Introduction

Picturetown, USA

So I resolved to start my inquiry with no more than a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed for me. *Nothing to do with a corpus: only some bodies.*

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

This book began as a study of images; it started as an attempt to understand my personal fascination with a specific type of image production—the visual matter of cyberdating. But the more I indulged my obsession, the more futile were my attempts at any serious structural analysis, as the catalog of images kept expanding. The inventory continued to grow as new participants joined the fray of the online dating network, and those already participating updated or added to their photo albums. Confronted by this ever-widening array, my attention began to drift to the more generalizable and inherently meaningful aspects that exist beyond photographic practice or close textual analysis—the temporal and existential underpinnings that seem to ground the musings of both Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. After all, within my study, an image was simply an appendage to a profile; more pointedly, it belonged to a trail of signifiers that led back to an individual and was in fact shaped by that individual's psychology. Each marker was not simply a physiognomic trace, but part of a psychological profile. What I found most interesting were not the images themselves, but their orientation. Why did the individual choose this particular image? Why did he or she use this construction of selfhood? Each answer revealed intentionality, even when there did not seem to be a conscious attention to detail.

The question of consciousness leads me to reflect on the variability of the gaze, to consider how we view ourselves and how we view others. Particular social spaces call forth particular forms of gazing; that is to say that context often privileges certain social practices over others, making them more likely, and to suggest that the gaze is not simply self-motivated. Structural analysis is difficult here as well, as the very variability of the gaze suggests it is difficult to speak about a universal experience. Gazing itself is a historically and culturally situated practice; to attend to the gaze is to consider the broader history of cultural influence as well as the narrower incidence of social activities buried within such a generalized chronology. The microsituation may call forth a particular system of signs and reading strategies, a nuance lost in (and perhaps against the grain of) the history of things.

Tourism as Metaphor and Practice

Despite my wholehearted investment in the images that I survey, I often feel like a tourist. But rather than understand my fascination as empty (or worse, exploitative) voyeurism, I embrace tourism as a metaphor for my experience. John Urry opens his study of the tourist gaze by suggesting that tourism, far from being a trivial subject or enterprise, "is significant in its ability to reveal aspects of normal practices that might otherwise remain opaque."[1] Like the typical tourist, I collect signs, and my engagement, as a scholarly activity, positions these fragments as separate from everyday experience, despite the fact that they may form a dynamic part of someone else's life. By attending to the minutiae of everyday life, my goal in this book is to move toward transparency. By opening up overlooked and rather commonplace practices to more deliberate scrutiny, we may begin to understand the social constructs, cultural patterns, and behaviors that structure our lives and birth particular subject positions. I choose to consider cultural practices that are messy; throughout this manuscript, I tackle several distinct activities that depend on media artifacts, but my attention remains largely on praxis, on action itself, a matter that cannot be summed up by a catalog of objects. The objects of my analysis are dynamic, and therefore often exceed their objecthood, circulating but not always existing as fixed commodities; I tend to focus on phenomena and ephemera.

The concept of dynamism returns me to the subject of time, the somewhat romantic or perhaps nostalgic notion of "passage" and "drift" found in the excerpt from Susan Sontag's work at the head of this chapter. Indeed, my reading is inevitably informed by my own nostalgia and personal history. I can trace my engagement with photography back to my role as family photographer during summer vacations in the seventies. I willingly embraced the

task, toting my trusty Polaroid OneStep to national parks and monuments across the United States, posing members of my clan in front of token landmarks—the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, Old Faithful. Though my photos have long since turned deep shades of blue, I am still enthralled with these relics of my youth and their shifting evidentiary status—at once a record of a fixed geographic region, a marker of my family's travels, a testament to our conquest of the great frontier, a cultural trace of a decade, a document of each family member during a particular past moment and, on close inspection, a map of our interpersonal dynamics. Perhaps my fascination with images formed over those summers in the seventies, as I longingly watched the chemicals of overheated instant film develop into an exquisite corpus. Fixed in the album, the images do not necessarily speak directly about conflict, typical family strife, the growing disinterest of teenagers in the matter of family vacations, torturous hours spent on the road sandwiched between siblings, or the occasional stench of antifreeze wafting from the overheating engine of the maroon Chevrolet station wagon. But temporality (and, for that matter, spatiality) is not altogether eclipsed by visuality; in fact, my memory may be enhanced by these images, even if it is made over by them. The flat surface of the Polaroid print yields a profound sense of space (the geometric contours of the automobile's interior in contrast to the vast exterior of the western frontier) and activates senses beyond vision (the trace of a dissipating odor in the breeze).

I include this particular autobiographical aside because the focus of this book is on transience and by extension its inverse, which might best be understood as momentary stasis. Transience and stasis seem to describe the conflicted nature of the emerging subject, moving simultaneously toward and away from parental law. Indeed, throughout this text I often return to the family frame, as it is one of the more common forms of prescription. Beyond subjectivity, however, the dueling states of transience and stasis are intertwined explicitly in the matter of technological mediation. We see this in instant photography—both in the physical substrate (the chemicals of film stock) and in whatever contents these chemicals are asked to reproduce. Polaroid, for example, actively exploits a fascination with seeing an otherwise inscrutable semiotic formula—watching sign becoming referent; as the film stock approximates its portrait, becoming yields to being. Despite this apparent fixity, there is a less-visible return toward entropy as the images, lodged in the archive of the family photo album, start to decay while hidden from view. Yet even as they decay, these images still operate as placeholders, and they seem to shirk the subject of transience, displacing it onto their long-passed referents. The events, once so fresh, have moved further and further away from the present moment, and the experience of an image's

once-visible state of becoming has long since been eclipsed, replaced by other comings and goings. The photograph is tinged with nostalgia and begins to serve less a purely evidentiary purpose and instead a more romantic function, fixing certain qualities of lived experience but losing others. Its "wow" factor, once a function of a physical process (what chemicals can do), is now attached to a mental process; the mechanics of imaging become subservient to the machinations of memory, yet synesthesia seems too grand a term for what might be a more limited evocation of sensory experience brought on by the still image.

