television, communication, and relational connections. I write moments defining family and childhood as communication incorporates the visual realities surrounding our lives and conversations.

CHAPTER 4

NAVIGATING STATIC: A LAYERED AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF FAMILY, IDENTITY, AND TELEVISION

I watch narratives flicker and twist. I flip through them quickly, lingering on some, skipping others. Static blurs memories, emotions blend and take on new meaning, and time seems to suspend. The narratives move faster. Phrases overlap each other creating nonsense, laughing splices with yelling, tears spill into intense moments. Sounds dissolve into white noise and images bleed to create a pulsating buzz filling my mind. It's too much. Too much memory and sound and feeling and static and... story.



“What are you watching?” My dad trails through the living room with a bowl of almonds in his hands.

I pause the show with our DVR and say, “It’s a good show. Watch it with me.”

He settles in. I press play.



The television shows I watch connect me to my family, to our culture, to my heritage. My concept of self and family spins out from the act of watching. We share moments, laughter, tears, and crystallized aspects of self-creation by discussing the intricacies of characters we admire or hate. We use these plots to understand the world and to find our place in our ever changing reality. This act of watching and meaning making connects over virtual webs spanning millions of television sets weekly. They create strands. These strands connect us to one another. They connect the meaning between screens. My strands come through a computer acting as television. No longer is the television a box receiving three

nationally broadcasted channels, but a thin screen inhabiting most living rooms. It has access to cable, web, carefully cultivated television, and movie channels. These spaces constructed as television have evolved and reached into the changing cultural lives we inhabit and construct, but television—the flickering box set in family living rooms—delivers the meaningful words and the visual history to this shared act of witnessing.

We use these webs, these storied strands, these broadcast memories to story not only our reality, but our relationships and selves. We pull meaning from the screens and add it back in. Virtual moments constructing tangible actions. The constructed reality defines and is defined by our realities. Eventually, there ceases to be a line. The line further blurs as social media promotes access to content, characters, and story unlike ever before in history. These realities intertwine and intoxicate our senses of expectation and lived embodiment. We construct inner heroes after a rousing action television episode. We observe people and consequences after a brush with a detective or murder investigation show.

Our inner identities borrow from these seemingly flawed and/or flawless characters constructed on screens. We construct our inner selves from the visual intake of these characters. They create a need or space within us we didn't know we needed to explore or cultivate. We choose these characters as someone else chooses the aspects that create them. The screens portraying these characters, these shows, these realities become a place where we pull in and tie in those meaning filled threads. Screens, though they are far apart, allow spinning, virtual gossamer thread to stretch from my family in Houston to my apartment in San Angelo. We hold up stories of last week's episodes or say "Can you believe what happened?!" while exclaiming over plot twists. We construct selves and identities based on

our needs. Needs to connect to one another. Needs to be similar. Needs to find our selves and our definitions of normal. Needs to maintain and establish a relationship.



Television has touched all of my relationships in some way or another. It is an integral part of how I relate to the world and make sense of others and myself. I watch people as if I were watching characters on the screen, waiting to see what the right reaction is or hoping to make sense of a situation. The relational act of watching television with another is sacred to me. It is the bonding experience I share with my mother and my father every visit home. I grew up on watching together. We watch our shows either in silence or in light, scattered conversation, but of course only talking during commercial breaks or pausing the show with our new DVR. We rewatch shows, television movies, and anything in between to prolong the act of watching. We use this space to share unarticulated relational selves. We build a language during these small moments of speech and meaning. Our relationship difficulties and successes are brought out. Our selves have friction due to conflicts from living in different physical realities brought into these relational spaces.

Television grows increasingly critical, political, sexual, and shocking. These moments in tension, where my realities conflict with my parents' realities, construct difficult emotional or relational conversations, both spoken and unspoken. These tense conversations test and set our relational boundaries and meanings, and show not only a change in the way television is always impacting communication in families, but in the communicative sphere as a whole. My stories, my strands, began spinning out years ago and continue spinning and connecting through the moments of childhood identity building, meaning making, and embracing understanding of relational spaces. I view the vast amounts of tension, relational

watching and understanding, and cultural ties as static. They press and fuzz and whirl like black and white bars jittering on a television with bad reception. Brief moments of clarity break through only to be swallowed again.

My strands emerge from static. I/me/my selves emerge from static.



My mother watches *The Closer* (2005-2012) almost fanatically. She owns every season. She has followed the show and characters for years as the show has spun off into new directions and meanings. Kyra Sedgewick plays Brenda Leigh Johnson. This strong, capable, and intelligent character is also written riddled with flaws. She cheated in a long term relationship. She is almost obsessive to the point of damaging relationships and her health. She has an incurable sweet tooth and covets the tin foil wrapped brownies hidden in her desk.

For all her flaws, I still remember my mother saying, “Now that is a strong woman.”



The television plays softly, garishly, with laughs ringing as my mother asks, “How did you gain all this weight? When you walked in the door I thought you were pregnant. Why did you lie and say you lost weight? I can see it all over you.”

I am anxiety encased in stillness. Tears are brimming at the edge of my eyes despite the sitcom playing on the screen. I cannot lose focus of the screen. The pretty thin, blonde, dumb-acting actress on the screen. We have just talked about my body. Again. The screen jars and bounces with bright color schemes and a volunteer family. Now we forcefully ignore my tears rolling down my face and pretend to laugh with the laugh track of *The Big Bang Theory*. I have gained 20 pounds over the summer, a sin. It sits on my imperfect body unwelcome but ever present.

The laugh track plays on.



My weight has always been a dinner topic. Junior high was the catalyst for my obsession with thin bodies. I was more aware of thinness than I had ever been. I had always known I was larger. A chubby child. Just needed to lose that baby fat—well past being a baby. I didn't know thinness until suddenly it was all I knew. I saw, felt, tasted, and understood it. I tried again and again to embody it. I never looked right. It took until I started being desperate to fit in, obsessive even, until I noticed which bodies were better. The bodies on television. Thin, beautiful bodies. Beautiful faces, beautiful hair. But mostly thin, beautiful bodies. So intoxicating/toxic. Television sold me the idea. The more I witnessed it on television, the more I watched. Things would be easier. Me being *me* would be easier. Just be thinner.



The summer before seventh grade I start running—carving out a pre-teen runner from a chubby child's body. I still remember the hell that was the first mile. My body becomes a continuous project, a family DIY, an in-house makeover show. Constantly discussing diet and obsessing over how much I eat and run become our family normal, and I grow thinner.

Weight was/is/will always feel like a battle. I am not naturally skinny through eating habits or metabolism. Every pound is a battle. It's a constant flux between seeking comfort in food and wanting to be thin. I eat and eat telling myself that running will account for the calories and then stare into the mirror wondering what I have done. I press and pinch my body. Pulling at fat. At skin. If I could pull at bone, I would. I want to shape my body like

plastic, pulling off the parts of me that are ugly. I just wanted to be the perfection of the screen. I wanted the television body, but nothing the television tells me to do works. My mother is at a loss for how to help me. I see her push and pull at her thin, beautiful body and start to do the same. The barest hint of cellulite, unacceptable. The slightest pooch to my stomach, abhorrent. While some parts of me considered sex and physicality other than my own, my love, my lust is critiquing my body. How could someone possibly want me if I look like this? What is desirable is on television and I do not look like I belong on television. I will look and look into a mirror until my features are abstract art. Deciphering if I am beautiful or not. If I am pretty enough for... for whatever. For television? Am I that pretty? Could I ever be? What would being that pretty feel like? Be like?

