

DIALOGIC TRACINGS OF LIFESPAN LITERATE ACTIVITY AND/ON TRAJECTORIES  
OF SEMIOTIC (UN)BECOMING

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of *becoming* (Prior, 2018; Ware, 2022) addresses Lemke's (2000) key questions of how “moments add up to a life” and how “our shared moments together add up to a social life as such” (p. 273). *Becoming* (addressing whole persons rather than narrow notions of learning) also addresses a growing interest in writing studies, particularly in scholarship that traces writing across the lifespan (Dippre, 2019). Grounded in dialogic semiotics, cultural-historical approaches to learning, development, and activity, and in Barad's (2007) agential realism and intra-action, this dissertation develops a theoretical and methodological approach to studying how literate activity (Prior, 1998) contributes to *becoming* across semiotic trajectories. The dissertation offers documented narratives of individuals who were once deeply religious, practicing clergy members, but who over complex trajectories of *becoming* lost their faiths and transitioned to secular lives and livelihoods, in part supported by The Clergy Project, an organization founded in 2011 specifically to offer such support. Drawing on audio-and/or-video recorded ethnographic interviews, numerous texts and dialogic animations of those texts, and many other artifacts, this research traces two focal cases (from among 20 research participants) of what I call “trajectories of semiotic (*un*)*becoming*” (Prior, 2018; Ware, 2022). The analyses have two, major aims: first, to carefully and responsibly trace the trajectories of semiotic (*un*)*becoming* of faith (i.e., how individuals *became* non-believers) in conjunction with literate activities they employed; and second, to map a dialogic semiotic theoretical-methodological approach for conducting research to trace the literate activity across trajectories of semiotic *becoming*. The dissertation argues that trajectories of semiotic *becoming* are necessarily messy and dynamically nonlinear, and that writing studies, as a field, needs flexible, theoretically grounded methods for tracing *becoming* across lifespan trajectories. The dissertation particularly

highlights the value of innovative *dialogic animation protocols* (geared toward eliciting continued engagement with texts written and artifacts created by participants) and *dialogic analyses* (analytical procedures that seek to probe the fundamentally historical nature of language, literate practices, and *becoming*). I argue that dialogic semiotic theoretical and methodological grounding supports *dialogic openings, deepening, and enrichment* of data, and affords tracing *acrossness* (how particular stories, practices, and artifacts transform across, but also help facilitate, trajectories of *becoming*). In the individual case studies, I highlight the key ways that literate activity (reading and writing) figured into the trajectories of my participants as they transitioned from religious to secular lives by drawing on texts participants wrote across extended spans of time, in one case over four years (Chapter 3), and in another, over nearly a decade (Chapter 4). In tracing the focal cases, I also showcase how literate activity around writing functions as a mode of the development of psychological functions across the lifespan (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003) and how these functions might contribute to overall senses of personhood.

*For Brandy, shade of my heart.  
For Jacqueline Dorko, my (grand)mother.  
And for Sméagol and Jerry.*

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This research project is a concatenation of many voices, places, times, artifacts, emotions, feelings, and becomings, and the dissertation is only one point of culmination of many planned. This point is the most consequential of my professional, scholarly life to date, one I knew I would begin working toward even before I finished my undergraduate degree in 2010. There are so many for whom I am grateful, so many without whom I may not have reached the end. I use this space to let their names sing.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **Vignette: “I think I’ll be an atheist now”**

On 26 January 2019, I conducted the first research session for the project that would become this dissertation. Lon Ostrander sat in a small room in Mexico and told me his life story over video conference. I asked him to talk to me about his religious life, his work in clergy roles, his *loss* of faith, and, of course, any literate activities he has utilized across his life—a tall order for a first session that ran a little more than two hours. As would happen many more times with 19 other individuals I talked to over the course of the (ongoing) project, I was struck by how fascinating the story of Lon’s coming to and loss of faith was.