Though I engage with the study of images in this book, my goal is not simply to talk about images, but rather to discuss what they reveal about looking—not in the abstract, but with regard to looking as an embodied term. It seems, therefore, that my interest is in getting down to basics, to explore subjectivity by critically examining the look. Perhaps this is not entirely new terrain, as certainly more than one writer has engaged with looking and with subjectivity. But my focus is on a particular form of looking and of subjectivity made possible through new technology. Indeed, my aim is to meld these terms together by exploring what I call the "life technobiographic"—the life written through technology and approximated by a data trail (a rich record of subjective presence). Technobiography implies a particular form of authorship and calls for an understanding of how the self is situated within social relations that inherently involve engaging with information technologies. I am less concerned with story (the technobiographic artifact) than I am with narrative (the technobiographic process). At the same time, I am not invoking a cyborg arrangement (of classical fusion or postclassical virtualization), nor am I engaging with explicitly cybernetic systems of feedback and self-regulation. Instead, I am attempting to make calm technologies more frenetic. We need to bring technology to the foreground, if only momentarily, to understand the implications of integrating it into everyday life. By speaking of the life technobiographic, I am articulating the manner in which subjectivity is transformed by new technologies, for those very same technologies impact how we translate everyday events into a knowledge system. Subjectivities, knowledges, and technologies are always situated; they all can be appropriated, rehistoricized, and read anew.[2] By linking technology to biography, I am acknowledging the fundamental power of enunciation. To approximate the life technobiographic, we might begin by "googling" ourselves, gathering every self-inflected node. This will produce a rather abstract portrait, allowing us to see how diffuse we have become, determined as we are to infiltrate networked space. Here, diffusion is a sign of success. Then, we might move on to examine our smart devices and consider the personal preferences that we have used to imprint ourselves on them. After that, we might study our more nuanced interactions

with the interfaces we encounter every day—recording, communicating, pro-
ducing, consuming, and transacting. Still, taken together, these tactics, this
sum total of signs, will not speak the technobiographic subject. There is
more work to do, and these signs are merely symptomatic of a process (of
mutual inflection). The concept of authorship is culturally relative. Any sin-
gular biographic tactic must be read against the varied modes of referential
self-expression that are practiced in contemporary culture.[3] Furthermore, in
an age of pervasive computing, we must also read biography against the domi-
nant forms of technological projection and consider how technology too is
practiced.

As transiency suggests a trajectory, however overtly purposeful (set in mo-
tion by biological or mechanical physics), as a study of the phenomenon, my
emphasis is on becoming, as well as on one particular form of rupture along
what otherwise might be a rather formulaic path—trauma. Catastrophic
trauma shatters norms, overwhelms the psychic system, and often produces
fractured subjects. As a media scholar, I evaluate media and media events as
deconstructive and reconstructive agents, and agency is most clearly accessed
(at least from the critic's vantage point) during moments of failed (or flailing)
subjectivity.

The formation of subjectivity suggests a movement through a landscape
at once psychological and geographical, and these two aspects can be mapped
together along a chronological axis. My study of transient images is a form of
tourism, and I return to the term both to acknowledge my critical distance
and to restate my approach—reading images. While our attention is often
drawn only to our own movements as we journey about the world, images too
have a life of their own. Images are subjected to similar movements; they are
asked to take on different functions as they move across the terrain. I am in-
terested in the life of images, and intend to consider what their movement
tells us about our own desires. In this respect, I too am a tourist; I take on this
role as I survey the field and encounter a catalog of images, some of which I
am more attached to than others.

The image is a semiotic phenomenon, a poetic record that produces a
powerful form of knowledge. It is this very form of transcription (the image as
a knowledge system) that Jonathan Culler describes when he argues that the
tourist gaze transforms things into complex sign systems, aligned with the
real but also imbued with an ideality that informs reality, making it figural.
Culler privileges tourism as a field of analysis, for it can provide significant
insight into sign relations.[4] My analysis of these relations is not aligned with
Jean Baudrillard's influential account of the simulacrum, a rather melan-
cholic view that speaks about the emptying out of meaning and the collapse
of stable referents. Rather than attempting to secure the real for its own sake,

I instead follow Gilles Deleuze's account of the simulacrum in *Difference and Repetition*, where the play of the real is important only insofar as it informs any studied attention to identity. Deleuze studies the interplay of his titular terms, repetition and difference, divorced from any melancholic attribution. While Baudrillard follows one trail of simulations, Deleuze chooses another. Baudrillard considers systems of mediation that drift from a singular reference point; he mourns the translation of the world into a semiotic system. Deleuze pushes further, considering the impact of systems of mediation on identity; as such, his analysis is less historical (less attached to the forward movement of history) and perhaps more temperamental (subject to the complexities of subject formation). I am interested in what we do with images; to this end, I am not interested in developing an exhaustive catalog of images but, more pointedly, I offer up several revealing case studies of postproduction praxis.

There is a long tradition of scholarly inquiry into photographic practice; the medium and its object lessons have become a transdisciplinary enterprise, sometimes serving simply as a checkpoint on a larger critical agenda. Following such a discursive path, in *Understanding Media,* Marshall McLuhan tackles a rather broad range of media forms, and as he attempts to illustrate the self-consciousness of the photographic age (the development of what he terms "gestalt culture"), he turns to the following example: "To see a photograph of the local slum makes the condition unbearable. The mere matching of the picture with reality provides a new motive for change, as it does a new motive for travel."[5] This narrative suggests two possible responses—fight or flight. At the same time, it suggests that the optical realm is not a value-neutral terrain, but instead one with decided consequence. The photograph can give concrete form to social categories; however, the process by which it does so is complex and refractive. Oftentimes, action of any sort is superseded by debate over the status of the image. The search for authenticity can be paralyzing.

When nostalgia is invoked in popular discussions of new technology, it suggests a critical position that mourns the loss of authentic experience; and the most common inflection extends this concept of authenticity to speak about the loss of interiority (of personal authenticity) in contemporary life. The refrain here is that commodities yield inauthentic forms of knowledge. Yet to focus on commercialization is to overlook the specific machinations of the culture industry (and perhaps to assume that capitalist exploitation is intrinsic to the operation of contemporary media forms) and to consider in only the most abstract way the link between capitalism and consciousness.[6]

A Preliminary Study in Transience

To move closer to the subject of transience and to illustrate how the term operates in everyday life, I turn to three industrial signs. Each taps the term for its metaphoric power and, by extension, highlights its decided conceptual weight. Our lives are truly saturated by transiency.

