When Ana Becomes the Protagonist: Eating Disorder Narratives, the Pursuit of Thinness and Social Resistance on the Internet

Nadezh Mulholland
Columbia College Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cultural_studies
Part of the American Popular Culture Commons, Cultural History Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cultural_studies/36
Cultural Studies Program
Department of Humanities, History and Social Sciences
School of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Columbia College Chicago

Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies
May 2014

Thesis Approval Form

When Ana Becomes the Protagonist:
Eating Disorder Narratives, the Pursuit of Thinness
and Social Resistance on the Internet

Nadezh Mulholland

Carmelo Esterrich  Signature  5/16/14
Thesis Director

Robert Watkins  Signature  5/16/14
Program Coordinator

Steven Corey  Signature  5/16/14
Department Chair
When Ana Becomes the Protagonist: Eating Disorder Narratives, the Pursuit of Thinness and Social Resistance on the Internet

Abstract: There is media concern that books about eating disorders are harmful to young readers. However, there is little research on how readers interpret the content of novels and memoirs featuring characters with eating disorders. This project considers the thinspiration images used as motivation to lose weight on so-called pro-ana and pro-mia social networks for people with eating disorders, and draws parallels between thinspiration and images used on the covers of eating disorder books. This paper uses a Gramscian lens to dismantle media claims by analyzing the interactions between members of eating disorder social networks, showing that website users turn to novels and memoirs not only to entrench themselves in their eating disorders but also to witness paths to recovery and to redefine their own identities. Ultimately, eating disorder books function as tools for both self-destruction and social resistance against the negative social narratives associated with eating disorders.

Key Words: Eating disorders, pro-ana, thinspiration, hegemony, fiction, memoirs
Before this essay begins, I would like to offer a warning to readers who have dealt with eating disorders or who are sensitive to issues of body image, self-harm, or sexual assault. This paper deals heavily with eating disordered thoughts and behaviors, discusses rape, and contains details that might be upsetting to some readers. I wish you a world of support.

All over the Internet there are young women and girls turning to books for advice and support—but not always in the ways we expect. The books I am referring to are novels and memoirs about eating disorders. Members of so-called “pro-ana” online communities, which center around eating disorders and the pursuit of thinness, use eating disorder narratives in a variety of ways: for suggestions on weight loss methods or hiding eating disorders; to define their eating disorder identities; to combat a sense of isolation; and to seek emotional strength. These are their words:

“Hey everyone! I’ve just read a really good book on ana that really inspired me and keeps me strong. I really want to read more good books for inspo, thinspo, and to keep me going. But I don’t want it to be obvious it’s about ana since my mom wouldn’t let me read it...” (“Ana or thinspo books you’ve read...,” WhyEat.net).

“This is one of my favorites, particularly because I can relate to some aspects of the main character... She comes from a good home and has stable and loving parents. Yet she still has problems with herself. I’m the same way” (“Book/Movie Reviews,” Go Pro: Ana Lives).

“I like this book... The young girl really displays what we go through each day and how we think. I think it is more for the type of person who wants...some support and comfort from reading about someone else’s journey” (“Books to Read,” Ana Boot Camp).

Eating disorder books are sometimes used as fuel for dangerous habits and other times as a tool for self-reflection—often in the same moment. In her reading, one user might
simultaneously seek both the motivation to starve and the hope that someday she will not want to
starve. Members of online communities that converge around users’ shared eating disorders
often turn to such literature as a form of resistance against hegemonic social ideas that people
with eating disorders are weak, vain, or lacking agency. This paper investigates the role of eating
disorder books from a Gramscian perspective of hegemony, consent, and resistance in order to
reveal the complex ways in which readers with eating disorders digest the books’ content. The
results reveal a surprising mixture of self-hatred and empowerment that results from both
consenting to and resisting popular ideas about women’s roles, beauty, and subjectivity.

Ana, Mia and Friends:
Eating Disorder Social Networks and How They Operate

There are a number of websites known for “pro-eating disorder,” “pro-anorexia,” and
“pro-bulimia” content, commonly nicknamed by members and outside observers as “pro-ana”
and “pro-mia” sites. In academic reports, researchers often use the term “pro-eating disorder” as
a catch all phrase to signal websites that provide an open forum for people with eating disorders
to converse, share information, and form online identities that center around their eating
disorders. Instead, I propose the term eating disorder (ED) social networks to refer to these same
groups, because labeling the sites pro-eating disorders necessarily implies a negative intention
and a cult-like desire for recruitment on behalf of the site members that is, upon closer
examination, inaccurate. I use the term “social network” because the social interaction that takes
place between members is critical to how the sites operate and to what users get out of joining
the sites. Some ED social networks function primarily as forums, in which members interact on
threads and in chat rooms; some are independent blogs; others exist within larger social
networks, such as Twitter and Tumblr. Even on blogs, which seem to be more private than forums, the element of community interaction is important; on Tumblr for example, a user’s thoughts, food intake, and thinspiration are posted for others to see, appreciate, and reblog on their own Tumblr pages, which function as public diaries.

Members of ED social networks share the belief that people with eating disorders have the right to resist treatment and to gather and share their experiences in safe spaces on the Internet. These social networks allow persons with eating disorders to form a collective identity that some argue legitimizes unhealthy choices and furthers the development and maintenance of self-harming behaviors. Such websites offer recommendations on how to be a “better” anorectic or bulimic through the use of “tips and tricks” on how to distract oneself from eating, kill the appetite, and keep family and friends from worrying (Whitehead 602-607).

Members celebrate ED community icons of thinness by sharing “thinspiration”—photos meant to inspire users to achieve their skinny goals. Thinspiration commonly features celebrities, including actresses—from the staple Mary-Kate Olson to the more recent addition of Emma Stone—and a host of models—from heroin chic Kate Moss to tiny-torso-ed lingerie model Candice Swanepoel; another popular category is so-called “real girl” thinspo. The blog The Pro-Ana Lifestyle Forever recently featured Kate Moss as “thinspo crush of the week” (image shown below). Thinspiration is a mainstay of online ED communities and is used to motivate members to lose weight through fasting, purging, and calorie restriction. In addition to images, thinspiration comes in many other forms in online ED communities: member submitted poems; mantras celebrating self-restraint (The saying “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels” is popularly attributed to Kate Moss); songs about eating disorders or songs to which members apply their own meanings for the sake of thinspiration (of the song “Skinny Love” by Birdy, a
user named tulips writes “I don't actually think it's about being physically skinny, but I like to think about it that way” ("Thinspo ED Playlists?,” WhyEat.net); movies; reality TV shows about weight loss; and books with eating disorder themes (most commonly memoirs and young adult novels).