The bodies of models were now my favorite entertainment. I pushed my mom over and over to answer if she thought I could be a model, never satisfied with her answer. She said, "Maybe if you were thinner. Maybe if you were taller. But you are *fine* just the way you are." Who could be satisfied with *fine* when goddesses were filling my television screen? I started observing the "pretty people" on television. The hair, the makeup, the thinness. I still wonder if it's the secret to happiness, to finding what you want and keeping it. My body has never looked like the girls on a screen or in a magazine, yet I would worship at television's alter of beauty and thinness daily as I watched more and more shows. The more I viewed, the worse my obsession grew. I just wanted to be thin. I knew it would solve my problems. I knew it.



I love this show. I center my attention on it. I open my eyes and take in every image. *America's Next Top Model* (2003-present). Beautiful thin bodies sashaying down

long, thin runways. Girls placing their bodies' worth—their worth—in the fashion industry's hands. Look at the way the fabric falls on their bones and planes. The carefully beautiful features, sometimes fragile in their thinness, sometimes strikingly strong. These women aren't that much older than me. They talk like me. They obsess like me. Yes. Their obsession with looks. Their own bodies. Their thinness. I must be normal. They're on television and they're beautiful and they're thin and they must be normal.. not like me. Someone must be. I must be watching normal. Structuring normal. Anxiety runs through me as a cold fog creeps through my mind. But I am not normal. I know this. It haunts everything I say, everything I do. The pretty girls on the television strutting their long thin legs, and worrying about the size of their waist seem mocking now. Anger wells as tears brim. It's my show. My show. It should be for me. I sit on the living room floor, eyes wide with desperation to drink the images. Images filling the room, my head, my mouth, my heart. Silent yet screaming, laughing yet sobbing, the anxiety filters from my head to my fingers, to my toes. It feels like fire. It feels like acid rain. It washes through me, punishing me. How dare I not be normal? How dare I watch this and not be beautiful? Stupid girl. Worthless girl. Can't laugh right. Can't talk right. Can't move right. Never right. Always wrong.

Static filling the space in between. Never normal. Always watching. Always hoping. I drink in the screen waiting. Watching. Observing. Starving for the pictures. Starving for the words. Trying to focus through the static.

If it's on television, it must be normal.



“Look! Look at this picture of me going to my junior prom. I look like a different person.” My roommates and I huddle in a circle around our kitchen table. We each scroll

through our phones, searching, scavenger-hunting pictures that show what we “used to be.” My eyes hungrily take in the body of my freshman selves. I remember how unhappy I was with my body. How I pinched and prodded. Vomited. Did everything but physically harm my body’s exterior.

“Oh, look here! I’m like scary skinny!” I all but shove my phone in my roommates’ faces, my voice excited and nervous. What do I expect them to do? Agree with me? Tell me I was scary skinny and I look so much better now. It would be a lie, but I hope for it. I miss that body.

“Haha, yeah... I was scary skinny. But I guess the bulimia helped. You know when I used to throw up all the time.” A bulimia joke slips out nervously. I’ve discussed it with one roommate before, but not the other. God, what was I thinking? This isn’t how roommates act. This isn’t the chemistry of *Friends*. I’m a goddamn bulimic idiot.

“Yeah. I used to do that too.” My roommate states without moving her eyes from her screen. Not apologetically or shyly, just matter of fact.

“Getting real up in here,” she laughs and the heartbeat of tension breaks.

Music doesn’t signify a joke, the scene does not cut away, and our eyes don’t even lock, but a connection was made. A moment free of static.



“I’ve been tracking my food! I’m on like a 90-something-day streak. So that’s good. And I’ve been working out, which is better.” My voice aims for happy, yet I recognize the nervous, desperate need for approval layered underneath the nonchalance.

“Well how much weight have you lost?” Dad asks me as he enters the house. I hear the door slam and his keys hit the counter. There’s a pause until television comes on in the background.

A laugh track plays.



I ate so much. Holy shit, why did I eat so much? My distended stomach gurgles as I curl into myself on my twin bed in my dorm. What was I thinking? God, I’m such an idiot. We have practice today. I’m going to throw up on the track. Panic snakes through me as the idea of people watching me be sick and seeing just how much food I had in my stomach empty after the first 400 meter of our four sets of six. They’ll laugh at me. They’ll be disgusted. There’s no way this is normal. I eat and I eat and I’m the fattest one out there. I moved from a laying position to a pacing one. My stomach groans at the movement. I have to be thin and run, but I have to eat. If I don’t eat, then I will feel the sadness again. Waves of depression threaten to pull me into my bed, to pretend the problem wasn’t happening. I fought the impulse. How can I fix this? There must be a way to fix this? The pain grew louder the faster I paced. I bit at my fingernails till the raw flesh made me sick.

So throw up. I pause. The idea had crept into my head and made itself at home. I don’t know where it came from. It wasn’t there and then... it was. Yes. Yes! I’ll... I’ll throw up. Just this once. Just to fix it this once. I nervously laugh. And then laugh again. Why didn’t I think of this sooner? It’s just so obvious.

I quickly sobered as I stood in front of the toilet. I don’t...don’t know how to do this. I lifted the seat quietly, as if any noise would cause the police to crash into my room. I bent over trying to remember how I’d seen this done on television. How did the girls do it?

Quickly or slow? Quiet or loud? I struggle with my hair until I yank it into a ponytail. The realness of my actions settle into my body. I take my fingers and tentatively put them in my mouth sliding them backward until I brush past my tonsils. And then it hit me, the false nausea. The bile and undigested food spill out of my mouth into the clean, white, porcelain toilet. Waves of it pass down my throat and into the bowl. I still feel full. I push again, aware of the layer of vomit already coating my fingers. I push more forcefully and more comes up. I push until I am empty. I push until I am light.

I sit exhausted, humiliated, defeated on the edge of the bathtub as I look at my first mess. I close the lid and flush the toilet while closing my eyes. As if that would make this less real. As if that would make the smell go away. As my eyes flutter back open, I view the reality of the situation. There is bile splattered across the toilet. Vomit on the floor. Horror makes my blood run cold. I drop to my knees and start cleaning. God, what would my roommate think if she saw this? What was I thinking? God, what was wrong with me? My breath hitches and tears fall as I mop up the small drops of bile. As I finish, I notice the trail running down my arm. It feels like I'm in a bad crime show and murdered someone. I'm the villain in my own story. The trespasser in my body. The "blood" is everywhere. The evidence on everything. I rush to the sink and scrub and scrub and scrub determined to remove all traces of my indiscretion.

I've never seen this scene on television, the cleanup, the ugly after. How do I process this? How do I move on from what I've just done? Am I a self-fulfilling prophecy of the statistics of high-strung girls developing eating disorders? I know that... that I've seen anorexia embodied on screen. It's not one particular screen or strand, but the idea calls to me letting me know I'm right. I've seen bodies on television so thin they must be anorexic, but

what of the bulimic bodies? Can we see this in/on a body? Is this what happens when the women on the screen aren't picturesque and put together? Still crying, I rush into my room. I cry until it is time for practice.

I have never run so light. I have never felt so in control of the static.



I remember when *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015) was the only CSI show on the air. My mom and dad loved it. My mom loved it because she could always crack the crime before the grand reveal. She'd shout and yell at the characters in a gleeful jeer because she was able to outsmart the timing of the plot. My dad loved it because while it was an interesting and evocative show, my mom loved it. He loved watching it with her.

Television shows liked or loved in my house defined the culture. Those are the shows we watched. A trickle down system of entertainment. At some point, I was able to watch with them, participate in this ritual with them. When I was old enough to watch it, I remember watching season after season in my brother's empty room trying to catch up so we could all watch it together.

The crime scenes didn't bother me. They were gruesome pictures I could tell myself were fake. But the actions of the crime, the violence inflicted on bodies, made me flinch and turn quickly away. I hated watching the reenactments of a beating or torture scene.

