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Existentialmd.com: Building Towards an Embodied Internet Aesthetic

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EXISTENTIALMD.COM: BUILDING TOWARDS AN

EMBODIED INTERNET AESTHETIC

by

NATASHA OCHSHORN

A master's capstone submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

ExistentialMD.com: Building Towards an Embodied Internet Aesthetic

by

Natasha Ochshorn

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

ExistentialMD.com: Building Towards an Embodied Internet Aesthetic

by

Natasha Ochshorn

Advisor: Professor Matthew K. Gold

ExistentialMD.com is a website that aims to treat the body as an emotional and social subject in an online space that is purposefully bodied and fleshy. The website contrasts original creative nonfiction essays with a formal structure that alludes to the medical website *WebMD*. Mimicking *WebMD's* symptom checker, which asks users to locate their discomfort with increasing specificity before suggesting conditions they might be suffering from, *ExistentialMD* uses a similar structure to yield results that are more exploratory than diagnostic, and which envision the body as a site of experience and emotionality. Form and content combine to create an affectual experience that interrogates the modalities of embodied internet aesthetics by imagining a different way to build and write online spaces: handcrafted and unauthoritative. The project aims to reveal the internet as a constructed space that is capitalistic, un-empathetic, and inherently embodied (often to the exclusion and persecution of othered bodies). Through the process of writing and coding the website, I was able to consider what distressed me about online spaces, how they achieved that affect, and how language and aesthetics could create an alternative space that felt purposefully different not only to me but to anyone visiting.

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EXISTENTIALMD.COM: BUILDING TOWARDS AN EMBODIED INTERNET AESTHETIC

The Internet has given us unprecedented access to any number of facts, but this does not ensure that it will easily provide the answers to our questions. The online spaces we turn to for answers—wikis, forums, and medical websites—act as both balm and irritant, offering unsatisfying tool, albeit one that I often turn to when I'm feeling isolated and other resources aren't immediately available to me. I click and—not quite finding what I'm looking for—I click on something else, hoping that there will be some change in the copy, some subtlety that will ease my anxieties. The informational websites that exist to answer questions about the body—whether they are presumably vetted and edited like a medical website, moderated like wikis, or open forums - are spaces that privilege what is perceived as rational, unemotional, and factual: masculine modes of thought.

My capstone project, *ExistentialMD.com*, is a website that aims to treat the body as an emotional and social subject in an online space that is purposefully embodied and fleshy. The website contrasts original creative nonfiction essays with a formal structure that alludes to the medical website *WebMD*. Mimicking *WebMD's* symptom checker, which asks users to locate their discomfort with increasing specificity before suggesting conditions they might be suffering from, *ExistentialMD* uses a similar structure to yield results that are more exploratory than diagnostic, and which envision the body as a site of experience and emotionality. Form and content combine to create an affectual experience that interrogates the modalities of embodied internet aesthetics by imagining a different way to build and write online spaces: handcrafted and unauthoritative. The project aims to reveal the internet as a constructed space that is capitalistic, un-empathetic, and inherently embodied (often to the exclusion and persecution of othered bodies). Through the

process of writing and coding the website, I was able to consider what distressed me about online spaces, how they achieved that affect, and how language and aesthetics could create an alternative space that felt purposefully different not only to me but to anyone visiting.

The World Wide Web is encoded with masculine modalities that are implicit and policed. While the web has been theorized as a utopia where, as in the cyberpunk tradition, the disembodied brain is judged only on the merit of its intellect and creativity, it has become evident that "outed" othered (bodies of color, female, disabled, or queer) bodies are subject to the same kind of marginalizing they might encounter in meatspace, perhaps even more so once the emboldening effect of anonymity is brought into account. In "Networked Bodies and Extended Corporealities: Theorizing the Relationship between the Body, Embodiment, and Contemporary New Media," new media studies scholar Michelle White discusses the violent reactions she received after criticizing the gender representation in an online poll. "These forum members, and many other individuals who use these technologies, make it clear that they will discipline people with oppositional opinions and deliver sexual onslaughts until resistors become too uncomfortable or tired to respond. These instances only start to indicate how internet and new media practices constitute and regulate the body and embodiment" (623).