Lon was born in Elmira, New York. He described his religious experiences as beginning at a small, Pentecostal church about a mile from his childhood home. The church was pastored by two women. Lon spoke of remembering that his parents allowed “the preacher ladies to take me to a revival tent meeting to be properly frightened by the preachers’ horrifying tales of the fires of hell that awaited theologically naïve seven-year-olds.” Lon recalled, to his parents’ delight, that one of the pastors of his church let the congregation know that “surely [he] would be a preacher when [he] grew up.” Lon recalled that out of his three siblings, his younger sister, younger brother, and he were “effectively indoctrinated into the Christianity virus,” but that one sister “was, and continues to be totally immune to religious delusion... When she came to realize that we really believed that shit, she decided we were all just crazy,” Lon noted, “she was no more than six at the time.”

Lon lived a religious life, for sure, and was active in the various churches he attended. But Lon is also a self-described “car guy,” and spent just as much—or probably *more*—time thinking, reading, and writing about cars than his Christian faith, at least until he began

ministerial studies. Nonetheless, one day in the early 1990s, Lon *felt* his call to ministry. He described:

Yeah, this gets interesting because it's so totally irrational and ridiculous. Because if I remember I was sitting there, under the tent and the district treasurer was giving a perfectly boring report which I had no interest in whatsoever. I don't recall thinking about anything particularly theological or thinking about God or, the purpose of my life or anything serious at all. I'm a car guy I was just as likely to be daydreaming about automobiles...And then I felt, oh, I felt that strange warming sensation in, uh, a blatant imitation of John Wesley's experience.

Lon went directly to the Ministerial Board and told them what happened during the meeting. It was decided that Lon was called to ministry and must begin his studies. I asked Lon a few months later (13 April 2019) to read back through the transcript of our first talk, and to talk more to me about his Wesleyan experience. He noted:

This is, this is very weird (.) for me to look back at and to understand. Frankly, I don't. Because like anybody, I like to think of myself as being somewhat rational, but this was totally irrational. And totally experiential, and it's you know, my experience there replicated what I had read about John Wesley's experience. But, you know, so what? Why would that become real for me, and such an acute sense? I mean, I wasn't obsessing about that. I wasn't thinking about that, but yet it was buried someplace in my mind and turned into an experience for me (.) that was very influential and decisive because, like I said, I just went forward to tell people what happened, and that it was now time for me to begin studying for the ministry. Which is nothing I wanted to do. Nothing I looked forward to doing and yet, at the same time, when it comes upon me in such a strange

way, I didn't, I didn't resist it at all. I didn't argue or debate with myself and say “wait a minute, what's going on here?” I just marched forward like, like a robot...And, and maintained that faith and attitude through years of study.

Lon notes that while growing up, he was never a very good student, preferring to study automobiles more than academics. He wrote avidly to car magazines, published opinion articles about laws around speeding (even taking a case around radar detection to the state supreme court), and kept an extensive spreadsheet that tracked car specifications across *years*. But when he began his ministerial studies, he very much loved the reading and writing and sense making around theological and biblical scholarship. Yet, despite his success as a student, he described a decade of dead ends and arbitrary hurdles (all richly charged by literate activities) as he strove for an ordination that he ultimately never received.

My ministerial studies, 7 years. Every year I would, [spouse] and I would go and we would meet before the District Board of Ministerial Development, talk about my progress and my plans and where I was going with all this. And at the 7 years, courses completed, uh, and we went to meet with a District Board of Ministerial Development and they decided that for some reason ordination wasn't in the cards in the immediate future. And they created some more hoops for me to jump through. Uh, yeah, which ended up going for, uh, another three years.

Lon noted feeling a sense of loss for the time that he wishes he had spent with his young boys instead of living in books for ordination. And while he was studying, numerous tensions grew out his theological scholarship. Of note, he started to recognize the exceptional number of contradictions extant across the gospels in the Testaments new and old, and in biblical scholarship at large. Lon did have enough courses—after seven years and thousands of dollars

spent—to minister a Wesleyan church. He did this for a few years, but the pay was not enough to support his family. Adding duress to duress, he took multiple jobs to provide for his family while trying for ordination as well as while pastoring various Wesleyan churches. One job, that would eventually become his full-time work to the present day, brought him to Japan in 2007. There, he shifted what I describe later as his *lifeworld perspective* (Durst, 2019; Ware, 2022).