In the first instance, consider Kodak. With the rise of the U.S. automobile culture in the early 1920s, Kodak found a way to associate the nascent pleasures of motoring with the joys of amateur photography, born at the end of the previous century.[7] To court the newly mobile consumer, Kodak sent its advertising representatives on a field trip; the company's scouts toured the country's most traveled highways seeking out picturesque views. After their survey was completed, six thousand small signs were erected alongside the nation's roadways to alert travelers that there was a photo opportunity ahead; each exclaimed, "Picture Ahead! Kodak as you go."[8] The slogan effectively turned the company brand into an activity. By the mid-1930s, the typical American vacation involved car travel, and automobile tourism and picture taking became fast friends. Motoring shaped the experience of the landscape for travelers in search of picturesque views; and like the snapshot, driving allowed them to collapse time and explore the world both as a flow and as a series of fragments.[9] But driving also changed what people saw and how they made pictures, for the view from the road and the challenges of its topography were unique; moreover, the journey itself was in part the product of strategic land reclamation. Traffic flowed along the highways and byways that were sanctioned by the Federal Highway Act of 1921 and funded by various federal and state initiatives that followed in subsequent decades. In a symbiotic arrangement, tourists used the highways that in turn made tourist areas accessible.

In the second instance, consider Polaroid, the company that launched the instant camera revolution. Edwin Land, the founder of Polaroid, demonstrated his first camera with self-developing film in 1947 and released the consumer-ready Polaroid Land Camera Model 95 at the end of the following year. In 1972, the company revamped its film process, developing the now-familiar integral print film system with the launch of its SX-70 camera. Popular reports suggest the newly developed process owed its existence to Lady Bird Johnson, wife of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Responding to the First Lady's concern over the growing volume of trash in the country's national parks, Polaroid invented a tidier picture process that eliminated the need for the expended pull tab of its original film. With nothing to pull, the self-contained cartridge also eliminated the need for any intervention from the photographer. The June 26, 1972 issue of *Time* broke the story with its cover

Kodak courts the bourgeoning tourism industry during the first part of the twentieth century by actively framing the nation's roadways and engaging with nascent automobile culture.
(Ellis Collection—Item #K0485. Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library. http://library.duke.edu/ digitalcollections/eaa/)

Kodak as you go

Autographic Kodaks, $5 up

Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, N.Y., *The Kodak City*

image of Land framed by the now-ubiquitous white rectangular mat, an iconic shape that would become part of Polaroid's legacy. The frame that bounds the emulsion sets each image off from the world around it in a uniform fashion; the effect is of a rather remarkable aesthetic coherence, at least at first glance, as every image has the same shape and each a ceremoniously bounded sense of interiority. The shallow picture box of a frame serves a practical purpose by forming part of the envelope that contains the film's caustic gel; in this respect, it binds. But the frame also serves the inverse function of dispersion by providing a space to write and a place to hold the print (and pass it among friends); in this regard, too, the frame undoes the object's sense of interiority by encouraging connection and dialogue. Despite the public's fascination with the Polaroid image, the movement to digital photography ultimately undid the company's leadership in the "now" of instant analog imaging, and in early February 2008, Polaroid announced it was discontinuing the manufacture of instant film and would be turning its attention to the digital market.[10]

In the third instance, consider Nikon. With the launch of its D40 camera, Nikon began an applied advertising campaign in May 2007. The print ad tells
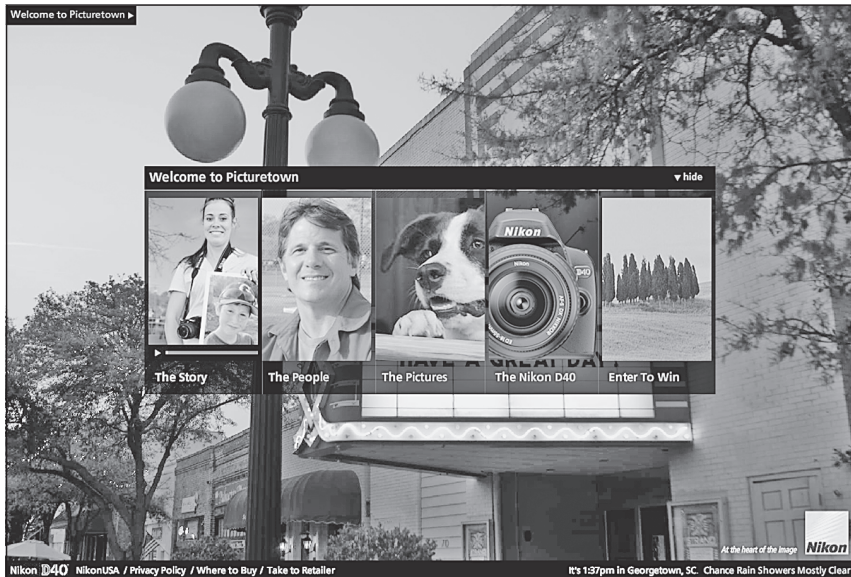
Nikon turns Georgetown, South Carolina into its first Picturetown.
(http://www.stunningnikon.com, accessed November 15, 2007; site now revised)

the tale: "People start taking amazing pictures when you hand them the Nikon D40. To prove it, we gave 200 of them to the people of Georgetown, SC. Check out the pictures and see how a whole town was transformed at stunningnikon.com/picturetown." In its approach, Nikon seemed to be engaged in a sincere attempt to move beyond empty rhetoric, providing evidence to back up its pitch. In celebrating the results of its intervention, Nikon dubbed the city "Picturetown," which shaped Georgetown into a fantastical realm. This corporate makeover dwells in the surface of things, shaping a decided place into a series of picture-perfect signifiers offset by white picket fences. Georgetown is introduced as an idyllic yet typical small town in Nikon's video portrait, which frames the Web site's story. The video paints a portrait of diversity that cuts across boundaries of race and class and offers footage that speaks of community and togetherness, producing the neighborhood barbershop, the town hall, the local playground, and the small town fire department, showcasing people gathered at work and at play. And the site speaks of engagement, of civic action, to the point that it erases the world of private consumption and privatized media. One participant remarks: "It's been fun as a parent. We shut off the TV, grab the camera, go outside, and enjoy nature."