Bodies are being used both as markers of who is allowed to speak, and as the point of attack upon those who are not. The "bodiless" internet is not without gender or race or any other embodied social positions, but is instead part of the system that seeks to hegemonize modalities to masculine ideals. The enforcement of the bodiless internet extends from the building of content that aligns with these beliefs, to the monitoring of websites that were built, in part, to protest or combat the proliferation of these modalities. In 2014, the feminist website *Jezebel* was deluged by GIFs of violent rapes in its comment sections. The images could only be taken down by a staffer (from a predominantly female staff) individually poring through the comment sections and taking down the

pornographic posts image by image, subjecting them to spending their working hours exposing themselves to hours of violent sexist imagery—an activity referred to as "playing whack-a-mole with a sociopathic Hydra" in a press release by the *Jezebel* staff (Staff). *Jezebel* is run on Kinja, a news aggregator and blogging platform operated by the Gizmodo Media Group, which also owns *Jezebel*. This platform is intended not only to host the feminist site, but a whole network of niche news sites including blogs for fans of cars, sports, and nerdculture. The assumption that a feminist website would have the same needs or concerns as one servicing car aficionados is an erasure of the way women are treated on the internet that enforces sexist modalities.

In her article, "#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures," new media and digital cultures scholar Adrienne Massanari explicates her conception of a toxic technoculture that "often relies an Othering of those perceived as outside the culture, reliance on outmoded and poorly understood applications of evolutionary psychology, and a valorization of masculinity masquerading as a peculiar form of 'rationality'" (333). Massanari theorizes that this culture is implicitly supported by the website's design, including the way it relies on moderators to dictate content without having extensive overlying content policy, or giving either users or moderators much recourse in taking action against toxic behavior. "There seems to be a deep reluctance on the part of the administrators to alienate any part of their audience, no matter how problematic, as it will mean less traffic and ultimately less revenue for Reddit" (340). This is not, however, quite accurate, and I believe Messanari would agree that Reddit is comfortable with alienating potential users who don't align with the toxic technoculture that has festered there. She writes, "but remaining 'neutral' in these cases valorizes the rights of the majority while often trampling over the rights of others" (339). As with Jezebel, the idea that a neutral design can take care of the needs of all users is a complacent falsehood that fosters invisible privilege to ensure the dominance of white hetero-patriarchy. The persistent

violence of this monitoring suggests that the lauded disembodied internet isn't an equalizing blank slate, but a brutally enforced erasure of voices that, because of their othered position in society, challenge the idea that the mind operates outside of the lived experiences of the body it inhabits.

Masculine modes of thought prioritize a logic untethered from emotion and rooted in "facts" over experiential knowledge and an understanding of facts and data as part of a discourse shaped by human agendas and attentions. They leave little room for thinking about the body as an emotional subject. They make it difficult to look at a body holistically, reducing it to the fragmented parts and identities of a male gaze: a leg, a gender, or a roll of flesh. They ignore the physical ways we process emotions. Even vague concessions to the ways our bodies carry stress are offered with "fixes" that make stress seem like a byproduct of physical negligence, and don't seem to consider that the opposite might be true. They ignore the possibility that the body is as much spirit as the brain is meat and electricity.

These modes are so embedded in the web that the idea of a feminine, or even truly genderless, webspace can be difficult to imagine. The cold isolation of late night searching, and the indefatigable scorn of a comments section can make me want to give up on the web in the same way that film theorist Laura Mulvey suggested that women "cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret" (53). She understood the powerlessness, the loneliness, of having something as recognizable as your body used for some alien purpose that is far from what you were hoping to see reflected. She wrote on how female characters are introduced in film: "One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen" (48). Escaping these processes – the male gaze of narrative cinema, the bodiless web – can feel impossible when you realize just how encoded these beliefs are into the narrative and informational structures we encounter for our news and our entertainment.

Mulvey teases out the enormity of the system. "Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. …It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged" (52).

In a 2016 masterclass lecture for the Toronto International Film Festival, filmmaker Jill Soloway outlined their three tenets for a female gaze in cinema, which they envision as being directionally oppositional to the participants Mulvey cites as making up the male gaze (the filmmaker, the characters in the film, and the viewer of the film). The first, Soloway labels "feeling seeing," which is a conscious use of the body and camera to express how the character feels rather than looks. The second is that that the camera must show "how it feels to be the object of the Gaze." And finally, that the gaze must be returned back to the gazer as part of a "sociopolitical justice-demanding way of art making" (Soloway). What all of these steps delineate is an acknowledgment of the encoded status quo, and a conscious acting against it in a way that is emotive and abstracted as much as it is political and didactic. Quoting artist Hannah Wilke, Soloway says, "the content is always related to my own body and feelings, reflecting pleasure as well as pain, the ambiguity and complexity of emotions." The same practice must be applied to an embodied internet.