It would give me nightmares sometimes, that violence upon a body.



I pause in my writing. It's late. Or maybe early. I glance at the clock; it's early. I rub my eyes as I struggle with the internal desire to sleep or to keep pushing against the stress, the fatigue, the constant press of my depression. Milo, my cat, is asleep on the floor, ever

vigilant at making sure he knows where I am and what I'm doing. As I watch, he rolls over in his sleep. I glance around the slightly messy space that holds all of my notes, memories, and change for the past two years.

I should put away the laundry, I think. Maybe just a little television in the background for noise. Yes. Just a little for noise, I tell myself. Just for one episode. One won't hurt. I let myself persuade my mind and let my habitual television rituals take over. I sort and fold clothes to the action sounds of *Agent Carter*. Her late 1940s style and turn of phrase make her one of my favorite characters. She embodies a proper, pretty English woman in the years following World War II. She overcomes sexism and uses the period specific views of women to solve crimes and collect information. All of the men at the intelligence service look down on her, and she subverts all of their perceptions by using their blindness against them.

What I would give to be like her. The thought passes quietly through my brain as I sit down—socks in hand—to really witness her magnificence. God, she's so pretty. And smart. And clever. But she's not perfect. She's not paper thin. I love this show. My mind starts to warp into the show. Noting phrases and taking in visuals. I catch myself before I fall too far into the act of watching. I leave the show running as I force myself to keep folding. Keep cleaning. I think about how privileged I am to never have had to justify my existence in academia, though society teaches me to expect it. I fold and place, picking up another piece of clothing. I think about the critical body of Agent Carter. I think about the time periods and wonder how much my grandparents remember of this time.

The role she plays as she embodies feminism and enacts it within her refusal to be complacent or quieted by her male superiors. Her male allies range in their sexism, but whoever writes/creates the show knowingly constructs a certain blindness in all the men

toward her abilities. Her closest ally in beliefs of equality is the only one who sees her outside actions and adventures. He's a soldier injured in World War II. He embodies the persona of disability. He is the only male who views her as equal, but also as dangerous. The episodes end in crisis and conflict. I set down my laundry and Google a preview for next week's episode. I pull up fashion websites and type: 1940s style clothing agent carter. I think about how these are the clothes my Grandmother wore when she met my Grandfather during an air raid. I look and look for something that will transform me, help me, and create how I feel when watching this woman on screen in action. I indulge in fantasy after fantasy, borrowing the shows beautiful reality as my own. I imagine myself in my Grandmother's shoes, flirting with British officers and dazzling the room. This is my favorite high— forgoing my lived reality for the picture-perfect construction.

After the watching high of the show wears off, I exit these windows quickly and admonish myself for being too easily influenced. I tell myself to celebrate the women I know who fight in ways metaphorically similar. Tell myself that I am pretty. I am strong. Tell myself many things to distract me from the comforting space that watching television brings me. I practice the same mental patterns learned since high school. Don't let the television consume you. Everything fills with static as my thoughts derail and want to go back to pretending. I can't focus on my writing or my folding. My brain becomes unbearably loud with static as my desire to return to the perfect screen grows.

Go back to watching, I think. Living isn't as good as the watching.



How do I show you the feeling of watching? How do I bring you into my calm, my moments of peace and tension, or pain and laughter? Of letting your eyes glaze but focus at

the same time. Of absorbing the screen as a part of you and emptying everything else. How you learn what's "right" and what's "wrong"—even if wrong is right. How numb the "real" world becomes and that encasing numbness allows me to just... be. I don't know how to show you that. I only want to tell. Tell of how I embody the superhero, the villain, the princess, the slut, the good girl, the rebel, the crazy, and the vampire slayer. I watch so carefully to learn. Learn how to move, breathe, think, and act. If I can watch closely enough, I know I can get it right... just this once. I can be the persons I desire. I can be the hero instead of Googling martial arts classes after watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* alone, without a gang of Scoobies. I can talk to my mother like *The Gilmore Girls*, and she'll understand me. She'll empathize with me. I can watch *Glee* and know my dad and brother will stop saying racist and homophobic things because finally they'll understand. But as soon as the screen is off, I'm already doing it wrong. The perfect, choreographed performances are so clear and right. Every movement my body makes seems wrong. Every word falls funny when spoken. Static fills the empty space confusing my watching with doing. Perfect actions corroded by the unforgiving reality of my body. The body I fight with. Control. Punish. Demean. The body. My body. I am not separate. I am not separate. I am not separate.

I am static.



"Look I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just trying to explain my side of it from my perspective with my knowledge. Why are you getting so upset?" I work to remain calm as my mother drives. There's tension in the air as we drive down the traffic filled interstate. I'm trying to get my mother to engage with me. To talk with me the way I feel families should be

able to talk. It seems we fight about everything except the small conversation we have when we are watching television.

“Well I can’t say anything without you jumping down my throat. Just let me talk, okay? I don’t need your advice or commentary. I just need you to listen when I talk,” Mom snaps back as we drive. I follow her direction and am silent. If only she had had a mute button. That would have been more effective. If she had the remote controlling the DVR of our relationship, I’m sure she’d just play the season one highlights over and over. She’d pause on the moments where we were close and not only mother and daughter, but best friends. She might even delete the later years saying that she dislikes the way the character progressed. She’d be able to carefully rewind through the commercial breaks of our conversation and only be in the moments where I’m home from school.

I sometimes regret persuading my parents into getting a DVR. It’s changing our relationship. We no longer talk during commercial breaks, we skip through them. Our act of watching is no longer interspersed with relational moments. It makes their lives easier, as they can record all of their shows to rewatch at a later date. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen my mother so mad as when I accidentally deleted all of the recordings of her favorite show. This technology is removing the relational aspect of the act of watching, though we still pause and talk. Though we still try to connect. Technology presses on our connecting strands. It affects and effects our relational rhythm as I move into a non-DVR, non-commercial filled watching space facilitated by screens that are and aren’t television. My parents navigate the pauses and skips of their enhanced televised space. We are losing our spaces. We are losing the chance for relational moments.



I question with an arching tone, “Since I have no homework, want to watch *Friends*?” I ask with a smile on my lips. I know mom will say yes, she always does. She likes this show too with its fast dialogue, quirky characters, and great cast. I watch her face carefully for a smile. We watch *Friends* almost every day after school and practice, but before dinner. She cooks. Mom cooks every day, and I sit with her and put on *Friends*. It’s our routine. It’s our show.

I can see her pretending to think about it before she concedes with a smile and a simple, “Okay.” She sinks into the chair parallel with the couch. Dad doesn’t like for me to watch this show, but Mom will always watch it with me. Mom is more open to actually discussing some of the topics I know Dad doesn’t like. We laugh together. Discuss which of the guys is more attractive or funny. I like Chandler and she does too, but she thinks Joey is more attractive. We both dislike Ross. He’s too whiny. We make fun of Rachel as mom tells me how popular she was on influencing fashion.

“I think Monica is prettier,” I declare. I understand Monica more. I resent Rachel’s easy, pretty life. Phoebe brings me pain. She reminds me of the friends I left behind, in an attempt to become more popular in middle school. I wonder if those friends will be like Phoebe, but the curiosity fades as quickly as it came. I won’t be like Phoebe.

“I’m such a Monica,” I say out loud. We laugh together. We let our bodies rest as school sloughs off our minds. Simple laughs, funny lines, these small moments in the show relax us. They bring us together. We are not only mother and daughter in these moments, we are friends.



When *Friends* finally came out on Netflix, I am delighted. I can rewatch all of the old episodes. I'll feel the same feelings. This was the show that brought me closer to my mom. It had cemented our relationship as more than just mother and daughter. We were close friends watching something just a little racy, just a little taboo. Excitedly, I click on it and prepare to laugh along with everyone's favorite friends.