The Nikon campaign began as a traditionally empty advertising trope, with the company speaking about the power of photography and, in fact, about empowering a community, but nestling that community neatly inside the

campaign's discursive boundaries. Beyond these boundaries, the discourse of empowerment seems to be superseded by one of facile consumption; it is perhaps stating the obvious to suggest that Nikon takes on this civic project in order to promote camera sales, and in particular to expand the digital single lens reflex (SLR) market (with digital SLR cameras seemingly too complex for everyday use, the goal is to make them less intimidating). Nikon melds the old and the new, mapping the latest advances in digital technology onto the most traditional notions of community, and suggests that even ordinary people can take the most extraordinary of pictures. And indeed, following through with this suggestion, in August 2007, Nikon reached through the gates of its planned community to launch "my Picturetown," a free public photo sharing and storage site.

Kodak, Polaroid, and Nikon exhibit a shared concern for distinct yet related aspects of transience. In the case of Kodak, the photographic mile marker is a form of punctuation in otherwise boundless terrain; it yields momentary rupture by producing temporary stasis. Not only do we stop the car to take the picture but also we introduce crop marks on an otherwise infinite horizon line and collapse the road trip into a quantifiable number of signs. Movement is reduced to a semiotic trace.

Polaroid's instant imaging technologies tell a different tale of transience. Here, fixity itself is experienced; it is transformed into a physical process, and our interest in seeing things through the viewfinder is matched by our fascination with seeing the very mechanics of the imaging process. We freeze time and watch it congeal.

Lastly, Nikon embraces transience by enabling the flow of images; indeed, the company suggests that electronic photo sharing is part of our civic duty. It enables and transforms; photographs move and communities materialize and evolve. Yet the goal of sharing, at least when channeled through Picturetown, seems to be rather absolutist; the photo-sharing network is built on a foundational myth (the Eden of Nikon's Georgetown) that is itself counterintuitive to community. To this end, the Web venture is built on a fallacy. The more public venture of Picturetown follows through with the ontological claims of Nikon's capital city—a planned community that serves as an imagined and ever-present limit, a testament to solidarity and diversity, and a yardstick for future community development. Georgetown has been repurposed as an ideal of communion.

Distillation is an ontological process discussed repeatedly in critical examinations of photographic practice. Sontag suggests that with the passage of time, a photograph loses its specificity to become a purely aesthetic object, while Barthes suggests that a photograph can do little more than confirm the existence of an object at some other time. But distillation is also an enterprise

and therefore speaks to desire, however real or constructed the need. Whether or not the photograph can actually stand in as a memory image, it can serve as a practical mnemonic aid. We want the image to be an active part of the narrative of memory, even if this desire is simply fleeting (an impulse that drives us to take the image, even if we are only to forget about it later). Though photography is part of commodity culture and may be complicit with traditional economies of circulation (always under the laws of capitalism), it is nonetheless a highly charged psychic endeavor and, as participants in this exchange, we seem to want to insist on the authentic nature of its rituals and the ceremonies it serves to condense, even as we acknowledge our rampant idealism.

Transience and the Traumatized Subject

Let me return to one of the quotations that opens this book, which was left as a dangling modifier of sorts. In his seminal investigation of photography and photographic knowledge, Roland Barthes examines his fascination with a few select images in an attempt to arrive at a universal truth of the general field of photographic objecthood. Yet his very aversion to a science of the image leads him to focus on the state of fascination itself. Reinscribing fascination as an "internal agitation," Barthes comes to understand his preference for particular photographs, identifying those images that give birth to certain interferences that mark the intersection of two forces—what Barthes refers to as the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* emerges from the reader's cultural consciousness and explains the spectator's attraction to the image, exposes its cultural relevance, and is inherently bound to the historical field. The *punctum,* conversely, emerges from the field of the image itself.[11] It is a detail grounded in the visual narrative, but it jogs the memory and carries in it the "power of expansion."[12] It penetrates the cultural layer while moving beyond the immediacy of the detail from which it arises and escaping the coded nature of things. While an image may distill experience and posit an incomplete and unsatisfying fixity, the *punctum* indeed reopens the image to presentness and addresses its incompleteness head-on; stasis yields to transience. Barthes found Polaroid images "fun, but disappointing," and one wonders whether his dissatisfaction is due to the failure of instant photography to maintain the distance between spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority (a distinction that figures significantly into Barthes's suggestion that photography invokes a unique consciousness).[13] The sense of an object's "having-been-there" is undone by an image that materializes in the same space and time as the object it represents.

Paralleling Barthes's study, which moves from the few to the many and from the personal to the social, this volume examines several distinct sites of

cultural production, each of which functions here toward the larger goal of considering the role of new media in articulating the public sphere within selected constructions of identity (national, communal, consumer, or otherwise). Each image referenced in this text gains its significance from an attachment to a specific cultural field and practice; at the same time, however, these images speak to the reader's memory as more-obscure curiosities.

Yet memory too occurs within a fixed cultural terrain, and it may be naive to assume that the *punctum* provides a point of exit or escape; it may be as overdetermined as its counterpart. While Susan Sontag reflects on the photograph's slow but steady temporal trajectory, which inevitably leads to a certain "unmooring," she throws out of focus any attention to the relative fixity of subjectivity, itself moored by certain cultural predispositions that reattach the free-floating signifier of the photograph in rather finite ways. And more significantly, Sontag overstates the narrative possibilities of the photographic record and retreats to tell the tale of the power of interpretation, which is itself about narrative but which inherently leaves the photograph behind to do something more or otherwise. Sontag suggests: "Those occasions when the taking of photographs is relatively undiscriminating, promiscuous, or self-effacing do not lessen the didacticism of the whole enterprise. This very passivity—and ubiquity—of the photographic record is photography's 'message,' its aggression."[14]

Photographs do not have a uniform grammar and, perhaps acknowledging this, Sontag locates their meaning in the conditions of either the reading or the recording and the "attitude" present in either moment. But she clings to the notion that this attitude will manifest itself inside the image's borders.

In this volume, I seek to elaborate on the nature of the photographic frame and its relation to the interpretive practices that follow. This is perhaps simply a difference in attention. At the end of their arguments, Sontag and Barthes seem to be intrigued, perhaps haunted, by visual images, and enamored by their affect. My goal is to put the frame back in focus—to examine the framing devices that provide the syntax for images—with attention to those narrative frameworks that are manufactured some time after the image. I use the term "manufactured" here to suggest that the frameworks at the center of my analysis are not simply reading strategies but a whole host of other predeterminations, "physical" constructs that play a syntactical role. It is the constructs that give the images their psychical weight.