In her article, "'Reading' Through the Skin: Lady Gaga's Online Representation and Affective Meaning-Making", media scholar Anne Graefer explicates why doing an affective reading of the internet can illustrate how the body is intrinsically involved in its use. "The 'affective turn' is often accredited with providing scholars in media and cultural studies with a new critical vocabulary that allows us to rethink representations not only as texts that can be distantly decoded but also as a matter of emotional attachments, intensities of feelings, synesthetic sensations, and embodied experiences" (Graefer 522). This includes looking at the structure, the

design and the language of the website not only in terms of what we have been taught these choices mean, but the messier, more emotive associations we have with the internet. For example, the number one design tip on the blog of website design platform Wix is to "keep your homepage minimalistic and free of clutter." Undoubtedly good practice under most circumstances, especially since most websites are trying to sell or market something that must be highlighted, but clutter can have emotional value beyond good practice. In a website for online games, clutter on a homepage can emulate the feel of a busy, flashing arcade. It can make a website feel warm and inviting, like a home that's too full to have a formal place for all the objects in it. "When we take the body seriously as central to our meaning-making, then it also matters how online representations *feel"* (Graefer 527).

Whether we are talking about making movies, or websites, or novels or songs or even conversation, the modes of communication have all been imbued with the masculine modalities that I am struggling against. It is not enough to have websites that depict othered bodies, or even privilege othered voices (though still important as these voices are more likely to recognize a dissonance between their needs and what is being offered to them). We must conceive the structure of websites differently, examining what a site might do and what purpose it might serve. We need to consciously push back on the idea that the internet should be rational, impersonal, and always factual. An embodied internet. I want to explore what that would look like, what it could feel like, what stories it could tell.

Embodied affectual spaces on the internet do exist. Often, I believe, they are found in in female-targeted non-corporate websites that are often overlooked as legitimate places to seek out answers. Online tarot card readings often offer numerous customization options that allow the user to pick their deck, the lighting on the website, the amount of times the virtual deck is shuffled, and of course the cards themselves. The cards offer answers, but they often encourage users to look for

their own interpretations as well; to feel their way through the reading as much as read their way through it. The website "Lotus Tarot" offers four different designs for the backs of the cards, four different decks, and a "zen" setting which simplifies the page content. The reading is partially animated to mimic the feeling of a live reading. A box on the homepage offers "Tips to Improve Your Readings," many of which aim to connect the web experience to the body of the user, inviting them to "take a deep breath," and apply "focused attention" to the cards. The website asks users to experience the website through the body that they have, with whatever social or individual positioning that might bring, but through the customizable ritual and language of the tarot cards, which are neutrally distributed, open to interpretation, and non-judgmental (Lotus Tarot).

The website "Gurl," no longer extant and now redirecting to the website for *Seventeen* Magazine, offered medical and body advice that addressed emotional questions about physical conditions alongside medical ones[1]. In an article on yeast infections, *Gurl* gave the same factual information as other, more masculine and adult websites did, but it also had sections on telling your sexual partner, or whether having one makes you a "slut." The article started with a cheery paragraph sympathizing with the inflicted individual, but reminding them that the infection is a common and curable condition (Sager). *Gurl* was created by Rebecca Odes and Esther Drill to be a "open, information-positive, nonjudgmental, and non-prescriptive" space for girls and young women to find information, ask questions, and play games (Symonds). The aesthetics of the website promoted this ethic by using illustrations instead of photographs for imaging a diverse range of female bodies. "By having it be very cartoony, and by not giving them anything real to position themselves against, we were trying to take a lot of the primary relationship that they had to mainstream media away, and let girls imagine themselves in it." (Symonds). The zine aesthetics

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[1] Archived webpages from *Gurl* can be found on the Internet Archive's *Wayback Machine*. Here is an example of the homepage in 2005: https://web.archive.org/web/20050624004342/http://www.gurl.com/

had the additional effect of making the website feel homemade and funky, diametrically opposed to the glossy produced images that were, and still are, produced by the majority of media targeted at girls. The user could not only imagine themselves as a figure in the website, but as the figures creating the website.