Below: A thinspiration image of Kate Moss from The Pro-Ana Lifestyle Forever

In a recent content analysis of eating disorder websites, researchers found that 85% of ED social networks included thinspiration in the form of images or prose, while 13% of sites featured “reverse thinspiration”—images of obese or overweight people. They also found that more than 70% of the sites offered dieting strategies and advice on fasting; half of them offered tips on purging or the use of laxatives and diet pills; and 43% offered advice on hiding eating disorders from family and friends (Borzekowski et al. 1529).

Many ED social networking sites provide lists of “safe” foods, Body Mass Index calculators, factual information on eating disorders, and forums and chat rooms where members can interact. One study found that sixteen of the nineteen sites examined provided thinspiration. Once again, the photos took the forms of “triggers” (extremely thin women) and “reverse triggers” (obese women) (Lapinski 248). This means that members use images of extremely thin women to motivate their weight loss; they use reverse triggers, or “reverse thinspiration,” in the same way—images of obese women are meant to instil users with disgust and fear to aid their

6
starvation. On the Internet the term trigger often refers to a place, thing, event or emotion that sets off eating disordered thoughts or behaviors (or other form of emotional distress). Some websites offer trigger warnings—for example, a personal essay on the website *Liberate Yourself* begins with the words “TRIGGER WARNING: descriptions of eating-disordered behaviour” (liberateyourself.co.uk).¹ Members of ED social networks sometimes use the term trigger in a different way though: they search for “triggers” to motivate themselves to lose weight and entrench themselves within their eating disorders. The term trigger and its meaning can be approached both from a recovery and an illness standpoint, depending on whether a person is seeking to continue or avoid disordered thoughts and behaviors.

Sixteen of the sites in the same study mentioned above also provided written “contracts” with eating disorders addressed to a personified form of the eating disorder itself such as “Letter From Ana.” Popular contracts include the “Ana Commandments” or “Thin Commandments.” They are modeled after the Biblical Ten Commandments and contain statements such as “Thou shalt not eat fattening food without punishing thyself afterward” and “Being thin is always more important than being healthy” (Lapinski 248). All of these features of ED social networks encourage members to lose weight or maintain extremely low weights, and generally do not promote recovery. One ED social networker comments on this, writing, “I don't think any of us WANT to encourage unhealthy behaviours in others however due to the nature [of] the site we kinda do just by being here” (“What’s your UG BMI?”, MyProAna.com).

However, it is important to keep in mind that existing research on ED social networks shows that the interactions between members function in multiple ways. Participation in ED

¹ Trigger warnings exist for other content as well, such as sexual abuse, self-harm, suicide, etc.
networks may not be as harmful as it is popularly believed to be. ED social networks are perceived as indoctrinating healthy people into the world of eating disorders. Such websites often claim that eating disorders are lifestyles, not diseases, leading people to erroneously believe that site members choose to have eating disorders, and that members promote unhealthy eating habits to otherwise healthy people. However, members of ED social networks are concerned with their own rights to engage in their eating disorders, not in recruiting others to join in their eating disorders. In fact, many sites contain disclaimers about the “pro-anorexia” content, warning readers to enter at their own risk, or even to stay away if they do not already have an eating disorder (Dias 31).

Interviews with subjects with eating disorders show that members of ED social networks have complicated relationships with their eating disorders. Users have two distinct approaches to the term “lifestyle.” Only 7% of respondents conceived of using ED social networks as a choice that “entails embracing a set of values that characterize the lifestyle—perhaps even promoting them.” 8% of respondents believed that having an eating disorder is a lifestyle in the sense that it “pervades every aspect of the person’s thought, perception and action,” but that one does not choose to have an eating disorder. The largest group, 54% of respondents simply saw eating disorders as medical and psychological disorders. 15% were undecided, believing that eating disorders are, strictly speaking, illnesses, but that it is possible to achieve a “healthy anorexia” if one has “just enough sanity to walk the line” (Csipke and Horne 202). Members are aware of the health risks associated with eating disordered behaviors. Despite public fears, the concept of eating disorders as lifestyles does not indicate the promotion of eating disorders.

Medical professionals and concerned citizens alike often recognize only the negative aspects of ED social networks, and fail to see the positive aspects. Active members of chat rooms
and forums on ED networks feel better about themselves after visiting and have higher subjective self-esteem than passive members. Frequent participation on ED social networks correlates with decreased feelings of loneliness and increased motivation to seek treatment. In fact, 38% of sites contain recovery-oriented information or links, while 21% devote a specific section of the site to recovery (Borzekowski et al. 1529). Forums and chatrooms on pro-ED sites can serve as a much-needed antidote to the feelings of isolation from friends and family that eating disorder sufferers experience in their daily lives (Csipke and Horne 200). Although most members of ED social networks are not ready for recovery (and some never will be), the theoretical idea of recovery appears to be on users’ minds, even while they pursue eating disordered behaviors.

In the Library: Inspiration and Thinspiration

One form of thinspiration that is extremely popular on ED social networks is literature about eating disorders—specifically narratives that tell a story about a character developing, living with, or seeking treatment for an eating disorder. Some books focus on family life and the character’s internal monologue while others center around the experience of being in a hospital. They are typically written in the first person and allow readers to feel that they are accessing the mind and thoughts of a fellow person with an eating disorder. On both forums and blogs, ED social networkers share thinspiring reading lists and ask for recommendations on what to read next. Users tend to gravitate towards books about anorexia but also show interest in bulimia. Members of the websites seem to have no interest in books about other eating disorder such as compulsive overeating. Although in addition to narratives there are also scientific, historical, and academic books on eating disorders, members of ED social networks seem to be most drawn to novels and personal memoirs. For this reason, all of the books discussed in this essay are novels
and memoirs frequently cited on ED social network reading lists. All of the cover images used here were found through the website GoodReads.com.

In reading eating disorder literature site users often seek out detailed information about how the characters—fictional or otherwise—maintain their eating disorders, such as specific references to how many calories they consume, what foods they eat, how much they weigh, and what exercises they do. Users find thinspiration in the characters’ measurements, willpower, and attitudes towards food. However, it is not only the case that the content of books with eating disorder themes is sometimes used as a form of thinspiration on ED social networks; I would argue that the novels and memoirs about eating disorders are often presented in a way that invites readers to view them as thinspiration. The cover images of the books signal an idealization of the skinny aesthetic that mirrors the thinspiration images shared on ED social networks.

Some covers of eating disorder books so closely resemble the images used for thinspiration on ED social networks as to be indistinguishable from them; they look remarkably similar in that both book covers and Internet thinspo feature young women in poses that emphasize their extreme thinness. Other notable book covers do not necessarily look like traditional thinspo but strongly allude to themes that are used on ED social networks to foster disordered thinking among community members. The following provides a few salient examples of the similarities between the two sets of images.