What links all of the chapters in *Transient Images* is an interest in examining how media technologies activate particular notions of self and community, and an investment in articulating the means by which a given technological apparatus may be domesticated and ideologically charged. To do so, I undertake an analysis of transitory images that move between public and

private and are articulated as such; by studying this process, best understood as a movement, either physical or psychical, I aim to reveal the general processes of inscription by which images take on meaning or through which acquired meanings are discarded and meaning shifts. Meaning is a temporary vestment for these artifacts. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the psychological explanation of photographic engagement is insufficient; to account for photography as a practice and to understand its rhythms, we must also attend to sociological accounts of production, distribution, and reception.[15] As images move, they become systems of exchange. The transient image serves a greater purpose than (personal) meditation; it is an object of (social) integration. Photography, Bourdieu suggests, is a technology for reiteration; repurposing and restating their evidence, the hardest-working images create a social contract.[16]

I use the notion of transience to evoke movement of a specific sort, a series of stops and starts that elicits rupture. While images may be actively circulated, they are just as often forgotten or discarded, lost in an archive as static relics yet still imbued with the potential to be repurposed and sent back into circulation. I draw a loose distinction between continuous and discontinuous transience (with the latter being my primary concern). Continuous transience is characterized by gradual, linear change of either decay or accretion, whereas discontinuous transience is abrupt and irregular in its transformations, and is marked by fragmentation and impulsive synthesis (aligning it with the pathological discourse of trauma).[17] For this reason, I find theories of trauma useful in considering subjectivity in the digital age because what I am describing is a landscape where fracture is the norm. Trauma theory informs the first four chapters of this book, as these case studies are most explicitly about trauma—both traumatic events and traumatized subjects. And while I move from photography to videography and then to broadcast television and to mobile and Internet-based communications technologies, I skirt the matter of medium specificity. For in the field of trauma and, more pointedly, within the terrain of new media, the multiple and varied frames of moving images are collapsed into single signifiers that acquire a certain object status, in part because they are leveled by the process of digitization. This process makes them register with a certain equivalence. Videography becomes a videographic trace and television a televisual one. The embedded movement of the moving image assumes a form of stasis; what is privileged is the life of the object. Like photographs, videos are something to be exchanged; as we share them, they clearly acquire an object status, even in the most virtual of spaces (as torrents or self-contained and embedded files). However, in this volume, I am acutely attentive to the unique features of any embedded context, better understood as the frame of the apparatus (of distribution and reception, of device and interface), even as distinct media elements become things simply

to be shared and whose meaning lies outside of their objecthood, defined by the nature of sharing. The act of exchange is accompanied by the act of translation, and although the process is situated and individualized, it is also collectively mediated; translation is a cultural practice. And as cultural practices commonly rely on material goods and services, we must also consider the varied operational limits of the citizen-consumer in social, political, and economic discourse. The citizen-consumer performs through commodities, choosing and often exceeding them, yet this subject always does so in relation to both a local and a global field and as part of a complex interaction between the two processes of consumption and citizenship.

Desire in Narrative: The Subject of Trauma

Fear is a response that is intimately bound to transience, for beyond the transient image, transiency is a matter of the human condition. The loss of a unified textuality is echoed in the loss of a unified subject position, and this experience gains greater momentum in an age of hypermedia. Psychoanalytic case histories have demonstrated how difficult it is for some to relinquish control over time to the objective world and to admit that time proceeds with or without us; for these individuals, acknowledging the sovereignty of time is experienced as dangerous. Such an acknowledgment threatens the individual with the reexperiencing of early traumatic separations and the resurgence of desires that are inherently beyond the control of the ego. This difficulty, by its very nature, reminds us that a certain amount of narcissistic renunciation is needed to reconcile the concept of objective time. Within this framework, the transient image satisfies a psychic need; the tragedy of our transience disappears from the field of view, however momentarily, as we study the image. This act, as a particular form of dissociation, carries much the same weight as forms of the mechanism that are more broadly defined; dissociation in general allows disavowal and enables individuals to steadfastly hold on to a set of beliefs. The dissociative effect is defensive and may depersonalize ("this isn't about me, it's about someone else") or derealize ("this isn't real") an event or experience. Unfortunately, the effect leads to a certain compartmentalization, to a constructed subjective experience of personal reality and of the self—in clinical terms, understood as the possible development of a pronounced psychopathology. Yet, at the other end, through treatment and synthesis, dissociation may serve a healing function by permitting the development of restorative fantasies that help to redress and undo traumatic psychic injuries.

Trauma theory concerns itself with the unconscious meaning of actual traumatic events and the relative success of restorative fantasies. The goal of

psychoanalytic therapy is to unite the pieces of the shattered self, to reconstitute traditional central organizing fantasies of selfhood. While I draw from trauma theory in the first half of this book, as a media scholar, I am more concerned with analyzing a series of objects in their respective cultural fields than I am with the intricacies of treatment and recovery. Nonetheless, I am concerned with fantasy; but rather than turning to psychoanalysis, I draw from narrative theory to more rigorously examine the operation of desire and its relative freedom. Narratology aims to describe the specific system of rules that presides over both the production and processing of narratives and, by extension, to understand the rule-governed ways in which human beings refashion their universe. Narratology exemplifies the structuralist ambition to isolate the necessary and optional components of textual types and to characterize the modes of their articulation. Narratives are found and stories are told in a variety of media and can be transposed from medium to medium. Though narratology in its purest sense argues that the narrative component of a text can and should be studied without reference to the medium in which it occurs, as a media theorist, I am equally invested in reading the formal attributes of the medium in which the narrative activity unfolds because the medium may promote certain forms of narrative coding over others. While traditional narratology—research aligned more closely with the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure and the structuralist pursuits of Claude Levi-Strauss—is devoted to story rather than discourse structure, a number of contemporary theorists such as Mieke Bal have attempted to integrate the study of content and form, an approach that, in Bal's case, reflects her interest in interdisciplinary studies.