ExistentialMD was born out an experience where I felt great alienation from my body, and when my use of the internet made that body feel isolated in its discomfort. In the autumn of 2017, bites began to appear across my body without any identifiable source. I'd had bed bugs a few years earlier, and this was a similar experience, although less localized. My whole body was wretched. The worst part of having bedbugs, as anyone who has ever had bedbugs will tell you, is not the treatment—although that is an exhausting, expensive, lengthy procedure of repeated washing, packing, and poisoning. The persistent sleeplessness is what gets to you: brought on by diagnosis anxiety, brought on by social disgust, by itchiness, by the breached safety of your bed. My previous brush with the pests had left me waking up in the middle of the night for months afterwards, brushing at nonexistent crawlers on my wrists and ankles. The disrupted sleep returned this time, and along with it a bad new pattern of habitually researching bite sources on Google, scrolling through image galleries of afflicted skin in an attempt to definitively prove or reject the presence of bugs in my bed.

As it turned out, the bugs were not in my sheets, but in my skin. Sarcotopic mange, more commonly known as scabies. It was awful to think about, but the treatment required only one load of laundry and an awkward night hiding from my new roommate while I rubbed pesticides over my skin. My endless internet research was useless in the end. The initial diagnosis of my condition came from a doctor friend in the back yard of a bar, and was confirmed the next day by a doctor at urgent care. This is not to say that medical professionals should be the only medium through which we communicate with our bodies. Too often their training is overly dependent on a bodily

discourse that has its own limitations, and in fact, the medical indexing websites on the internet can be a valuable tool for people—especially with marginalized bodies—whose pain and discomfort is not being listened to by medical professionals. But I had realized the futility of my scrolling long before I stopped. All rashes in pixilated form look like your rash. What was I looking for? The words to tell my roommate that our home might be infected. Someone to let me out of this box of Schrödinger's bedbugs. Someone to tell me that I had done due diligence; that I could go to sleep now. What I do believe is that often the time we spend online searching our bodies is based in an isolation that extends beyond the medical. Bodies are objects that are often read too clinically, and ache for an empathetic reader. There are few betrayals as dismaying as our bodies as they ail, transform, or otherwise act against our wishes. When our bodies are misread by others, intentionally or not, it is a second betrayal.

  The organizing conceit of *ExistentialMD,* which formally references *WebMD's* symptom checker but does not parody it, was the concept that sprung from my battles with real and imagined bug bites. I was inspired, in the original conception of this project, by Amy Krouse Rosenthal's memoir *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*, in which she uses the formal structure of an encyclopedia to convey an authority and importance to a life story that doesn't follow the struggle/redemption arc that is followed by most autobiography. "I am not writing a memoir (I have no story); I am not writing an autobiography (for who really cares). I am writing a personal encyclopedia, a thorough documentation of an ordinary life in the end of the twentieth century/beginning of the twenty-first" (27). The content of the book is not much different than the kinds of stories that make up traditional memoir, except that it is maybe more quotidian. Formally representing the text as something outside of memoir, however, allows Rosenthal to release her writing from the generic expectations of autobiography, and to work in a format that doesn't depend on narrative to create meaning.

In fact, the version of *WebMD*'s symptom checker that is referenced by *ExistentialMD* no longer exists. The current version asks for age and gender (for which it offers only binary options), and then asks for the user to identify their symptoms. The former version, which was still active in 2017 as of the conception of this capstone, began with an image representing the human body, which the user could click on to increasingly specify the location of their discomfort until eventually they were given a list of potential conditions.[2] A press release issued by *WebMD* claims that the change was made to make it easier for users to identify generalized symptoms such as fever. The update may successfully address that logistical issue, but it also contributes to an alienation from the body by asking users to immediately translate their ailments into language that may not be intuitively phrased to reflect their experience. A user suffering from head tremors caused by cervical dystonia, for instance, would have to search for "head tilt" (a symptom not experienced by all people with dystonia), because "head tremor" is not an option and "upper body tremor" yields no results on its own. This example doesn't speak well for the efficacy of the tool, but the removal of the imaged body as a whole also illustrates how the internet often isolates and abstracts bodies to their parts which don't adhere to hegemonic norms.