But I just can't get into it. All I can hear is that heavy laugh track ringing in my ears. Even though the characters play well off one another and the dialogue is witty and clever, all I can see is the whiteness of the characters, even the background characters. The personalities that made them so special and funny now seem empty. There was connection, but no one seems real with the exception of Ross and Chandler, two of the unhappiest characters on the show. My disappointment with this failed moment of nostalgia fills me. My expectations are crushed. Why doesn't this feel the same? I grow angry and confused. I decide to go for a walk.

I close my laptop.



Home on break, I flip through the channels. My mom comes in the room, quickly followed by her cat. She settles into the love seat as I pass through the channels again, this time keeping her in mind as I choose what to watch. I pass *Friends*. I struggle internally for a moment before turning to say, "Want to watch *Friends*?"



My mother is not racist.

I say this at some point during the story, either as a preface or a final note. A disclaimer or an apology. Usually insistently both.

My mother is not racist. My mother is not racist. My mother is not racist. I nervously laugh about it while trying to assure my audience... and probably myself.



She is not racist.

I say this at some point during the story, either as a preface or a final note. A disclaimer or an apology. Usually insistently both.

She is not racist. He is not racist. They are not racist. I am not racist. We are not racist. I nervously laugh about it while trying to assure my audience... and probably myself.



“But she, she’s actually really supportive to the local community. She does a lot for the kids in the ‘lower income’ neighborhoods. They always have. They’ve always watched out for those kids. And, and... she always taught me the importance of being color blind. Well, not the problematic way of being color blind, but just... accepting everyone. Even if they were different from me.”

She’s not racist. They *are not* racist.



“Kelsey, I’ve noticed... you’ve been watching a lot of... different shows lately,” she asks in a careful, but purposeful tone.

“Well, not really. They’re just Disney Channel shows,” my pulse quickens. Why would she bring up television? Have I been watching something I’m not supposed to be watching? Have I been watching something wrong?

“Well you’ve been watching a lot of... black shows. Why are you watching those shows?” she demands.

Oh. OH. My mind calms down. I'm not in trouble. She means *The Proud Family*, *That's So Raven*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Sister, Sister*. Television shows that revolve around the lives of black families, with white characters in supporting roles.

"No, no. Those are just Disney Channel shows. Or Nick At Nite shows. They're not black shows." I find peace and am slightly dismissive. I am starting to resist my parents' views of acceptable television. My parents won't even let me watch *The Simpsons*. It's just a cartoon, what damage could it possibly do. I resent being sheltered... I know it makes me different. Weird.

"Why do you even want to watch those shows? Do you want to be black? Is that it? Do you want to be black?" her voice rising in volume, pulsing with confusion and anger.

"Wh-What?" I stutter.

"Do you want to be black?"

Her words... assault me. They stop me. They halt my forward movement mentally and physically. Shame immediately washes over me. As if I've done something wrong. As if I've violated the unspoken agreement I've developed internally to not cause trouble and to not be a source of stress or unhappiness for my parents. We've never talked about race—not outright. There are things I understand that would not be okay, dating a black guy or hanging out exclusively with black people. They've never articulated this, but we have that understanding of race. She has never said something like this before. Something so raw and racist and... ugly.

Then I am angry. I barely transgress the unwritten rules of our television. These shows are on the Disney Channel. They're on Nickelodeon. Kids' channels. It's on the same channel as *Rugrats*. They're not bad. There's nothing wrong with these shows.

My shame is challenged by a sense of incredulity. Why is this an issue? When did my perceptions of race become an issue? How could I want to be... black, I'm white? I'm as white as our bleached heritage. I'm so white I use the whitest shade of foundation. How could I want to be black? Could I even be black if I wanted? Is that an option?

I am white. My friends are white. My family is white. There is little color in my daily exchange of words or experiences or social interactions with people. These television shows are my only experience with cultures where the main characters aren't white. I don't know what she means by black. These "black shows" surrounded by a television broadcast schedule swimming in white bodies and white culture and bleached ideas of diversity.

But I'm quiet. I watch her face for any give, any sign of backtracking on the things she's said. *The white savior of the black football players and underprivileged kids. The one who repeated over and over the importance of choosing words because of the impact they have. The one who condemns the use of harsh words or "bad words."*

We never talk about race or serious issues unless I'm in the middle or past the point of help in a personal struggle. They constantly tell me to lock the doors. Hold my keys in between my knuckles. Cross to the other side of the street. They grow angry and defensive when attacked when their ideas are questioned. All I can see is our white lives in a nice house, in the country, on the land we own.

They—we are...



The difficulty of that story is physical. My fingers are tense and my neck stiff. My body resists naming my family as anything other than... good? decent? I search for the word, but I can't find it. I've avoided the difficulty of telling that story for as long as possible—

weaving in and out of metaphors of static and screens. The realness of it still astounds me. Shocks me. I recoil from the memory. I reject it from my description of family and mother. I want to only story the good, the happy endings. I want to disavow the struggle and the relational doubt that fill me when I focus on moments like these. My mind craves the happy sitcom, witty banter, minor strife, and happy ending to wrap everything together. This moment's sharp edges makes me feel as if I am picking up glass. Or wiping up vomit. I flinch from these memories. Scraping my fingers, creating small cuts. Blood. Memories that bleed.

When this story is shared, haltingly in covert conversation—as if speaking it will upset some unseen balance—the reactions of the audience surprise me. Friends who have grown up in conservative, white, religious homes like mine echo my feelings. They speak to how certain shows were allowed while others were not. They respond to my story building a hushed-tones culture, which comments on our privileged positions in society. Our frustration, our humor, our commentary on our family being around and involved enough to censor our television programs speak to a protected privilege. Our positionality creates a space between watching prejudice, racism, and poverty from the outside and never experiencing it. Within our families, whatever may occur, by having them and the means to have television shows that were censored means there were moments we were protected from.

My commentary on television is white, female, middle class, informed by higher education, and utterly wrapped up in a history of a close relationship with my parents during my formative years. I think back to shows like *Friends* or *The Big Bang Theory* and recall the memories differently. I see the lack of diversity and ubiquitous sexism. I see women, though at times different and powerful, often torn down or brought down by flaws in which the male

characters are allowed to reveal. I see racist, classist, and homophobic language peppered into witty dialogue or funny word play. Now, when I look back, it is all I can see. My positionality is a second skin clouding my eyes, making it harder for me to see. The static lulls me into being comfortable with the problematic words and subtle prejudices until a show goes too far, until someone's comments go too far. I am jerked into my present. I reject writers' creations of realities. My critically informed consciousness and eyes sharpen to pierce the second skin and analyze the show. I wonder out loud at these problems—either alone or with my mother. These are the small moments of connection in which I try to pull her toward me, toward my world. I want her to see a little more critically, to be a little more aware of the shows she intakes. These small moments teeter on an edge in our relationship, one that sharpens the more different I become from her.

“It’s just a TV show,” she sighs, irritated I bring it up again and again. “Just watch the show or be silent. I like it. So I’m going to watch it.”

And the moment slips, easily and familiarly, away from me into static.



Oops. It is past time. I forgot to switch channels. In hurried motions, I stretch my body to the couch and grab the remote, flipping through channels before remembering to check the guide for the FOX station. Dang, I hope I don't miss a song, I think as the show pops on the screen in the middle of character dialogue.

Kurt, the flamboyant, closeted gay singer in the glee club is wearing a resemblance of Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" leotard and tights. He's trying to explain his outfit to his dad. I know he's gay. He must be. I've never met a gay guy, but surely Kurt is one. Kurt quickly

lies and tells his dad he's on the football team. I laugh out loud. Kurt wouldn't survive a day in football practice, I think.