The young adult novel *Thinspo* by Amy Ellis is teenager Jenni’s fictional story told through blog posts and text messages as she tracks her weight and struggles with her eating disorder in the “pro ana”/“pro mia” community. Jenni writes on her blog that she has always wanted to be a ballerina: “Not for the sake of being a ballerina, but for the body, the discipline. I want to be thin. So thin. Like a popsicle stick with legs and a tutu, a tiara. I want to be the queen
of thin” (1). Her “Ana buddy” sends her texts messages like “Rise and starve, sunshine.” The cover of *Thinspo* depicts a woman photographed from the back and the side. This photo has many attributes of traditional thinspiration: instead of focusing on the whole person it focuses on one body part—in this case, a bare back. Visible bones are a popular thinspo category, and this image features a set of prominent rib bones. Even the pose of the cover character resembles thinspiration, as she is arranged in what I like to call a “broken doll” pose—she is hunched over in a way that calls attention to physical and mental unwellness, making her bones appear more prominent and suggesting feelings of depression or fatigue. Even the title of the book—*Thinspo*—suggests a possible approach to the contents of its pages.

Emily Halban’s memoir *Perfect: Anorexia and Me* details how she developed anorexia in high school and struggled with it throughout college, ultimately leading to her recovery. She writes about her memory of when her mother “lost her laugh” when she was a teenager:

...the image that jumps out at me over and over again is finding her in bed or on the sofa, lying there in desolation, day after day... I remember her craving pancakes and sautéed potatoes. But neither the sweetness nor the starch seemed enough to cushion the pain. She was helpless, unable to master the inexplicable ache that was searing her inside—and it was beginning to filter through to her little girl” (19).

Like *Thinspo*, *Perfect* is introduced by an image of a woman’s bare, bony back. Images of women’s naked, bony bodies like this one are commonplace within ED social networks. This cover also features a quote: “Perfection was my disease... anorexia was my perfection.” The phrase on the cover brings to mind the motivational mantras found on ED social networks, presenting anorexia as a laudable pursuit of bodily perfection and even a form of perfection itself. For comparison, a thinspo image tagged as “skinny,” “pro ana” and “anorexic” on Tumblr features a photo of a woman’s very thin arm overlaid with a text that reads “Hungry to bed/
Hungry to rise /Makes a girl /Smaller in size." The cover of *Perfect* follows a strikingly similar format to the mantra of this thinspo image.

Left: Cover of *Thinspo*. Right: Corresponding thinspo image from The-Frail.tumblr.com illustrating the thinspirational qualities of the above two covers of *Thinspo* and *Perfect*. 
The covers of Thinspo and Perfect share an important thematic and aesthetic quality: both choose to represent characters with eating disorders using isolated body parts. In her film Killing Us Softly 4, which focuses on images of women in advertising, Jean Kilbourne explains the idea of fragmentation. Ads have a tendency to break women down into a collection of body parts rather than representing them as comprehensive people. A woman becomes a leg, a naked back, a pair of breasts. This is an unmistakable way in which book covers lend themselves seamlessly to the purpose of thinspiration. The models of print advertisements are a rich source of thinspiration on ED social networks. By focusing on isolated body parts instead of full people, book covers use the same strategy as ads, arranging the women on the covers in the same way that models are arranged in the pages of magazines. Additionally, Kilbourne explains that fragmentation in advertising leads to the objectification of women's bodies, which is a
contributing factor to violence against women. In a way, the fragmentation of bodies that takes place in thinspiration is associated with violence against women, as well: the way that members of ED social networks use thinspo as motivation for their self-starvation is a significant form of self-harm. While it might be argued that advertisements that portray women as rugs or surfaces for beer might open the door men’s violence against women, thinspiration—both online and on book covers—can be said to authorize women’s violence against themselves.

As a further example of the similarities between eating disorder books and ED social network themes, Julia Bell’s novel Massive tells the story of teenaged Carmen who develops an eating disorder while attempting to satisfy her weight-obsessed mother, who values thinness above all else, and to reestablish a sense of control. Her mother’s disordered relationship with food is apparent from the start of the book: Carmen explains that when her dad makes her a fried egg for breakfast, her mom “makes exaggerated puking sounds. I turn away from her and eat it really quickly. ‘Fried egg on toast, 300 calories. At least. You’ll be on lettuce all week now, you know, Carmen,’ [my mom] says. ‘After all that fat.’ Later she says she can smell it on her clothes” (5). Massive is an example of a book that alludes to themes commonly found on ED social networks. The cover shows a scale, but instead of numbers the window reads “massive.” Although it differentiates itself from thinspo—it does not include pictures of women by which to measure one’s self against—it successfully suggests inadequacy in connection to weight and size. Images of scales are common on ED social networks, and this image in particular looks like one that ED social networkers might use to reprimand themselves for failing to live up to their own expectations, as motivation to try harder. For example, the header of one ED social network blog features an image of a woman’s feet as she stands on a scale that, without regard to how much or little she weighs, simply reads “EAT LESS.”
Another cover with strong allusions to the inner world and symbolism of ED social networks is the one featured on Leslea Newman’s young adult novel *Fat Chance*, written as a series of diary entries. In this book thirteen-year-old Judi learns the secret of a new thin and glamorous friend: bulimia. Judi writes in her diary,

> While we were doing our assignment, Nancy Pratt was looking at this modeling magazine she was hiding behind her notebook. I couldn’t read it, but I could see some of the pictures. Some of the girls in the magazine are so skinny, they’re even thinner than Nancy Pratt! They all have beautiful hair and perfect smiles and it’s really depressing to know I’ll never be pretty like that. I’m not pretty or smart, so what am I? (18).

Judi soon finds a solution in purging: “I’m really relieved now because I know I can eat whatever I want, as long as I have my new ‘secret weapon’” (145).

In this instance the contrast of fat/skinny is taken to the extreme of flesh/no flesh. Skeleton and bone imagery, like that featured on the cover of *Fat Chance*, is commonly found on ED websites; the contrast between full and empty, as well as the path from mental health to
illness, is illuminated as the protagonist swaps a snack for a finger down her throat. A picture posted on the image sharing site WeHeartIt.com features a skeleton and the words “thin enough now?” Users tagged the image as “ana,” “mia,” “bones,” and “yes perfect.” The image of the skeleton differs from thinspiration in a significant way because it does not present an aspirational image of the female body—there is, on fact, no body left. Regardless, it effectively conveys the strong pro-skinny themes that ED social networkers seek; like thinspo, it serves as a rebuke against flesh and a reminder to strive for thinness at all costs. Like Both the cover of Fat Chance and the ED social network image focus on skeleton imagery and a transformation from flesh to bone.

Left: Cover of Fat Chance. Right: Thinspo-inspired image from WeHeartIt.com.