ExistentialMD does not include images, which interfere with the effectual connection a user has to a text by interrupting their notion of bodies/general and replacing it with a body/specific, but it does mimic the structure of the former symptom checker by presenting the user with a more holistic view of the body and, through questions and links, moving them inward, to smaller and more granular topics. "Why are you here?" is the first question, and there are three possible choices: "My Body," "My Heart," or "My Head." Clicking on any one of these will result in a request for further specification: "The Pain is in my Arms," for example. Some of these will lead to

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[2] I attempted to access the 2017 version of the symptom checker by using The Internet Archive's "Wayback Machine," but while the page will load, the symptom checker will not.

even more narrowly defined categories. Eventually the user is presented with bodily questions, conditions, or preoccupations that they might be experiencing. Some are more traditionally medical ("I can't stop picking at scabs"), while some are distinctly emotional ("I Dream All My Teeth Fall Out"). Others are less clearly delineated; "I Keep Growing" is a physical condition to find oneself in, there is a lack of context that allows questions begin to enter the space. There are other oddities. "Dreams" is a part of the body listed under "My Head." Eventually the user reaches a short piece of creative non-fiction or a poem addressing the complaint that they navigated towards. From those articles they can navigate back to the beginning and dive in again, or they can click hyperlinks embedded in the text to navigate to other texts. The texts themselves are emotional, questioning and non-authoritative in tone, but are always mindful of the body: its fleshiness and physicality.

My decision to code the website from scratch was also related to a desire not to disguise the singular, individualistic, human decisions behind it. I wanted it to feel crafted, a made thing, built by hands and not a disembodied brain uploading data to a ready-built repository. Additionally, coding the website myself keeps it disentangled from corporate interests and advertising. A website using a template built by a company or on a company platform will inherently be complicated by questions of who is profiting from its existence, and what corporate incentives are driving its content. Bodies under capitalism can only be producers of labor or consumers of product: a positionality that is incompatible with the body as a site of emotion except as a feature to be exploited in order to sell more product. For *ExistentialMD* to function as an empathetic reader and writer of bodies it must also be anti-capital. There is also an aesthetic nostalgia that is put into play by hand-coding the website. The colors of the website are purples, pinks, beiges, and blues. These colors are meant to invoke a gender spectrum, as well as a genderless fleshiness. They additionally conjured up for me an affective nostalgic reaction. The colors *felt* like the internet used to *feel* when I was younger and it was a less commercialized space: or at least felt like it. I believe that the

rest of the graphic design choices—the font, the absence of slick graphics, and the slightly awkward placement on the page—contribute to this feeling as well. I am wary of nostalgia, especially its usefulness as a powerful marketing tool, but I am also mindful of it as a powerful affectual engine in online spaces that I felt shouldn't be overlooked in this project.

The website uses hyperlinks and categorization—two important structural elements of internet aesthetics — to communicate its ethics. Links are a vehicle, a transporter taking you through the internet, and they are a brick, a basic structural element used to build sites. They would suggest a potential for unlimited expansion, for an erasure of borders, but in fact they are, for much of the web, a capitalist tool used to keep site visitors within a limited network of a single website and its advertisers. The links on *ExistentialMD* are also designed to keep users in the website, but because there is no financial gain to be had from their time or clicks, the insular structure of the website serves a different purpose. It creates a digital fold, a concept theorized by artist and art scholar Anna Munster in the 2006 book *Materializing New Media,* in which she articulates the digital as a baroque space. "Both baroque and digital spaces engage the viewer visually, seductively and affectively. They operate by creating clusters of objects, images, sounds and concepts that belong together in variation and in dissonance" (6). On *ExistentialMD*, these clusters are formed by the linking of texts to one another, and the linked paths from the homepage to the texts (often one text will appear in multiple paths), all of which serve to not only categorize the body by biological parts, but to include the emotionality of those texts in those categories.

This is also achieved through a taxonomy that is as intuitive as it is embodied: a folksono(me), an idea that I am borrowing from Jeff Rice's article of the same title. The term "folksonomy" describes an open, collectively organized taxonomy. "Folksonomies provide reference systems, as any taxonomy does, but in digital spaces; they do so by challenging various assumptions about classifications and how such classifications generate meaning. … In

folksonomy, references are not based on what something is, … but rather they are based on the relationships that emerge out of interactions and connections" (Rice 193). They are systems that, because they are organically, intuitively, and collaboratively developed, are designed to be unathoritative and anti-establishment. Because *ExistentialMD* is the work of a single creator, its organizational system cannot be described as a folksonomy. It does, however, challenge classifications and form references in the same way that a folksononomical system would: emerging from the experiences of living in a body and having that body navigating the world. It allows, in *ExistentialMD,* for texts to be accessed through multiple categories, for dreams to included as a body part, and for the body to be seen as both parts and a whole. Rice identifies the impetus of a folksono(me) as "a struggle of multiple meanings in multiple places," a description that fits our relationships with our bodies perfectly (200).