He walks through and stops to watch with me. He smiles in response to my laughter and asks, "What's going on? What's funny?"

"Oh. Well... uh Kurt was dressed like Beyoncé and then told his dad it was a football exercise," I tell him, my voice quieter than before. An instinct tells me I shouldn't say I think Kurt is gay. I don't know if he will find this funny. He called Kurt's character a fairy last week. I'm nervous to share this show with him. I don't want to make this show an act of resistance. I want to share it with him.

"Hmph. Never did anything like that in my football practice," he laughs.

My tension eases as he sits down to watch with me. The episode follows how Kurt joins the football team as the kicker and goes through varying methods of trial and error to find what works for him to display his fantastic kicking, singing, and dancing abilities.

"Wish we had a kicker like that this year," he says. I murmur agreement. Our kicker on the football team this year sucks.

The episode dramatically reveals the football team to have learned the iconic "Single Ladies" dance. They're dancing on the field! We crack up as the beefy football players shake it. We then cheer as Kurt wins with an impressive field goal kicked during the other team's confusion.

"This is such a good show. I hope it stays good," I say while stretching out on the floor to wait for the glimpse of next week's episode. He gets up to leave.

He walks out of the room and says, "I don't know. It's kinda gay." My smile fades. I don't know what that means. Is that negative? Should I not watch the show anymore? I'm

conflicted considering my emotions. I like this show and the music is great. Why shouldn't I watch this show? I know gay is kinda bad? Like against the church or something? But Kurt isn't bad. I mean they kinda use his gayness as a joke, but like not bad? I reach the edge of my high-school ability to think critically on a subject I know nothing about. I've never really questioned liking something before. But I'm growing up. I'm supposed to have my own thoughts and opinions, right? Why can't they be about this show? They're really showing how bad bullying is, so that's a good thing, right? They're trying to show you should accept people no matter what, right? I decide to keep watching *Glee*. I don't care if it's kinda gay. He doesn't have to like it.



My brother is and isn't a part of these narratives. When he's home my parents are different. We don't watch so much as play. We bring out games and cook and go out and... live. We go to movies and big events. They are a different family with him. They talk in full and deep conversations. The nine years and two military careers have dwindled our relationship down to birthday calls and static filled moments of trying not to feel like he's parenting me. I get nervous around my brother. I want us to be easy, to be natural like so many siblings I see on television. I want to have someone in my corner when he's home. I want us to fight and it not feel like a strategic power struggle. I want someone who I know will support me because we share the same parents. I want a brother like on television. I don't know my real brother. I want us to have a different story. I want to rewrite our story.

Though he has transgressed more of my parent's spoken and unspoken rules than I ever will, he's an adult now. They leave him alone. At twenty-three, an age when my brother

is just finishing his contract with the Navy, I bear the brunt of the parenting and anxiety and overall worry about my future. Yes, they are different parents with him.

All I can do is watch.



“That’s gay,” my brother laughs and jeers at me while I talk about something related to a show I watch.

“And that’s homophobic,” I snap back.

He says, “I’m the one comfortable enough to make the joke. I know plenty of gay people. You’re the one who seems to be so uncomfortable with the words. Maybe you’re homophobic.”

I turn my body from my current conversation ready to lay into him. My mother interrupts us, “Stop. Kelsey, don’t pay attention to him. He’s just trying to wind you up. You know better. Can you both please go one day without getting into an argument?”

He mocks me with a smile. I know he thinks he’s won. He turns and goes back to watching football with my dad. I roll my eyes so hard it feels like a headache. I turn back to my book and ignore my grinding teeth.



I type out that story pondering if it’s unfair to my brother. After one minute, two minutes of thought, I don’t give a shit. Nine years of pent-up emotion bleed into this story. Nine years of being expected to toe the line and not transgress my parents’ rules. How convenient for him to be born nine years earlier.

He is the married one, after all. I suppose I should be more generous with his character, as he now bears the unspoken pressure of having grandchildren first. Something

we both know my mother expects. It's the natural progression of plot. Shows only succeed when the cast grows. We need more people to build relationships with. We need new tension, arguments, and struggles. We have to continue the narrative of our family. It comes back down to us to keep telling *that* story, to continue our television past.



Alex Dunphy, son: "Dumb guys go for dumb girls and smart guys go for dumb girls. What do smart girls get?"

Phil Dunphy, dad: "Cats, mostly."

Modern Family, "Mother Tucker" (TV Episode, 2010)



Television lied to me.

It said love would be easy. That I would meet boy after boy who would want me for being "different." For not being the popular girl. Television told me to be shy, and quiet, and lonely because eventually I would find a guy who loved me enough to save me from that and make me beautiful and whole and surrounded by friends. That my suffering in high school would be worth it.

When I found no one in high school, I pined for college. Everyone told me college would be my time. How beautiful I would be, how I would have to beat the boys off with a stick, how happy being in college would make me. All signs pointed to it. I wasn't allowed television shows that covered college. I knew that certain elements and certain episodes would violate the unspoken agreement my parents and I had surrounding our television. I watched the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, and Discovery Kids (the kid's version of the Discovery Channel since rebranded Discovery Family). My knowledge of sex and

relationship existed in those three spaces. I didn't have these "talks" with my parents. I just picked it up. Learned what was and wasn't right. Television shows gave me context clues. I knew enough. Sex wasn't a topic discussed.

Yet, somehow, my imagined relationships were always perfect. Who needed sex when I knew I would fall in love? Everything I knew about culture told me real love and older crushes would be different. The utter indifference and panic dating caused me in high school was just temporary. My prince would come.

I cast my prince with the most attractive boys and men from my life. They always adored me, protected me, and were mine. The relational work and physical aspects seemed so far away, something I would never have to deal with. If it didn't work out the way I wanted, I could always recast. If there was something I needed to learn about, I could switch to a different channel, stray a little from my tween understanding of sex, love, and lust. Sometimes straying to another channel, but never far. Love was pure and stolen glances, and deep conversations. It was quirky dates and witty banter. Wily shenanigans and crazy antics. It was not a date where I made all of the decisions and said it was fine if we used his Chick-fil-A coupon. It was not realizing how much power I had and with that power came a scary ability to manipulate the situations. I didn't want to be that character. I was pretty sure that that character was usually the villain. Powerful women, women who didn't need men, who had some greater goal than a relationship, were usually the villain. Few little girls grow up wanting to be the villain.



Oh god, I thought. I'm going to have to be the villain. I glanced across the table at my date flashing what he probably thought was a smile, but I knew to be a grimace.

My date, playfully tracing my hand with his, delivers his finest one-liner, “So how’s an amazing girl like you single?” All the while he’s giving me what I assume he intends to be a charming smile. I internally wince and respond with a weak smile.

“Just pure, dumb luck,” I suppose.



Television comes with disclaimer after disclaimer. As I write my mother and father, I feel disclaimers for their behaviors flashing across the stories, the memories.

Irish-Czech daughter of a farmer who grew up in a small, conservative Texas town. Her father leaned on her, the middle child of eight, as the boy of the family. Her nickname was “Butch” before it had lesbian connotations. She struggles with femininity and doesn’t express emotion well. She moves on quickly and hates to think about “what if.” She just wants my happiness, but has no idea how hurtful the truth can be except when she does. She is a caring, wonderful, good person who has done so much for the special education communities in the schools she’s worked at. My mother is slim, muscular, but distinctly feminine and pretty. She doesn’t like personal drama but loves to gossip within the family. She loves my father, but gets frustrated with him. My mother has a mean streak. She has left everything and everyone she loved several times over as they moved for his coaching career. Her desire to be a good mother is so consuming she is sometimes overwhelmed with not knowing how to help. She wants things to be good, to be light, and to be like her because that’s what she can understand. She says negative things about herself, but gets mad when people call her out on these toxic behaviors.