As this series of comparisons illustrates, the titles of the books and the cover images they employ tell us something about their social purpose and use, even if that purpose differs at times
from the stated desires of mainstream society or the media. While the titles mentioned here are only a few examples, there is a clear crossover throughout the genre between thinspiration and the images used to market eating disorder-themed books. Regardless of whether we believe that books, TV, film or any other medium encourage eating disorders, there is an important connection to be made: the cover images used to market eating disorder-themed memoirs and novels tend to conflate the extreme thinness of anorexia with glamour, poise and feminine delicacy. This is especially the case in covers like that of *Perfect*, which features a fashionably styled black-and-white photo that resembles a modeling shot. The word “perfect” overlays the image as if to literally label the woman in the photo as an object of perfection and idolization; she is effortlessly feminine, undeniably delicate. The women on the covers of *Perfect* and *Thinspo* need only to stand there to be instantly memorable for their waiflike physiques. These books fit seamlessly into a thinspirational context, and using them as motivation to diet one’s self into the double-digits is a logical, if disconcerting, leap.

Most eating disorder stories touch on recovery—memoirs are written from the perspective a person who has since recovered from their eating disorder and novels often end on a hopeful note—but what is striking is that the cover images rarely shine the spotlight on recovery. Books appeal to readers with images representing the protagonists at their thinnest, when they are the most in the grips of an eating disorder. Readers on ED social networks take the thinspiration-like qualities of ED books a step further by using not only the cover pictures but also the literary imagery and content contained within the pages as fuel for their thin pursuits.
The Media Conversation about Eating Disorder Books

In response to ED social networkers’ tendency to turn to novels and memoirs for thinspiration, news media outlets and personal bloggers have questioned whether books about eating disorders are dangerous to women, particularly teenage girls. In 2009 there was a rash of articles about the harmful potential of the then-new young adult book *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson. The novel focuses on the anorexia of its protagonist Lia, as well as the bulimia of her recently deceased best friend Cassie. *Wintergirls* has been criticized for mentioning specific weights of the protagonist and describing what she did and did not eat, information that is seen as an invitation for readers to try their hand at anorexia. In fact, Anderson is no newcomer to controversy in response to her young adult novels: most recently Richard Swier, who has a doctorate in education, attempted to ban her novel *Speak* in Florida school districts for addressing the subjects of rape and teen sex (Swier). *Wintergirls* was the catalyst for the scrutiny of eating disorder books, but not its sole target: an article titled “The Troubling Allure of Eating Disorder Books” was published on the *New York Times* Well Blog, in which the author asks of the genre, “In writing about eating disorders, are authors, unwittingly, creating an alluring guidebook to the disease?” (Parker-Pope). She answers this question by implying that narrative books about eating disorders encourage unhealthy escapes from the normal problems of adolescence by glamorizing harmful behaviors like self-starvation and purging. Some ED social network members even agree with the criticism leveled against *Wintergirls*: one member believes that the book presents a “pro-ana ‘empty, strong, control’ glamorous-deep-dark-secret” view of eating disorders (“Opinions on Wintergirls?”, MyProAna.com).
In late 2013 the question of whether eating disorder books are dangerous resurfaced in response to a book written by Kesley Osgood, this time with a focus on eating disorder memoirs. Osgood, who developed anorexia during her early teenage years, focuses heavily on the perceived dangers of eating disorder memoirs in her own recent memoir *How to Disappear Completely*. To hear her tell it, she “willed” herself to develop an eating disorder and used the material stocking the shelves of her local bookstore as a guidebook. Marya Hornbacher’s famous book *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*—often referred to as the eating disorder Bible—made Osgood “swoon at the prospect of such success” to the point that she “incorporated some of Hornbacher’s tricks into [her] own weight-loss repertoire” (Osgood 23). For Osgood, novels and memoirs serve to glamorize eating disorders in a disturbing way, implying that to have an eating disorder is to be special and loveable. She criticizes the “beautiful, invigorating” (49) tone with which authors write about eating disorders for its ability to beckon to vulnerable readers like she once was.

It is easy to understand Osgood’s perspective, as well as the perspective of the *Wintergirls* critics. In the question and answer section of her website, Anderson, the author of *Wintergirls*, tells readers that the book “has become a positive tool, something [that] helps people reach for help and health” and that she hopes it will lead to “discussions of why we give our power about body images over to the people who are hired to make us hate ourselves” (Anderson, “Wintergirls Q & A”). But perhaps she illustrates the thought processes that accompany anorexia too effectively. When we get inside protagonist Lia’s head this is what we read:

“Dead girl walking,” the boys say in the halls.
“Tell us your secret,” the girls whisper, one toilet to another.
I am that girl.
I am the space between my thighs, daylight shining through (Anderson 18).
If any passage represents Osgood’s concerns about eating disorder books, it is this one. It is clear how Anderson’s words could be used as fuel for a dark journey. Lia may be close to death, but as a result she is special. She is “that girl,” someone with a secret that makes her worth noticing and whispering to and about. She does not have a space between her thighs, she is the space between her thighs, completed by her absence. There is poetry to Lia’s wasting. One recognizes the way this phrase presents her eating disorder as compelling, her quest as virtuous.

A Tumblr blog called *Wintergirls* provides an example of how ED social networkers have used the book as a source of thinspiration. The blog is dedicated to quotes and passages from *Wintergirls*, photographs of its pages, and images of bony women and models that users associate with their perceived message of the book. A photo on the blog shows two of the books’ pages on which the words “Must. Not. Eat. Must. Not. Eat” are repeated over and over again, resembling the mantras found on ED social networks. The book holds a function similar to mantras for members of ED social networks, as well: “LOVE Wintergirls! keep the recommendations coming. Almost under 100. These books help so much!” one user writes (“Insparational [sic] ED Books?,” MyProAna.com). There is a forum thread on MyProAna.com dedicated to figuring out Lia’s Body Mass Index (BMI)—or height to weight ratio—in which users chime in about how much they would have to weigh to achieve the same BMI (“Lia in wintergirls height..,” MyProAna.com). In both instances readers identify with Lia and find thinspiration in observing her eating disorder; there is also an element of competition in users’ desires to match or surpass her accomplishments.

In the media discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of eating disorder books *Wintergirls* stands in as proxy, but it is only one of many such books that are used for thinspo on ED social networks. For example one blogger writes, “Just downloaded Wasted by Marya
Hornbacher... Apparently it's pretty good thinspo, and if you sorta read in the wrong way you can actually get some nice tips and tricks, or it'll simply trigger you to continue with your pro-ana lifestyle" (“Trigger Book…”, Everything Else Failed). Another reader writes of the book Life-Size by Jenefer Shute, “I never feel like eating after I read it, [because] the narrator makes eating sound absolutely DIRTY. she always says things like ‘masticate’ instead of ‘chew’, and I think at one point she compares eating pastries to rape...” (“Ana or thinspo books you’ve read…”, WhyEat.net). The poster is remembering a scene in which the novel’s narrator Josie recounts a dream of eating food: “I stuck my tongue lewdly into éclairs, probing the cream filling with grunts of lust until, appeased, I moved on, leaving the pastry shells vacant and violated on the plate” (Shute 153). In this moment her consumption of food is paralleled with the consumption of another person’s body.