Contemporary studies of narrative also have moved beyond more purely structural conceits to consider the context in which narratives occur, taking into account the situation that partly determines their shape and contributes to their meaning, and addressing the pragmatic factors that partly govern their functioning. In this manner, narrative has come to be understood not simply as a product but also as a process. Taking this synthetic approach to narrative, this book locates myth contextually. Yet context should be understood not only as a social setting in which a reading is performed but also as an interface, a formal location from which a reading is extracted. And the interface itself may present the reader with multiple media, each with its own narrative logic.

Transient Images studies the assumptions that underpin the exhibition of personal images, occasional photographs, and amateur video in public domains such as the Internet and considers fundamental questions of community and nation, of public and private, in order to produce a social history that binds together production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. Though this volume

aims to understand the movement across these terms, the focus is on exhibi-
tion, the most visible of these practices. Close textual analysis provides an ap-
propriate entry point as I am attempting to align my own critical work with the
more commonplace and subtle reading practices that inscribe these bodies of
evidence. To this end, I am largely concerned with reading the technologies
that contain personal photographs and videos; in a Foucauldian framework,
these technologies can be understood as social practices that are inevitably
implicated in power dynamics, even as they are practices that people enact
upon themselves.

Images can be subjected to an array of institutional imperatives, but
people also subject images to their own ideologically inflected gazes. For this
reason, I am also concerned with reading the images themselves, to the ex-
tent that they inform my efforts to identify the structuring tendencies that
bear on exhibition and, inevitably, on reception. Scholars such as Patricia
Zimmermann and Marianne Hirsch have explored the manner in which
select photographic practices, particularly those framed by the family circle,
may be infused with the ideologies of domesticity. As I extend these arguments
into the terrain of new media, I am not attempting to develop an essential
opposition between technologies of representation. Rather, I am interested in
articulating the ongoing ability of the cultural field to regulate the use of suc-
cessive technologies, and I am accepting a certain historical dialectic be-
tween mediums for self-representation or home modes. The strength of Zim-
mermann's and Hirsch's scholarship is their understanding of the ideological
assumptions embedded in photographic practices and, in Hirsch's case, her
focused attention to strategies for resistance, for using photographs in ways
that interrupt the dominant ideological project of cultural myths. Both schol-
ars utilize more or less historically situated models, understanding ideology
as something that is not static. Yet Zimmermann and Hirsch nostalgically
evoke a period of coding activity—of particular photographic practices—that
although not precisely dated is still loosely contoured within certain imagined
limits of the very nature of the family photograph; they make reference to a
fairly fixed mythology of the family. As such, these models may be less useful
for examining specific shifts in the cultural field, where home no longer has
the same resonance, the familial has been complicated beyond its adjectival
inscription as nuclear, and the images that can be attached to domestic life
are more varied in their form.

The primary focus of this volume is not the ontologies of varied visual
practices and technologies; however, some review is undertaken of the criti-
cal, popular, and industrial discourses that draw distinctions between, for
example, photography and videography. This is done as part of an effort to
tackle the larger topic of the technological imaginary—cultural projections

that shape and sometimes delimit what a technology can and should do in any given historical moment. My attention is drawn to terms and frameworks that are more all-encompassing and central to discourses of the technological imaginary, such as community, identity, family, and nation, as well as to categories more obviously grounded in affect, such as desire, trauma, and fear. Yet cultural projections are not simply affective categories; they are part of an industrial complex, a new plug-in for the all-too-familiar machinations of the culture industry. I use the term "plug-in" purposefully because the landscape charted in this text is one in constant flux and under the sway of a movement toward the computerization (or simply digitization) of culture. This is not a paranoid musing about the digital divide, and I do not operate under the assumption that we can draw a steadfast distinction between visual culture and digital culture as unique enterprises. Indeed, it is the continuities that are explored throughout this text, as new technologies and industries are put in the service of familiar and long-standing ideological imperatives—the newness of new technologies does not necessarily lead to a ground shift in ideology. This is not to suggest that radical thinking is impossible, but only that it is more difficult to isolate because the industrial terrain itself is evolving at light speed, suturing over any apparent ruptures in the surface of things.

Transient Images is therefore a series of readings that highlight those claims that seem to persist despite more obvious changes in the order of things. I begin in Chapter 1 by considering fear as a construct that shapes new technologies. The specific objects are images of missing children, but the larger project is to understand the mechanics of fear production and to connect practices to industrial and social discourses, for exchange is not simply a social phenomenon; it is also a matter of commerce. Looking backward on photographic practice, Jonathan Crary notes: "Photography and money become homologous forms of social power in the nineteenth century. They are equally totalizing systems for binding and unifying all subjects within a single global network of valuation and desire."[18] The abstract relations set in motion within this economy of exchange are still at play; the social world is persistently reconstituted through an evolving series of signs. Visuality, once the domain of science in the age of the camera obscura, has become increasingly mobile and exchangeable, taking truth along with it.[19] To this end, new technology, far from being a matter of invention, can only be understood as an ideological enterprise.

Technology has been a subject of great debate concerning our hopes, fears, and anxieties, and the most common concerns of the digital age center on technologically enabled forms of theft: identity theft, fraud, information loss, hacking, and viruses. These are all virtual losses, aspects of the fiduciary subject. But what of the more troubling thought of physical abduction? Here,

the threat of violence off-line is inevitably connected to the virtual world—the ever-present paranoia about a crime that may happen (abduction as a virtual mental construct) and the role that new technologies might play in linking predators with victims (the virtual presence of imagined predatory communities that materialize in online communiqués).

Yet, at the same time that technologies are read as unlawful tools for criminal mischief, they are also positioned as a great new hope, as tools to dole out justice. One need look no further than NBC's *Dateline: To Catch a Predator,* a program that alerts viewers to the presence of online sexual predators and at the same time uses the tools and tactics of electronic communication and surveillance to battle criminal conduct. The dystopic and utopic discourses about new technology converge in the *Dateline* narrative, as we are at once alerted to the dangers of cyberspace yet told a tale in which technology is deployed as a productive social instrument. Technologies may inspire anxiety and fear, but they also carry the promise of salvation.