She embodies the idea of mother.

My father is a secret cowboy with a coach's whistle. He loves the idea of things. He plays the "what if" game. I inherit my uncontrollable anxiety and compulsive tendencies from him. He is one of the most respected coaches I know. His players have been my brother's cohort and my cohort all throughout junior high and high school. He is humble and doesn't want to be the leader with a small town's expectations sitting on his shoulders, yet is unsatisfied with not being in charge. He softened when his father died quickly, withering away in about two months. He is a "man of God." He struggles with overcoming hegemonic masculinity even though he has no names for it or understanding as to where the motivation for his actions come from. He says problematic things, but has learned to stop saying them around me. Sometimes hard and unyielding, but can also be one of the most expressive men in his desire to connect with others. He loves television. As I watch my favorite shows, he walks through the room with eyes on the screen. I recognize the eyes. His eyes catch and still. They focus on the screen. He'll ask what I am watching if he doesn't know. He loves the screen. He collects shows like I do. He watches things separate from my mother. He lives in the static too.

He embodies the idea of father.

My parents are a constant and unwavering character study. I absorb all I can from them to try to understand away the hurt and dark memories we share. I do not know how they would describe me. My flaws and hurts and quirks. I get to play observer as I write our family in and out of place, in and out of text trying to connect to screens flickering in homes across the country. It's the privilege of the audience.

I turn my audience/my character study to me. Who am I?



“Kelsey... are you okay?” My mom’s voice crackles over the phone. She’s asking me this because it’s been two weeks since I’ve called. Since I’ve reached out. Mom’s also asking because of the edge to my tone. I was careless when I picked up. I had been crying. From stress. From life. From... I don’t remember anymore. I’ve been alternating crying with numbing television screens. Just a few more episodes. Everything will quiet. I can understand how to not be me with a few more episodes.

These are the bad times. Everything is static. From the way I move to the way I breathe, static wraps around me, fills me, comes out of my mouth in words. I hear and see it everywhere. It builds inside me. The noise is deafening. Static, depression, anxiety. I can’t keep these straight when I talk, when I perform Kelsey Merritt. Everything feels distant and fuzzy. Everything feels like failure when I leave my screen.

Except when I turn on the screen. It quiets. It sits down and watches. It holds my hand to let me know I haven’t escaped it, but this screen is keeping it happy, sating the need to see real happiness and real emotions. These realities are the ones the static and I like. They are real to me. The screen flickers and twists toward me and away from me, pushing and pulling. Pouring out story and action and love and hate. Violence and joy and blood and tears. Musical comedies and superheroes navigate between aliens and critical sitcoms. The static is at peace only when the screen is on.

I turn off the screen. The quiet is palpable in the first few moments. I can feel the panic coming as the television high wears off. The static is back. Wrapping around my throat and filling my lungs. I don’t know how to speak it away, breathe it away. I start crying as the pressure enters my mind and body. I would leave it on... but I have to try to work. The idea of trying to work while the screen is on is laughable. I can’t focus on both lives. I can either

be the *watching self* or the *struggling self*. Static reminds me the only time I am happy is when I am watching. I've grown up watching. The static was not always there. But the more I watched the louder it grew when the screen was off. My emotions cannot be heard. My voice cannot be heard. Friends reach out to me, family reaches out to me, but all I say is, "I'm fine." I move away from the questions, and let the static perform happy. As long as I go back to the screen, I can perform happy. I think I may be addicted to the screen or... maybe it's the static. I need the numbing sensation of living while watching. I need to be watcher, to be audience. What else will I have to talk about?



I look up from my laptop to the television. A commercial flickers across the screen. I forget what program was on. I consider the stories in front of me, the written and the visual. I look to the spaces where my family will sit later in the day. I close my laptop. I turn off the television. I close my eyes and see

Static.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

I watch narratives flicker and twist. I flip through them quickly, lingering on some, skipping others. Static blurs memories, emotions blend and take on new meaning, and time seems to suspend. The narratives move faster. Phrases overlap each other creating nonsense, laughing splices with yelling, tears spill into intense moments. Sounds dissolve into white noise and images bleed to create a pulsating buzz filling my mind. It's too much. Too much memory and sound and feeling and static and... story.



In this final chapter of my thesis, I will (a) summarize my first four Chapters; (b) review the goals of this thesis established in Chapter 1; (c) consider my limitations and methodology; (d) offer potential contributions that my thesis makes to the field of relational communication, television studies, and my selves; and (e) conclude with a discussion of looking toward the future in light of my thesis.

Summary

I began the exploration of writing self, family, television, and communication in Chapter 1. This chapter establishes foundations for the review of literature, the doing of autoethnography and layered messy texts, and personal narrative that follow. I write to connect these chapters and create space for them to develop. In this chapter, I also establish the goals of my thesis and begin layering personal narrative laden with reflexive, aesthetic moments.

In Chapter 2, I continue to build the foundations for critical space in my thesis by introducing and reviewing literature. The roots of television begin in how it operates as an

agent of cultural change and narrative production. This section examines the inherent theories and ideologies television participates in and constructs. I examine family over the course of televised history with each decades' contribution to how family was approached and portrayed in television shows. I discuss how representation of minorities and women changed over the course of television moving from the classic homemakers of the Golden Age to the new roles women hold. I discuss the call for personal narrative as a response to television's narratives. Finally, I discuss how narrative and relational communication are tied together through the act of relational watching and monitoring (Yoshimura & Alberts, 2008).

In Chapter 3, my doing of autoethnography and the complexity of my methodology are offered to the readers. I review how stories are the backbone to the human experience (Bochner, 2000; Fisher, 1984; 1987). I move through a history of autoethnography and how the crisis of representation in social sciences created the space for it. I also delve into elements of personal narrative and its power to give voice to issues that lie in the personal, political, social, and cultural spheres of family and communication (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). The foundations of my doing of autoethnography are reflexivity (Berry, 2013), evocative stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), aesthetic moments (Bolen, 2014), aesthetic merit (Richardson, 2000), and reframing lived experiences (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

In Chapter 4, memories and storied moments are written with reflexive, critical, aesthetic intentions. I layer stories messily and purposefully (Marcus, 1994; 1998; Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995). The stories found there can help to round out the field of television studies (Alexander, 1993). Shifting between narratives, I move through a non-linear timeline

of memories. The purpose of my autoethnographic inquiry is to offer story speaking to the spaces of family and selves discovered in acts of watching and embodying television.

Reconsidering the Goals of my Thesis Project

In the first chapter of my thesis, I began this project with goals to guide my inquiry. My first goal of this thesis was to crystalize existing literature documenting how familial communication and interpersonal connections change with television. In discussion of identity and body, I moved to my second goal for this project. I reflex upon memories and personal stories to find moments of crisis between lived experiences and visual/virtual reality of gender, body, and self (Berry, 2013). I use lived experience as evidence for how repetitive images affect self, performance, and perception of body. My third goal for my thesis focuses on creating a space of connection and conversation around how family is linked to television and the communicative, social, and emotional impact of this relationship. My thesis seeks to delve into the culture of watching and sharing stories of growing up alongside and intertwined with television through reflexive and critical narrative.

Familial communication, interpersonal connections, and television. During the process of reviewing literature and finding personal, political, and familial connections to previous research, I would write. Personal narrative spun out in moments of meaning as literature inspired me. I found resonance with family and self through the study of the history of television and relational watching. I find meaning in the ways television families have evolved and changed. I connect my familial culture and narrative to my consumption of cultural currency of television (Alexander, 1993). Writing these connections and selves has created a process/project filled with deeper significance.