Elsewhere in the text Josie draws connections between sexual appetite and epicurean appetite, presenting consumption of food as a violation of her physical self. Sex and food alike, and others’ abuse of them, have the capacity to inflict violence. Josie reflects on a time when she initiated unwanted oral sex with a partner in order to divert unwanted sexual behavior away from herself; she finds herself “gagging at the very idea” of “his cock in [her] mouth” (31). She continues,

“... I sucked away dutifully, trying to ignore its salty taste... my jaw was aching and my throat gaping before he let out a little moan and filled my mouth with viscous slime. The bitter, metallic taste made me heave, bringing tears to my eyes... I pushed myself across his knees, feeling for the door handle in the dark... I held on to the edge of the seat with both hands, stuck my head out, and half spat, half vomited, my mouthful into the gutter” (Shute 31-32).

While in the hospital receiving treatment for her eating disorder Josie remembers this encounter, the unwanted semen in her mouth, and feels the same sense of panic at the thought of being
prescribed a feeding tube. She fears the “insertion” of the feeding tube as well as the doctor who tries “to force something into you, make you swallow something…” because he “knows he can stick it to me whenever he wants…” (68). From Josie’s perspective, being forced to consume food against her will is a violation as personal and intrusive as rape. Shute’s novel tells the story of a woman who suffers acutely from her fear of food, allowing readers to peek inside her mind where food is hostile, frightening, and shameful. In turn, readers on ED social networkers, who often share Josie’s worldview, appropriate these words to fortify their own negative attitudes towards food and to fuel their eating disorders. The ED social networker who mentioned Shute’s word choice and the connection between eating and rape illustrates the way that members use books as a tool to enhance their negative associations with food. In this manner, thinspirational messages are gleaned from eating disorder books across the genre and dispersed on ED social networks.

For her part, Osgood believes her memoir is different from other eating disorder stories because she deliberately excludes all references to weight, calories, starvation and purging methods, and specific foods in an effort to avoid selling eating disorders to vulnerable readers. And yet her book is similarly rife with morsels that allude to the poetic beauty of self-starvation. In the hospital she deems another patient “[p]rincess of the skeletons” (63); in a criticism of one author’s glamorization of anorexia she uses she words “Ballerinas, Nadia Comaneci, heroin chic. Faeries. One can wear ‘faded gingham and eyelet lace,’.. One is a china doll, a shivering Little Match Girl, small and pitiable, so easy to love” (49). In spelling out her thoughts on the dangers of conventional eating disorder memoirs, Osgood still accomplishes similar results to those whose writing she criticizes. In recounting how she used to think, back when she starved herself, she inevitably brings those thoughts alive in the present moment.
It may be impossible to eliminate the compelling aura of eating disorder narratives. Ultimately Osgood cannot fully escape a glamorizing narrative if she is to be honest about her mindset and emotional processes while anorexic. This oversight in Osgood’s writing suggests that even careful narratives on eating disorders run this risk of being appropriated as fuel for an eating disorder. It is true that books like Wintergirls and Wasted can be triggering, but it is also unrealistic to single out novels and memoirs about eating disorders, and their authors, as being responsible for the bulk of triggers that people encounter. As mentioned previously in this essay, members of ED social networks find triggers in a vast variety of mediums—even mediums that are not created with references to weight or size in mind. Sources of thinspiration range from television and film to art and song lyrics to billboards, ads, and runway models. People looking for thinspiration will find it in one form or another, interpreting information to suit their aims. Whether or not eating disorder books mention weight or calories, thinspiration is firmly a part of our cultural vocabulary. Although eating disorder books are sometimes used to motivate unhealthy behavior, it is unrealistic to project blame onto the books themselves, rather than a social world that prioritizes thinness in women at the expense of physical and emotional health.

Perhaps the media perspective that criticizes eating disorder literature is incomplete. The subject of whether eating disorder books are harmful is a grey area; while they may be glamorizing in a certain sense, they also have healing applications for those who already live with eating disorders. One member of the site MyProAna.com reflects that Wintergirls is “so hauntingly real that it blows my mind every time I read it. That book makes me feel real” (“Opinions on Wintergirls?”, MyProAna.com). On her website Anderson writes, “Too many of my readers have a little bit of Lia or Cassie festering in them; that sense that they will only be valued according to the number that shows up on the scale. Wintergirls gives them a chance to
name the demons that haunt them and take back control of their bodies and souls” (Anderson, “Wintergirls Q & A”). She might not be wrong about this.

**ED Social Networks as Compliant and Resistant**

Much the way that Anderson sees readers of *Wintergirls* as working to regain control, members of ED social networks are constantly negotiating control of their bodies and subjectivities. Members regularly engage in acts that assert their identities and understandings of themselves. For example, an earlier section of this essay discussed how triggers function on ED social networks. As mentioned previously, the meaning and application of the word trigger can be approached both from the perspective of recovery or of maintaining an eating disorder, depending on whether a person seeks to refrain from or intensify eating disordered thoughts and behaviors. According to the common understanding of the word, a trigger is a catalyst for negative emotions and behaviors—something to be avoided at all costs. Members of ED social networks, though, redefine the word trigger to suit their own needs and perspectives. Instead of avoiding triggers, they actively seek them out as tools to help them to “stay strong” on their quests for thinness—such as reading eating disorder books for thinspiration. Instead of allowing the outside world to define trigger as a negative concept for them, users reappropriate the word trigger and define it as a positive term that helps them achieve their goals. This is one example of the many ways in which members of ED social networks resist popular understandings of eating disorders and those who live with them.

For this and a host of other reasons, ED social networks can be considered from the perspective of Antonio Gramsci’s theories on cultural hegemony; these online meeting places function as both hegemonic and counterhegemonic spaces. In the Gramscian sense, hegemony is
ideological domination. When one ideology, or worldview, becomes dominant it excludes other ways of seeing and believing. Through this process society endorses a limited set of beliefs and behaviors, denouncing others as deviant or illegitimate. Because all people are born into it, ideology appears to be inevitable, making it difficult to imagine alternatives to hegemony. This is how hegemony is created and maintained—and how it functions for members of ED social networks.