Chapters 2 and 3 develop one of the underlying assumptions that grounds the first chapter: the persistence of narrative. The mechanics of fear production provide a useful engine for the generation of larger narrative impulses, and in Chapters 2 and 3, I examine two distinct tales of terror(ism) that have been used to reenergize the myth of nationhood. Chapter 2 treats the issue at a more local level, tracing the echoes that emanated from the September 11, 2001, crash sites. While the events of that day are of international importance, my analysis is limited to a particular media flow—the movement of images from the streets of Manhattan to the virtual field of CNN's online missing persons database. Chapter 3 shifts to a more consciously global scale, linking a series of events and flows from around the world—moving from the gallows of Kazimain, Iraq, to the transit tunnels of the London underground. The focus here is on more egregious forms of mobility and the courting of the mobile consumer. Both Chapters 2 and 3 examine the use-value of cultural memories and the manner that trauma facilitates the subjugation of the subject to history; the intent is to consider the stakes involved in this scripting of memory. Public trauma facilitates the movement of personal documents into public space, relating the subjects of representation to each other and to the viewer in a manner that ultimately exceeds the subjectivity of either subject or viewer, and pushing us rather blindly toward communion.

Perhaps I am simply following through with a project undertaken by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things,* his most fervent critique of the constitutive limits of discourse (which, he contends, is guided by historically situated epistemes). Foucault's study leads him to ask why we persistently turn to certain modalities of order to make sense of everyday life. This volume isolates several contemporary modalities and draws attention to the discourse in

order to reveal the rather selective deployment of new technologies and to consider the relative presence and value of alternatives. It does so by excavating the most sacred ground of resemblances, that of self-representation, for it is during those autobiographical moments (speaking out loud about or simply considering ourselves) that we most forcefully insert ourselves into the technological imaginary.

My approach to the matter of self-representation is influenced in part by a question posed by Philippe Lejeune in his seminal work, *On Autobiography:* "What special interest can there be in looking at a self-portrait?"[20] Expanding on this question, Lejeune reveals his own fascination with the object at the center of his query:

> For several years now, in the course of my visits, I have been seeking out self-portraits. Like everyone else, I have been struck by some of the series—that of Rembrandt, for example, scattered to the four corners of the world. At the same instant, at various ages, Rembrandt is looking at himself in Amsterdam, New York, Paris, Florence, in the eyes of hundreds of tourists. From one museum to another, they recognize him; he's an old friend. It's reassuring. We need to be reassured. We can never be too sure of what we're looking at in a museum.[21]

Though Lejeune privileges the value of the autobiographical pact in literature, and even doubts its reproducibility in media such as photography and film, he introduces a number of secondary concerns that are useful to this study. While my project moves beyond the immediate field of autobiography, the ancillary objects surveyed herein are part of the same exercise— elements that are part of a larger picture that illustrates society looking at itself. The value of assurance cannot be overstated, even when we find ourselves questioning the value of seeing images of other people. My students constantly ask me about motives. Why would someone post private images in a public forum? Why develop a publicly accessible blog (Web log) about one's personal obsessions? Is there a use-value that might explain our culture's willful embrace of (and rampant participation in) such private-to-public migrations? Under what conditions are such exchanges transformed into commodities?

To answer these questions, I turn my attention in Chapter 4 to *Intervention,* a reality series now in its ninth season on A&E. *Intervention* profiles people whose dependence on drugs and alcohol or other substances and behaviors has led them into personal crisis. The program makes rather liberal use of the family photo album, playing through a nostalgic photomontage (in

search of an origin story that grounds the addictive persona) before navigating toward a final meeting with friends and family. Each episode continues past the confrontational climax, following these addicts as they move into and through recovery. Some succeed and others do not. *Intervention* raises the rather complex issue of motivations in a genre that is an already charged arena where private and public collide. The urgency of the tale of recovery rushes us by any deliberate attention to truth and reality, to the commercialization of the real, and to the contouring of lived experience to television's narrative economy. The stakes seem to be too high to allow such critical scrutiny or to argue about the integrity of what might be a heavy-handed dramatic construction. Yet *Intervention* calls our attention to the manner in which television (more properly understood as television viewing and the situation of television in everyday life) is often discussed as a social abstraction, as the program refuses to be understood as such. The pressing testimonial narrative cannot entirely shirk the uncertainty of its address. Who is benefiting here? Who is the principal subject of the intervention? In speaking to and about the addict, the addict's family, and the viewing public, the program positions the tale as both particular (an individual's story) and universal (positioning the addict as a statistic and a sum total of clinical facts), and it opens up difficult questions about observing and affect. There is an inherently troubling relay here that becomes all the more unsettling when one considers how trauma and addiction are intimately connected. It is fairly common for trauma to lead to addiction and for addiction to lead back to trauma. My analysis looks to answer what I consider a fairly urgent question. Does the program successfully open up the family circle and break the cycle of addiction? It seems that this particular narrative impulse, however benevolent or benignly governmental, might actually open up rather caustic psychic wounds.

On Difference: Making the Personal Public

With these stakes in mind, I seek to bridge the familial and social readings of photography and videography to follow personal images as they migrate outside their usual places of residence in photo albums and family rooms, on office desks and refrigerator doors. As images produced in the home circulate beyond its borders, they can expose cracks in the foundation of domestic architecture, but they can also signify something beyond the domestic; it is too prescriptive to always bind family photos and home videos back to their original contexts of production and consumption. I highlight this migratory process precisely because it leads to questions about the power dynamics evoked by relative positions of authority and ownership of the image, of imaging technologies, and of image interfaces. How is production socialized? How

self-evident are the disciplinary methods at play? To what degrees are the processes of socialization unilaterally controlled? And whose desire is acted out in the process? I might pose these questions about power as a series of simple binaries that contrast the personal with the social, the private with the public, and the amateur with the professional. But these terms themselves are not useful for reading contradictory relations as processes; they are too static and seem to evoke an *a priori* system of correlatives that makes no allowances for dialecticism and potential transgression or for thinking historically. The general pathway I am tracing is the movement of images from personal spaces to public ones, though these public spaces are oftentimes privately controlled. Perhaps these polarities are better understood as relative positions inside and outside a market economy that urges us to adopt rather homogeneous codes of production. What are the varied commercial practices that frame personal images, and what tensions develop when private photos enter the flow of commerce, subjected to its hegemonic push? To what degree do the commercial imperatives of privately owned, publicly viewable exhibition venues constrain personal images, making them less-open texts by attaching them to new narrative threads? The moments of image production and site/venue construction are remote from each other, both temporally and physically. What is lost and what is gained when the personal image reemerges in its new context? And why do the manufacturers of secondary image spaces use the rhetoric of community and personal agency to describe their sites and services? Is free play merely a trope?