The core idea of this goal connects to my initial drive to pursue the thesis option. I wanted to write and examine a cultural happening with personal ties to my life. As I watched old television sitcoms with my parents, we started a conversation filled with moments laden with memories, family, and communication differences. My mother talked about sharing a television with seven sisters. My dad discussed what it was like to watch old shows and commercials. They talked of historical events and eventually I stopped talking and just listened as a flow of memory, story, and nostalgia washed over me. This aesthetic moment (Bolen, 2014) crystallized this subject. I saw television as a relational space, a space full of family, history, and story based on this one conversation. I started writing moments, both uncomfortable and aesthetic, that connected family, television, and communication.

By writing personal narrative, I advance television studies. I explore the personal and the political that is inexplicitly tied to television. I story gender and body and family performance with intention to peel back layers of meaning between and within these subjects. I offer my stories as method to further study of television and family and create space for discourse (Alexander, 1993). I open myself to inquiry as I am not separate from my stories and take responsibility for my personal narratives.

Lived experiences and the visual/virtual reality of gender, body, and self. My second goal for my thesis was focused on using lived experiences to story my personal struggle with navigating visual/virtual realities of television with my lived reality. I shift through narratives to find the moments of pain, of love, of story to bring a personal and evocative connection to readers and their experiences. I want to write struggle visceral enough for readers to be able to connect to their own lived experiences with media. As my identity, self-talk, and body changed with age, my understandings of these self-concepts were

influenced and molded by repetitive visual and personal performances (Butler, 1988).

Growing up fixated on screens and the bodies/storied lives within, personal reality shifts and narrative understanding can be influenced by crafted and marketed alternative realities.

In my thesis, I reflex upon memories and personal stories to find moments of crisis between the lived experiences and the visual/virtual reality of gender, body, and selves (Berry, 2013). I use lived experience as evidence for how repetitive images affect self and perception of body. Writing through and to these lived experiences helped me understand past decisions and influences. I offer my experiences to readers with hopes of connecting to moments where the “static” of living caught between our perceptions of “realities” and the “realities” we consume using media.

Layered accounts and messy texts (Marcus, 1994;1998; Rambo Ronai, 1992; 1995) embody a genre of autoethnographic writing that spoke to my way of remembering and reliving these experiences. Memory is not clear, distinct, and linear. It is a fluid process filtered through our perception and positionality. My remembrances of bulimia or learning my body was not the body of popular culture are messy moments. They are uncomfortable to read, write, and remember. Yet, I was drawn to these stories with this thesis goal in mind. As media blends into our daily lives more and more, there is a struggle in generations both new and old to reconcile the idea what of “realistic” now means. I write to these moments. I struggle through “real.”

Connection, conversation, and culture of family and television. Television worked to influence the reality of many generations—mine, my parents, and even my grandparents. Popular culture and television have a symbiotic relationship in which they influence and create based on each other’s message. This cycle, this relationship, has grown and evolved

over generations. Each generation experiencing a different version of this relationship between popular culture and television. Generational communication influenced by television ties into how these different generations relate to each other. The last goal of my thesis seeks to delve into the culture of watching and sharing the stories of growing up alongside and intertwined with television through reflexive and critical narrative.

My narrative is informed by my review of literature and a lifetime of living in a television family. The relational watching, monitoring, sharing created my family's culture (Yoshimura & Alberts, 2008). My last thesis goal guides my critical eye when selecting stories that speak to family culture and embodiment of communication defined by television. I write stories that explore my family's culture as generational and pop culture trickle down through conversation held within family/television spaces.

Making sense of these spaces helps me to understand the transition families face as media creeps evermore into communicative spaces. My personal narrative contains uncomfortable and aesthetic relational moments (Bolen, 2014) in my family's television/living space. I write to explore my connection to the space and offer critical examination of space and story as objects of inquiry.

Limitations and Methodological Considerations

No inquiry is perfect. I am a flawed being with a perspective limited to what is filtered through my senses and awareness. This section seeks to discuss possible criticisms of my thesis while acknowledging the strengths of my methodology. I do autoethnography to diverge from positivistic research and other traditional qualitative methods. In the next two sections, I will examine limitations of my work and ways in which this thesis contributes to the continuation of doing autoethnography.

Limitations and potential criticisms. No inquiry is perfect, no researcher removed (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I tell myself this as I read over my personal narratives. I review my narratives with a critical eye and rewrite and reflex again.

The most voiced criticism autoethnographers face are the questions of reliability, generalizability, and validity. Terms such as these usually come from those looking to examine autoethnography by positivist standards with the same meanings they hold in positivist frameworks (Denzin, 2014). In autoethnography, these terms hold different meanings. They must. Autoethnography is a postmodern inquiry, not a positivist study nor traditional ethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Is my personal narrative reliable? Criticisms of reliability call my credibility as researcher/writer/participant into question. Critics wonder how we are to know that stories have any basis of truth (Denzin, 2014). I respond that my stories hold narrative “truth” (Bochner, 2001). I write personal narrative based on my acknowledged, fallible, human memory. I can only write my stories through my perception and remembrance of them, as a reader can only read them in their own perceptions and interpretations (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The “truth” found in autoethnography may hold different meanings with different readers. A “truth” might transform over the course of the text. I write my stories as I understand them and as I reflexively write memories (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Denzin, 2014). I strive for narrative “truth” through stories written reflexively. I acknowledge my bias and positionality in culture and my family while writing. It is from this space I write.

Does my thesis have validity? Denzin (2014) talks of verisimilitude in autoethnographic work. Works should “evoke a feeling that the experience described is true,

coherent, believable, and connects the reader to the writer's world" (Denzin, 2014, p. 79).

Writing evocative autoethnography seeks to evoke feelings in writer and reader (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I seek engagement and relational connection with my readers, not a deposit of knowledge. I want to write work that embodies verisimilitude in order to connect with readers (Denzin, 2014). Would traditional social science allow me to use "I" in my writing? Based on previous research, the I, the self is removed (Ellis, 2004). I would have to write separate and distant, hoping my readers connected with my ideas rather than evoking emotions and creating relational connections between reader and writer.

Are my stories generalizable? If we consider the idea of generalizability within positivist works, it speaks to whether or not research is applicable to others, a movement toward a universal singular (Denzin, 2014). I never claim my personal narrative as universal "truth." I write to the moments, the culture, the lived experiences available to no one but me. I use my life as inspiration for inquiry and offer observations to reader. I write for relationships, engagement, and participation from audience. My goal is not to write standard social science, but to create a moving, evocative text that motivates ideas, questions, or actions (Denzin, 2014). I also write resistance to television narratives with my personal narratives. I cannot generalize my experiences of watching *America's Next Top Model* (2003-present) to my readers' experiences. We interpret and embody this television narrative separately. If I write to voice this, readers may also be inspired to voice their experiences and encourage a cycle of resistance to television narratives.

Methodological considerations. The television is on as I write this. I sit in living space typing on a screen while the low vocalizations of *Parks and Rec* play in the background. My fingers lightly tap the keys and a cadence creates my words as I strive to put

story to paper. I think on my journey as I wrote/remembered/lived this thesis and these personal narratives. I smile at the struggle and find cathartic release from critically examining painful memories in story (Bochner, 2005). I consider the screen in front of me and the one that has been in front of me most of my life. I close one, turn the other off. I close my eyes. I listen to understand the static.



We use narrative instinctively and organically as part of the process of understanding world, culture, and positionality within and between the two (Bochner, 2000). My methodology calls for author to be heard and for readers' responses. I write to give voice to unheard spaces, people, and groups. I write because my positionality creates opportunity for my words to have impact and meaning. Urgently, my words press against page.