Although gender roles were not the subject of Gramsci’s writing, much of his work can be applied to contemporary gender relations and male domination. Limited parameters within which women are told they can be beautiful are a hegemonic social structure. According to Gramsci hegemony is upheld through a combination of force and consent. Madeleine Arnot invokes Gramsci’s theory when she explains that women “offer consciously and unconsciously their ‘consent’ to subordination... They are encouraged ‘freely’ to choose their inferior status and to accept their exploitation as natural” (66).

In the case of ED social networkers, the pressure for women to sacrifice desire for an acceptable physical form is primarily a social pressure—not typically enforced by threats of physical violence. Rather the social consequences for deviating from aesthetic demands serve as all the “force” necessary to cement women’s adherence to the demands placed on their bodies. For example, Rosalind Coward explains that women are led to believe that the likelihood of attaining love and security is entirely dependent upon their appearances. Because members converge around the shared goal of bridging the gap between the perceived self and the ideal mental image of the self, their use of ED social networks can be read a form of consent to hegemony. Members of ED social networks express their consent by altering themselves to fit the mold of the acceptable female form.
The behavior of ED social networkers can be seen as consenting to hegemony in another way as well. Many users seek to be fragile and delicate—qualities which are considered desirably feminine and represent the relinquishment of female power. One member describes her ideal appearance as "tiny and fragile. If people were describing [me], i would want them to say things like...i am afraid to hug her cause she looks like she would break..." ("How do you want to look?", MyProAna.com). Users of ED social networks rarely profess a desire to appear powerful. Social theorists regard women’s refusal to eat as an extension of feminine traits of self-denial and self-sacrifice—women policing themselves according to the demands placed upon them by outside society. Feminist thinker Susan Bordo argues that the fear of women’s fat is actually the fear of women’s power. We live in a society in which female hunger—"for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification"—must be contained (171). Feminist author Naomi Wolf writes that through self-starvation one becomes "the perfect woman": "weak, sexless, and voiceless" (197). Members consent to contain their hunger by organizing in pursuit of fragility and delicacy as opposed to strength. Because they use eating disorder books as thinspiration to support their goals of self-erasure, the books become tools that reinforce hegemony. This is the most common understanding of thinspiration.

At the same time, and perhaps more interestingly, the existence of ED social networks is also counterhegemonic. Members rally around what appears to be the patriarchal demand of women’s thinness, but use it to subvert expectations. Some have characterized women’s refusals to eat as a form of rebellion against women’s experiences of subordination to men and lack of autonomy, or else against culturally defined feminine roles. According to Susan Bordo eating disorders represent women’s desire to reject the patriarchal mold. Women’s secondary sex characteristics, such as breasts and hips, diminish with low body weights, which may
symbolize...freedom from a reproductive destiny and a construction of femininity seen as constraining and suffocating” (Bordo 209). Through this lens, self-starvation can be read as a rejection of the historical role of women as second-class citizens and, by extension, as a quiet assertion of power against the social forces that demand women’s subservience to men.

Members of ED social networks often revere images that outsiders perceive as “gross” or “too thin” such as the category they call “skeleton thinspo,” which contains lots of visible bones. One image from an ED social network features a woman’s side and text that reads “Call it sickness, call it madness, call it obsession. I don’t care, I still call it perfection” (“Pro Ana!,” Obsessed). This image asserts ED social networkers’ commitment to their desired aesthetic in the face of negative outside perceptions. Even if others see it as “sickness” or “madness,” they remain committed to their own definition of perfection, which they define against, rather than by, societal ideals of women’s beauty. Members’ admiration of bodies that are seen as deviant and too “extreme” for most people’s taste is a rebellion against the demand for a socially approved appearance that strikes the right balance between too fat and too thin.

For Gramsci, ideology is the “terrain” on which people “move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle” (377). Certainly there is a “war or position,” (168) to use his words, taking place on ED social networks. The organizing that members engage in resembles...
organizing within one's social group—for ED social networkers seem to see themselves as a unique community of people with a shared perspective on the world. They exhibit solidarity by organizing online against intervention by the greater population and in defense of an aesthetic that they value in spite of rebuke from outside of their community. This is an example of counterhegemony playing out on ED social networks, as members are capable of using texts—including images and books—in ways that differ from current ideologies of femininity.

A primary way that members of ED social networks resist hegemony is through the use of what sociologist Carol Rambo Ronai calls “narrative resistance” (Ronai, “Dancing with Identity,” 118). Ronai has written on how marginalized groups resist popular narratives that present them as deviant, and instead formulate their identities by developing counter-narratives. Women on ED social networks do this with eating disorder books, which they use as a platform upon which to construct identities that are more palatable to them. Narrative resistance allows them to fight “discursive constraint” (Ronai, “Discursive Constraint,” 125). In a study on anorexia Emma Rich expands on Ronai’s work, explaining that narrative resistance is a way for people with eating disorders to “[reject] the negative labels of pathology or irrationality and instead [construct] a narrative of anorexia as affording them status, and empowerment” (300). Members use novels and memoirs to fortify a variety of resistant narratives, including defiance of the medical establishment, the portrayal of eating disorders as symbols of strength, and the illumination of emotional distress that underlies eating disorders.

Site members resist the ways in which the medical establishment pathologizes their actions and their mental states. Rich found that people with eating disorders often feel that the medical establishment stigmatizes them, choosing to see them as ill rather than acting in response to an illness of society at large (294). Feminist author Naomi Wolf classifies eating disorders as “sane
and mentally healthy responses to an insane social reality." She goes on to say, "surely it is a sign of mental health to try to control something that is trying to control you... Self-defense is the right plea when it comes to eating disorders; not insanity" (198). Like Wolf, ED social networkers defy stigmatizing views of themselves, instead asserting their right to a safe space in which they can organize around their shared experiences without the demand to recover.

People who use ED social networks challenge the medical and psychiatric conception that they are passive "sufferers" without agency (Day and Keyes 5) by employing a counter-narrative of starvation as strength. Although it has been acknowledged that members desire to appear delicate and fragile in contrast to appearing powerful, a clear narrative of power appears on the sites and in the books. By positioning themselves outside of the dominant discourse which stigmatizes women with eating disorders, users “present alternative narratives within which they construct themselves not as irrational, seeking attention or ‘abnormal,’ but as in some ways embodying extraordinary strength and finding ‘empowerment’ through anorexia” (Rich 298). For many members a sense of self-control follows from resisting food as they urge each other to “stay strong” in their goals. The Tumblr blog Wintergirls features a quote from the book in which Lia explains her lack of motivation to recover after two failed hospitalizations: “Who wants to recover? It took me years to get that tiny. I wasn’t sick; I was strong” (Anderson 28).

This quote is an example of how members use the content of eating disorder books to reinforce the resistant narrative that self-denial corresponds with strength.