While the texts on the website are categorized, hyperlinks complicate the structure, creating a decentralized "folded" structure instead of an authoritative ladder or web. In *Materializing New Media*, Munster uses Gilles Deleuze's idea of the baroque fold—which she describes as "simultaneously form and process"—to illustrate what she sees as the baroque shape of digital spaces (7). "… The fold simultaneously describes the experience of living the discontinuities and connections of digital sensory experience. These experiences of crossing thresholds between here and there, continuous and differentiated, corporeal and incorporeal, are common faces of engaging with virtual and teleparent technologies and environments" (Munster 8-9). The links on *ExistentialMD* fold the website into itself. They maintain the thresholds of the website—chains of links, individual web pages—and simultaneously break through them and decentralize the structure. "Folded in its structure and form, matter cannot be decided into atomistic units—parts that add up to a whole—but instead is both continuous *and* differentiated in and between its parts" (Munster 7). The hyperlinked structure of *ExistentialMD* supports this idea; in the website the body

is neither separate parts nor an autonomous whole nor an unembodied spirit, but all at the same time. The texts and paths on the website are individual units, but they are also part of a whole connected by links. The website becomes a rhizome, another concept from Deleuze, this time with Félix Guattari in their 1980 book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. "To be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses" (16). *ExistentialMD* penetrates the body through the outside, and through a website whose structure feels familiar, but once inside the seemingly linear structure become tangled and nonhierarchical. The website serves as a "*map and not a tracing*" of the body (Deleuze and Guattari 12). It is a tool for navigation, not a depiction of what a body always does or should look or feel like.

Although there is still work to be done, I believe that *ExistentialMD* creates the affectual experience that I set out to create, and which I outlined in the application for this capstone project. In February 2018, an early beta version of the website was displayed at "Love 2018: Purple Hearts," curated by Rachel Stern at the Columbia University LeRoy Neiman gallery. At the opening, I found a childhood friend of mine happily ensconced in the iPad on which the website was displayed, not knowing it was my project. I was pleased to see that in a room full of distractions, he had gotten a pleasurable and peaceful affectual experience out of navigating the website. What people will get out of the essays themselves is a little more difficult to measure; I can only hope that I have communicated my own experiences in a way that will reach through to readers. Each essay begins with a bodily experience that is producing some strong emotion or question in me, whether that is as traumatic as my mother's hair loss, or as quotidian and mundane as my unending quest for a natural deodorant. In the essays I try to explore those experiences and see what further emotions or questions they bring up. I write using language intended to provoke emotion, and to create an affectual reading experience.

My own body is a unit unto itself and a part of a larger fold of human bodies on the earth. This being the case, the essays that I write are both universal and highly limited. My bodily experience is white, cisfemale, queer, allistic, younger, non-fat, able-bodied, and probably depressive; all of which can resonate widely or be alienating depending on the story that I am telling and the bodily experience of the reader. There are experiences and emotions specific to bodies other than my own—especially marginalized bodies—that I cannot ever fully understand and should not write in the context of this website. The question I struggled with most in creating the website was whether or not to include other voices. What I have concluded at this point is that the risk of alienation if I limit the voice to my own is too great a chance to take. I do not want to hide behind invisibility and a presumption of universality. My experiences are limited, and in order for the website to not become hegemonic in the areas in which I am privileged, it must consciously and actively include other and othered voices into *ExistentialMD's* fold, where they become part of the whole even as they remain autonomous. A priority in this work going forward will need to be the inclusion of excerpts from memoirs, articles, or even fiction (which will noted as such) from authors who have different lived bodily experiences from myself. Authors I have read and am considering excerpting include Roxane Gay, Lindy West, Jane Juska, and Lidia Yuknavitch. I would like to diversify this list further, adding male voices, disabled voices, more queer voices, more voices of color, sick voices, and hopefully voices that take more joy in having a body than I am capable of. It will be a challenge to find excerpts that are a good match tonally with the rest of the site, but I believe that it is essential in order to achieve the ethics and effectual experience of this website.