I do autoethnography to break from the tradition of postpositivistic research used in television studies. My life is shaped by the experiences I have lived as well as the experiences viewed on screens that have blurred my expectations of "reality." By writing these lived experiences, creatively, performatively, or as an endeavor of narrative "truth," I show and tell lived critical moments of family communication in television spaces (Bochner, 2001). I write myself in order to create understanding of positionality, researcher, and writer (Holman Jones, 2005a). As I write and story my relationships, I seek to create relationship between past and present moments, those reading my thesis and personal narrative, and other television families waiting for commercials (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

Story as theory. When we story our world, we create a collective knowledge and history. Good stories are shared again and again, told in different languages, details changing over time. Certain stories hold onto core aspects, but the characters, scenery, and meaning

change. Stories, and the telling of them, are eternal. They are theories that bridge storying and living (Bochner, 1994).

My use of personal narrative allows me to speak to issues and events through my own personal experience. I build my understanding of a topic by starting with my personal culture and positionality. While other methods allow for the researcher to gain knowledge through writing, the intrinsic elements of this thesis stem from speaking from a culture, place, and communication phenomenon I experience as an insider (Adams, Holman Jones. & Ellis, 2015).

Ethical considerations. As I write, I ponder the ethical implications of my personal narrative. My family is obviously tied to this thesis, yet no names are used. The lack of names creates space for readers to project their own meanings onto the idea of “mother,” “father,” or “brother.” Yet their voices and words are chosen by me. There is the possibility they would write themselves differently and choose to change the story (Bochner, 2001). How then are we to ever decide which version of the story is “truth?”

I write with an ethical perspective rooted in relational and narrative ethics (Bolen & Adams, in print; Ellis, 2007). Humans exist in a narrative space. All elements of our lives are processed through stories (Fisher, 1984; 1987). When writing stories to process my understandings and embodiments of television and family, I write with considerations of memory and passage of time. In addition, doing autoethnography encourages reflexivity of self in memories and stories as well as setting, audience, meanings, and relationship between writer and other characters in the story (Bolen & Adams, in print). While memory is a fluid, ever-changing aspect of life, the memories important to us are woven into our personal understandings and narratives. Doing autoethnography is not about cherry picking the good,

bad, or evocative. It is the process and project of creating meaning through using our personal, unique positionalities to write stories that give meaning and hold potential (Bochner, 2007). I do autoethnography to write relational meaning and understandings into my thesis and offer these moments to my readers.

An unwavering choice. Again and again, I write. I write aesthetic and uncomfortable. I sink deep into my memories and look for new meaning, new perspective. I give voice to a communication phenomenon that has little mention in existing literature. Relational watching is coded and divided into subsections of actions (Yoshimura & Alberts, 2008). Families are studied, interviewed, and observed (Hutchinson, 2012). These studies explore the topic of family space, television, and communication. They dip into issues, choosing to dissect them slowly and carefully. Few, if any, studies write with “I” (Ellis, 2004). These researchers, many of whom I would conjecture grew up in the conditions they are trying to study, draw their experiences and emotions into their research.

I want to draw my audiences in. I want my inquiry and reflexive narrative to speak to their moments of family communication that took place in front of television screens. I do not want to separate my voice from my research. I want to offer my lived experiences as research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). No other method creates space for my work and my voice like autoethnographic writing. I write to explore the personal, political, and the unsaid. I write to explore static in all shapes and forms. I write to do autoethnographic inquiry.

Contributions of this Thesis

This section spins out from meaning-filled strands that spin out from my personal narrative. I write to the questions posed without necessarily reaching a closed-end answer. The relational aspects of family and television, the impact of personal narrative in television

studies, and how this thesis affected me as writer/researcher/creator of stories subjected to critical examination are topics explored in these next few paragraphs.

Relational watching and family, television, communication. Relational maintenance is an integral part of human connection. We spend much of our social time reaffirming and reestablishing connections to each other through small actions and light conversation. Yoshimura and Alberts' (2008) work in romantic relationships establishes a starting point for how television is used as a relational maintenance tool. My narratives speak to how television was a relational maintenance tool, identity influencer, and producer of narratives that I embodied through my performance of gender and family communication.

I write my stories as inquiry into the personal side of media studies (Alexander, 1993). I want to bridge the personal with the political, the culturally constructed narratives with the private embodiment of their messages and meanings (Holman Jones, 2005a). My thesis is an outstretched hand. It is a personal offering of memory and meaning. It seeks to provoke questions about our consumption, embodiment, and repurposing of culturally accepted narratives. My thesis inspires me to hope that my outstretched hand, or beginnings of discourse, inspire further narratives countering television's narratives while also hoping there is a future for further research into this static filled area.

Gender performance, bodies/my body, and television. Writing my stories provoked many moments of uncomfortable examination into self. Some of my narrative may not seem to directly relate to television or family, but instead seem focused on my struggle with my body. I write these narratives to offer readers an account of the tension caused by a lifetime accumulation of tension building between consuming television's narratives of body and my narrative body (Alexander, 1993; Myers, 2013).

As I researched television's narrative of family, I noticed the bodies and changing ideals within each generation. There seemed a war waged against women in the constant barrage of media and visual narratives weighing on women's gender roles and performance. My personal struggles with body and gender performance have meaning in my identity and personal journey. Writing my narratives is a way to speak to the disconnect and constant silent pressure television's bodies were in my life (Adams, 2016). While my family's discussion about my body are also crucial to my identity and understanding of body, the pressure is not defined by a single instance. It manifested into struggles with an eating disorder and found affirmation in depression. I know I am not alone in this pressure. Through shared moments of body shaming and a subculture of television narratives that push back against the majority message, I know I am not alone in this pressure, this tension. My narratives seek to make personal for my readers the affect and effect the dissonance of television's narratives and women's lived narratives have. I write to create space for more personal narrative, more bodies, more space for acknowledgement of struggle between and within bodies.

Personal narrative in television studies. As discussed in my review of literature, television produces narratives that viewers consume (Alexander, 1993). Television and media studies have examined the relationship between people and television in many ways, but there are still few studies that seek to explore personal narratives. Through writing this thesis, I inspire discourse through doing autoethnography to explore my personal relationship between television, family, and narratives both of television and the re-storying of television narratives that occurs in daily life.

I create an act/action of resistance to the narratives delivered via my television screen. Turning off the screen will not make cultural narratives change or stop—that would be abandoning my responsibility as autoethnographer, researcher, and critical writer. Instead, I do autoethnographic inquiry as a life-long consumer of television narratives. I take ownership in my stories. I take responsibility for how I have interpreted and embodied television's narratives and work to write moments of tension and meaning making. They are my words reflexed and reworked and offered (Bochner, 2001). I look to the future with hope that my thesis inspires other personal narratives that write to television's narratives and resist. I write to the future of family and hope for critical examinations into ways family is portrayed on television. I write to young and old female bodies and hunger for their realizations and evocative moments. I look to the future and I write.

Looking to the Future

My thesis has done something. It gave me a space to explore self, television, family, and culture not previously accessible to me. It has created relationships through its process and hopefully through its entry into others' lives as product. It has crystallized an academic and personal journey two, six, twenty-four years in the making.

I want this thesis to continue *doing*. From this inquiry, I hope to keep exploring these narratives of television culture resistance. I hope to gather groups of women and listen to their stories to develop more processes and projects that create space for bodies and body talk. I hope that the idea of family continues to change as television becomes more critical of the culture it is producing. My narratives can only contribute to this critical space, but I hope to hear others' accounts of exploring their family and the relational act of watching. Ultimately, I watch, I question, and I hope.



“What are you watching?” they ask.

I pause the show and say, “It’s a good show. Watch it with me.”

We settle in. I press play.

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