In general ED social networkers revel in the picture of a brighter future painted by eating disorder books—but on their own terms. Books allow readers to entertain the possibility of a happier future without forcing them to address obstacles before they are ready. Musings on hope and the potential for recovery are common on ED social networks. In a letter to her future self...
one member writes, “Do I haunt you every day, the memory of what you were? I hope its all in the past tense, if I knew my future was nothing more than my present, I wouldn’t want a future” (“If you were to write a letter…”, WhyEat.net).

Wintergirls in particular is a source of reassurance that the future holds more than the present and that recovery will be waiting for them when they are ready. One person writes, “it stuck with me, telling me that it's okay to be like that. it's okay to be a fucked up silent little wintergirl, because I will be saved someday. maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday.” (“Opinions on Wintergirls?,” MyProAna.com). Another reflects on how reading Wintergirls was a positive experience for her: “Why I love it: [Lia] struggles with everything and it gives a great insight to what it's like but at the end it says that she is ready to recover. Her story won’t be over just like that. It gives me leverage to use, when someone likes this book as well, for them to look at it like ‘hey, she recovered, so can I. I don't have to die from this’” (“Opinions on Wintergirls”). About the memoir Stick Figure: A Diary of My Former Self by Lori Gottlieb someone writes, “Going though a [similar] situation growing up with an over bearing mother who was not aware that she was passing on her ‘bad habits’ to me [sic]. I found some comfort in [knowing] I was not alone in this situation and maybe like Lori I will recover” (“Books/Movies,” anorexics.net).

This is not to discount the very real health problems that accompany eating disorders. Eating disorders have lasting effects on the body and can—and often do—result in death. Despite the appeal of hope some readers will never truly seek help, and some others may not survive to experience life after recovery. Recovery is not the inevitable outcome for all women with eating disorders, nor for all members of ED social networks. That said, because memoirs—like Gottlieb’s Stick Figure and Hornbacher’s Wasted—are written by people in recovery, their
authors have, by necessity, survived to tell the tale. Through reading memoirs, ED social networks are reminded that stories with happy endings do exist. In looking back at her medical records Hornbacher learns how her doctors saw her while she was in treatment: as “chronic,” a “hopeless case,” “an invalid, a delusional girl destined, if she lived, for a life of paper gowns and hospital beds.” But Hornbacher sets the record straight: “I am neither delusional nor an invalid... I no longer perform surgery on the smallest of muffins... I live in a house, not a hospital” (3-4). Even Hornbacher, who was considered a “hopeless case,” transcended expectations, defying the stigmatizing belief that she was too fractured to be mended.

Collectively, the books remind readers that it is possible for a person to be worse off than they are and still go on to live a fulfilled life, go to college, get a job, have a family. They can still want. Wintergirls offers a beacon of hope at the end when Lia is overcome with the idea of countless possible futures that could all be hers: “Doctor. Ship’s captain. Forest ranger. Librarian. Beloved of that man or that woman or those children or those people who voted for me or who painted my picture. Poet. Acrobat. Engineer. Friend. Guardian” (Anderson 271). Finding hope in eating disorder books is a form of biographical work in which members construct positive future selves. These stories do not promise a happy future, but they suggest the possibility—and that alone is significant. The resistant narrative that members of ED social networks take away from the books is that to have an eating disorder is not be wrong or broken, but on a different path that nonetheless may lead to a worthwhile destination—or at least a path that does not necessarily lead to hopelessness and death.

In yet another act of narrative resistance, the books use poetic imagery to draw attention to larger social and emotional issues faced by people with eating disorders. Wintergirls (along with other similar books) approaches its subject matter with poetic representations of extreme
thinness. By exalting dangerous degrees of thinness through colorful and poetic language choices, the novel serves to illuminate the state of mental distress that drives eating disorders, demanding acknowledgement of the underlying problems. On ED social networks, outside recognition of users’ emotional distress is a popular subject: one user offers, “Honestly I want to look as disgusting as I feel. I could achieve that from weight gain too but I don’t want to give ignorant people the impression that I’m enjoying destroying myself” (“How do you want to look? (Tw)”, MyProAna.com). Another member posts that “sometimes looking fragile and delicate and clearly not-okay is the only way to get through to people…” (“do you want to look sick?”, MyProAna.com). Wintergirls similarly highlights profound thinness as a physical manifestation of poor emotional health.

Anderson paints a beautiful picture of Lia’s physical decay: “My hands read a Braille map hewn from bone, starting with my hollow breasts threaded with blue-vein rivers thick with ice. I count my ribs like rosary beads, muttering incantations, fingers curling under the bony cage... My winged shoulder blades look ready to sprout feathers” (Anderson 222). Later Lia describes her bruises as “sunset colors stretched over the tight bones” (258). Her words portray a romance with illness and decay that mirrors ED social networks’ fascination with decay. By starving, members reject the charade that everything is alright. Instead, they expose the reality of their suffering and demand that their suffering be addressed. In Wintergirls Lia writes, “Meat in my mouth, chew ten times... I sip the milk, staining my top lip white and proving that we are all just fine” (Anderson 65). For Lia, eating food is false evidence that life is manageable and there are no problems that cannot be solved with a smile. In refusing to eat, Lia and the ED social networkers reading her story refuse to agree to this pretense.
A member of the forum MyProAna.com explains that continuing to lose weight will allow her access to the mental and emotional support she feels she needs: “I can't be hospitalized unless I'm below a certain weight so fuck it, might as well let myself drop until I look sick enough to be admitted and get the help I need” ("do you want to look sick?", MyProAna.com). Lia’s story in Wintergirls parallels this user’s experience in that their degrees of thinness determines their access to support. A different MyProAna.com member by the name of Princess Airy uses a quote from Wintergirls in her signature—meaning that it shows up at the end of every post she makes. The quote occurs after Lia cuts herself violently and is then deemed stable enough to go home before being admitted to inpatient treatment: “I failed eating, failed drinking, failed not cutting myself into shreds. Failed friendship. Failed sisterhood and daughterhood. Failed mirrors and scales and phone calls. Good thing I’m stable” (Anderson 227). This quote shows all the ways in which Lia feels unstable—yet the only sign of distress worthy of intervention is the (in)stability of her weight. The poetic depictions of eating disorders in literature shed light on this reality. When Lia and ED social networkers starve to manifest outwardly the distress they experience internally, they are committing an act of defiance against a social world that insists that women plaster themselves with fake smiles in response to the pressures they face.

Ultimately, ED social networking communities thrive on myth in the Barthesian sense: users have been led to believe that being thinner will bring love, satisfaction, confidence, and clarity. For Roland Barthes myths are cultural beliefs that are presented as apolitical and ahistorical facts, when in reality they are social constructions determined by political and historical realities. The reverence of women’s thinness, for example, is a political and historical construction that has become so standard that it feels inevitable—in other words, a myth. But
there is also another form of mythology built into the very fabric of the novels and memoirs that members use to achieve their goals: that is, the literary myth and its magical, mystical tropes. As the characters in eating disorder books defend themselves and their starvation against the intervention of family, doctors, therapists, and nutritionists, their stories take on a message of heroism: in her efforts to maintain her thinness a protagonist is constructed as a Girl Against the World, the archetypal heroine.