I set out initially to keep a blog of the making-process. As I was learning code, researching, and writing it occurred to me that the process of building was as much a part of the project as the final product was. In order to embody myself into the website, I thought it might be important to

keep a record of decisions I made, and things I learned, as I put the website together. I am not good at keeping journals of any kind, and as such this has not been a successful element of the project. I have decided for now to remove the blog, not only because I have been so inconsistent in updating it, but also because I believe that in a project examining web aesthetics it is enough to have the website acting upon its users and that a public record of how it came to exist is not necessary. I do plan to include this white paper on the website, under a link on the homepage reading "I don't know how I ended up here," at least until the site has been digitally archived by the Library. As for future histories or explanations of the website, hosted on the website, I remain undecided.

I fully intend on continuing to work on this project indefinitely. The larger the website is, the more it can be folded in on itself; every fold of the affectual experience will make the website more effective. There are more additions I would like to make, including the inclusion of other voices as detailed above. Additionally, I have only spent thirty years in this body, and I expect to have many more, all of which I am sure will bring new aches and pains, challenges, and pleasure that I will be compelled to enumerate upon. I have not even expended the experiences I have lived so far: certainly not without writing at least one essay about my large feet! I am hoping to maintain the website as a living document, one that can expand, transform, and fold as needed.

The main challenge to this, aside from the evergreen issue of time allocation, will be financial. A website is a relatively inexpensive enterprise as far as digital humanities project run. It was written entirely using freeware, and operating costs are low, but I do have to pay for web and domain hosting. I would like to look into grants which could cover these costs in the future, as I am not sure if I will be able to maintain it myself, and feel adamantly that supporting it using an advertising based model would undermine the effectual experience, ethics, and purpose of the website.

This project was enormously supported by structuring of the MALS program. The

individualized studies track allowed me to take classes examining and investigating aesthetics and digital humanities. The work I did in those classes often led me to and supported this capstone work. While digital humanities classes often focus on the use of digital tools and data work, my individualized study made it possible for me to concentrate on the aspect of digital humanities study that interests me most: digital and internet aesthetics.

With the exception of the core classes taken in the MALS program, I focused my courses in the English Department at the Graduate Center. I consider this work to be at the intersection of English and Digital Humanities studies. My Introduction to Graduate Study course, taught in the Fall 2017 semester by Professor Elizabeth Wissinger, was called "Envisioning the Body." Several of the readings for that class were enormously influential in the development of this project; particularly "'Reading' Through the Skin: Lady Gaga's Online Representation and Affective Meaning-Making" by Anne Graefer, which introduced me to the concept of affectual responses to digital aesthetics. The other core classes taken in the MALS Program were Aesthetics of the Film (Fall 2017), which acted as a great introduction to academic aesthetic discussion, and Digital Humanities: Method/Practice (Spring 2019). My introduction to Digital Humanities was in Approaching Digital Humanities (Spring 2018), taught by Professor Matthew Gold, who is now advising this capstone project. This class introduced me to the conceptual theory underlying digital humanities projects—most presciently the conversations surrounding making, building, and coding as scholarly work. Electives I have taken in the English department exploring aesthetics have been Postmodern Memoir with Professor Nancy K. Miller (Spring 2018), which investigated how form effects autobiographical writing, Studies in Poetics/Aesthetics with Professor Joan Richardson (Fall 2018), which lead me to philosophical writing on the relationship between self and body, and Literature and Film (Playing with Ashbery) with Professor Wayne Koestenbaum (Spring 2019). I have also taken a thesis-writing course to aid in the process of completing my capstone.

I will conclude by leaving you with a poem from *ExistentialMD*, written in 2015 when I was missing someone, which now feels like a prophecy for this project. It's a poem in praise of memory, and an internet archive of chat histories and e-mails to keep it fresh. It's a poem about how with those archives of memory we can write our bodies, and realize that they were always just stories to begin with. It's a poem about how by writing new stories we can bring our old bodies back, or transform them into something else that is still part of ourselves.

Mostly, we were only ever described.

Our fleshiness wonderful

But so briefly realized.

Someday I will describe some fiction

And have our archived dreams to

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