Different uses of photography and videography suggest different degrees of ideological containment or the "successful" channeling of desire within a governing framework of value following prescribed formal criteria. *Transient Images* takes the form of a number of case studies, "some bodies" that represent what I perceive to be the most notable degree points of such containment. To this end, I am concerned about the possibility of acting out, a possibility that seems increasingly limited as media monopolies take on new heights of vertical integration and as our reading strategies become more institutionally driven (even if it is impossible to institutionalize all avenues of social action within any given system).[22]

Though the devices for acting out—the software and hardware—are themselves the end products of corporate research and development, we should not accept industry rhetoric as evidence of an inescapable and decidedly hegemonic process. Critical work can be accomplished by exploiting the gap between the personal and the public; certain desires can be liberated in this border crossing. There are striking parallels between the battle invoked in the identity politics of the text (as producers choose among formal strategies) and the battle invoked in the general field of identity politics.

What categories of images are privileged enough to move? How exactly do they move, why do they move, and what happens as they move? My goal is to arrive at an understanding of certain migratory patterns; perhaps these form yet another discursive structure with its own distinctive grammar. This would suggest that migration has an evidentiary purpose and is not simply a product of chaos.

Reclaiming the Subject: Narratives of Excess and Recovery

Chapters 1 through 4 of this book are connected by their focus on trauma and, taken together, they recount a series of failures (institutional or otherwise); these four case studies offer up evidence of liberation lost, of difference made marginal, and of the rather forceful return of a prosocial agenda that inscribes the personal images privileged enough to move. Yet Chapter 4 is also a bridge to Chapters 5 and 6, as it speaks (however provisionally) of the potential for resistance and free articulation, and illustrates the ways in which producers and subjects might move beyond the structures that attempt to channel desire into ideologically acceptable forms. Following the lead of Chapter 4, the final two chapters are united by their shared attention to an opposing movement; they focus on recovery and suggest the possibility of expressly positive outcomes, of working through, and perhaps of transgression. In the final chapters of *Transient Images,* I expose a series of operational limits and move forward through these limits to suggest a model for action.

To this end, Chapter 5 speaks about the business of desire and its relative freedom as a commodity. It turns to the contemporary architectures that frame personal advertisement photography on the Internet and the discourses—both utopic and dystopic—that attempt to read personal advertisement sites as contemporary manifestations of community. I consider the assumptions that underpin this particular use of photography, its alignment with other textual markers, and the position of such sites with regard to more fundamental questions and indices of community and its shifting parameters. In order to do so, I survey a number of Internet "dating" sites and social networking sites, each of which conforms personal information and personal photography to a predesigned template and maps these individuated markers onto a conventional layout that is policed by particular rules, regulations, and codes of conduct that make the personal safely public (and consumable).

Chapter 5 examines the multiple architectures of personal advertisement sites, as well as the particular strategies of containment deployed in the

manufacture and distribution of images. It also considers the relative free play of desire in Internet architecture, as individuals map their identities onto generic templates designed by vertically integrated Internet-based communication, information, and entertainment companies. And it speaks about the possibility of excess, of identity out of bounds; returning to a concept first developed in Chapter 1, it begins to articulate the fears that drive prescription in an attempt to understand and overturn them.

Chapter 6, revisiting the theoretical arguments sketched out earlier in the volume and following the autobiographical lineage charted throughout, steps back from the individual in the interest of seeing the general contours of the archive, sending the images found throughout this text back into the network. It tracks the movement of autobiography, from the home to the social network and back again, and considers the discourses that shape the technology, practice, and mechanisms of reception—the push and pull of the private and the public. Chapter 6 is about a change in focus; here, I privilege interaction over imaging, even though I understand that these processes are interdependent. What is the structural logic of the social network? Where do its principles come from? And what happens when the fundamental premises of sociality are violated or narrative progress is hindered? The deepest computational layer of the network is the code that structures the database. Yet it is not simple math. Rather, code and data interact as a discursive construct (and each is a discursive construction in its own right) shaped by history, culture, industry, and technology that may encourage certain forms of engagement.

Though the chapters in this book are presented as a series of case studies, taken together they draw out the tensions that accompany both the casual reading of images and more theoretically inflected exercises in close textual analysis. Perhaps the problem is one more generally associated with postmodernity. Images are ubiquitous in our culture, as is the practice of photo taking within the family circle. This very ubiquity makes photographic artifacts both transparent and complex, signifying nothing and everything, easily overlooked or subjected to intense scrutiny. Photographs can give us insight into the constructed nature of subjectivity, if we pause long enough to reflect on them. And this reflection can ultimately give way to a consideration of the moral dimensions of these objects that are so central in shaping personal and cultural memory. How do we learn to take pictures? And how do we learn to read them? Do the same codes govern both enterprises? Are these codes for a medium? Or are they codes for living? *Transient Images* gathers together several sets of images for the purpose of exploring these questions. The book is a theoretical and practical tool for understanding how to read such familiar encounters. My goal is not to replace one master discourse with another, but

to reveal the way that discursive practices shape our daily lives and perhaps help the reader interrupt the hegemonic codes that form even the most familiar and private types of personal expression. The ultimate goal is to open up a space for revision—to look but not to subject.

The difficulty of engaging with the rather unremarkable spaces that permeate daily life is the all-too-common problem encountered in media and cultural studies of speaking about things that we are all engaged with, objects and interfaces we have experienced and know so well that we no longer see them but rather look right through them. The difficulty is not in complicating objects that seem in no need of complication, but rather in defamiliarizing objects to understand them as sign systems. The goal here may be aligned with that far grander project undertaken by Foucault, who, by examining classical thought, sought to restore "to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws."[23] My history as an educator, video artist, and scholar shapes this study into one that hopefully helps readers understand the tools we take for granted and that seem to be simply naturalized extensions of our self-proclaimed subjectivities. The aim is to dislocate the self to shed some light on what Foucault refers to as the "dark spaces," to temporarily remove the shadows we cast over the technologies we use and the silent artifacts we encounter in our everyday lives.