Additionally, the language of the books suggests that it is possible for the body to transcend the physical need for food. “Like a plant, surely, the body can be trained to subsist on nothing, to take its nourishment from the air,” Josie from the novel Life-Size tells herself (Shute 8). These words speak to the fantastical desire to control one’s need to eat and to become elevated to a higher plane by a commitment to starvation. Indeed, elevation above the rest of the humdrum population is a common theme in eating disorder books. The young adult novel Mercy Unbound by Kim Antieau, which is commonly referenced in reading lists on ED social networks, tells the story of fifteen-year-old Mercy who believes she is becoming an angel. The synopsis on the back of the books explains, “She can feel her wings sprouting from her shoulder blades… And angels don't need to eat. So Mercy has decided she doesn't need to either. She is not sick, doesn't suffer from anorexia, is not trying to kill herself. She is an angel, and angels simply don't need food.” In exchanging the label “anorexic” for “angelic,” Mercy distances herself from pathological language and embraces a fantasy of divine destiny. Mercy’s story presents her starvation as the path to a hauntingly beautiful and ethereal existence; it is truly the stuff of fairy tales.

In parallel with the book, angel imagery is common on ED social networks. Sharing Mercy’s sentiments, a MyProAna.com user posts in the thinspiration section, “…my ultimate
dream is to have shoulder blades you can see. I think they look like you could've [sic] been an angel and wings should be growing there soon” (“Angels,” MyProAna.com). In a forum section on self-injury another user writes “I am a lost angel and I want to go home” (“I am a lost angel, MyProAna.com). She appears to be using angel imagery to validate her sense of isolation from human society by representing herself as something other than human. Here, we see how the mythological applications of eating disorder books double as a form of escapism that allows readers to disengage from reality, choosing instead a fantasy that cannot remedy the underlying struggles they face.

The appeal of the eating disorder narrative lies, in part, in the appeal of the myth: ED social network users find validation in mythological imagery that represents them as pure, ethereal, and on a higher plane of existence. It is important to note, though, that the way that members use mythological tropes to defend their eating disorder identities against detractors differs significantly from Barthes’s understanding of mythology. For Barthes, mythology is fundamentally ideological. Myths are constructed by dominant society and function to uphold dominance. Members of ED social networks, however, add another layer to the understanding of myth, creating their own literary mythologies and repackaging them as tools for resistance. In their application of mythological tropes, members are making a deliberate departure from Barthes. Because for him myth is necessarily a tool for reinforcing dominant ideology, Barthes sees little possibility for a counter-mythology. Yet ED social networkers embrace fantasy for the purpose of resisting dominant beliefs associated with eating disorders. Members are often confronted with the cultural myths that people with eating disorders are superficial or lacking in agency. In response they establish magical narratives—which present people with eating disorders as righteous, fighting a noble fight against detractors, and attaining exaltation through
starving—to deliberately counter their negative interactions with the non-eating disordered world. They fight back against dominant social myths by redefining their own identities in a poetically appealing image. In this way members use mythological stories to resist ideological mythology. It is possible to see this act of resistance as one of the central missions that ED social networkers engage in on the Internet.

The Promise of Possibility

In the beginning of this essay I mentioned that ED social networks function similarly to diaries—albeit public diaries, to which anyone with an Internet connection holds a key. Users on various blogging platforms record their personal thoughts, experiences, and struggles in relation to their eating disorders. Fellow members—and diary keepers—then read these personal reflections and comment, reblog, or lend support. Sometimes when a member makes a post about her struggles, others will tell her to “PM”—or private message—them for personal support, further supporting the sense of secrecy and anonymity surrounding these public diary entries. But blogs are not the only diaries ED social networkers turn to in times of trouble.

The word “diary” appears in a handful of the memoir titles referenced on ED social networks: *Running on Empty: A Diary of Anorexia and Recovery* by Carrie Arnold, *Stick Figure: A Diary of My Former Self* by Lori Gottlieb, *Purge: Rehab Diaries* by Nicole Johns, and *Diary of an Anorexic Girl* by Morgan Menzie are a few examples. Each title reaches out to the reader with the promise of a confidential reveal. The use of the word “diary” seems apt, as users of ED social networks often view the books as being akin to their own personal diaries, but with the added dimension of allowing them to connect with others who share their reality. These books reassure readers that people with eating disorders offer worthwhile perspectives that can be defined by insight and not dysfunction.
One member writes, "I love love love memoirs. Knowing that other people go through what I do is so comforting and motivating" ("Motivation from memoirs/ ED books?,” MyProAna.com). Another writes, "…ever since i read WASTED when i was 14, it has been, is, and always will be my favorite book of ALL time! …it was as if quite [literally]—that she had gotten into MY head and was writing MY thoughts down quite perfectly…” ("Purge: Rehab Diaries, by Nicole Johns,” WhyEat.net). And here lies a great deal of the value to be found in Wasted. In reading books about eating disorders, members of ED social networks find freedom from oppression through their connections with others. Readers’ association with other women who are portrayed as strong and capable gives them a sense of agency; just as Bordo explains that eating disorders represent “freedom from…a construction of femininity seen as constraining and suffocating” (209), the books similarly offer a construction of women with eating disorders as free from certain pressures of contemporary womanhood by representing them as self-governing, strong in the face of opposition, and safe from the advances of men. Simultaneously the books, especially memoirs, ask readers to consider the possibility of recovery and a fulfilling future. Memoirs and novels alike present characters with eating disorders as full, real, and complete people—not as statistics or case files. As evident as that is, it might be the most important truth there is about eating disorder narratives.
Source Bibliography


**Literary Bibliography**


**ED Social Network Bibliography**


“If you were to write a letter to yourself in 5 or 10 years time what would it say?” *Why Eat*. 7 Oct. 2010. Web 6 Apr. 2014. [http://whyeat.net/forum/threads/22314-lf-you-were-to-write-a-letter-to-yourself-in-5-or-10-years-time-what-would-it-say](http://whyeat.net/forum/threads/22314-lf-you-were-to-write-a-letter-to-yourself-in-5-or-10-years-time-what-would-it-say)


http://xxxpureperfectionxxx.blogspot.com/2010/12/pro-ana.html

http://whyeat.net/forum/threads/10948-Purge-Rehab-Diaries-by-Nicole-Johns


http://whyeat.net/forum/threads/33734-Thinspo-ED-playlists?