By this point, Lon noted that he was still a “true Christian,” but “ordination was no longer in the cards”:

**Lon:** I'd been wrestling with theology and, and the Bible and trying to make the whole thing work and it evidently didn't. I was in Japan. So I saw some, must have been Buddhist, processions, or something, realizing that most of Japan was not particularly religious and certainly not Christian, and yet it seemed to be a wonderful society and wonderful people and (.1) so that was playing in my mind at that time...I was still fascinated with the theology and stuff like that, and then I, I went to a bookstore, and bought, uh, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. And also while I was there, I read, uh, Hitchens' *God is not Great*. I fell totally in love with Dawkins.

**Ware:** So what was that like? so you, you fell in love with those texts as a believer? Or...

**Lon:** Yeah! Suddenly it seemed, suddenly all the contradictions and inconsistencies and awful, awful stuff in the Bible, it made sense of that. And that I realized it was awful. (.) And kind of stupid. And I, I was okay with that. And I remember one night thinking, "Well, I think I'll be an atheist now."

**Ware:** hm

**Lon:** and you know, “starting tomorrow and from that day forward, I'm not going to read any religious books and I'm not going to read the Bible and I'm not going to pray, and as

much as possible I'm not going to think about this stuff. And maybe I'll get struck by lightning. Whatever. But if I don't, I can always go back...to believing.” So I was in Japan. And so I decided, just thought I'd try out this atheism thing for a while and see how it went. It went really well. It was totally liberating.

In a fascinating turn—a decision made *seemingly* (as Lon tells it here) as suddenly as to begin ministerial study—Lon consciously *directed* his life away from five decades of religious perspective, ethical and moral values, and ways of seeing and being in the world.

As I will describe more later in Chapter 2 and 4, Lon marshalled a shift in *subjectivity*, and *configurations* of subjectivity oriented toward personality and life projects. Whereas once he strove for ordination, guided by an experience that mirrored John Wesley's Aldersgate experience, he is now the president of an atheistic/agnostic, *secular* organization called The Clergy Project that serves religious practitioners who no longer believe in the faiths they profess/ed. In fact, Lon worked his way up through the board of directors to become president by remediating (Prior & Hengst, 2010) a literate activity he utilized as a “car guy.” Before even joining the board of directors, he began a spreadsheet—closely like his work in tracking car specification—to track how many members of The Clergy Project there are, what denomination or faith they were (or *are*) clergy for, their geographic locations, etc. This spreadsheet was exceptionally useful for the board, and they put him in charge of it. Through this trajectory of activity, Lon eventually became president of The Clergy Project. Thus, instead of ministering a congregation, he is now an atheist, and presides over a large nonprofit secular organization.

How should, or how can, we document, interpret, and assess Lon's multifaceted, dynamic becomings, unbecomings, and becomings-*anew*, all richly charged by literate activities? Teleologically, he did not achieve his aspirations of ordination and ministering, but he—like

most of my co-researchers, in varying ways—judges the outcome of his loss of faith as quite positive.

There is certainly far more to the brief narrative above, as Lon and I have talked many times over the last few years (and still consider ourselves co-researchers and friends). But from the first talk with Lon, I got the sense that there was *far* more to the Wesleyan experience, to his becoming with the literate activities around his ministerial studies and his being a car guy, and to his unbecoming Christian and becoming secular. Working with Lon served as a primer for the following years of research, and I felt I was on to something very unique. But I also noticed that I needed to figure out *how* to conduct the research, even though the project was already planned, and IRB approved. I realized that my project was not only about tracing “pathways of becoming” around literate activity and nonbelief, but also about how to theoretically-methodologically conduct research that accounts for the unexpected twists of the wildly disparate, *dynamically nonlinear* ways in which my co-researchers lost faith. I also needed to figure out how to ethically tell those stories *with* my co-researchers.

Herein, I offer research that I have been conducting since January of 2019 (and planning since May of 2018) as a “dissertation” in partial completion of my doctoral work in writing studies. This research is about some very wonderful people<sup>1</sup>. It is about coming to and from faith. It is about the “unbecomings” and “becomings” of whole persons (González Rey, 2011), and the semiotic/literate activities that are utilized on trajectories of *intra-actions* (the ways multiple agencies emerge as they become entangled through interacting, rather than taking agency in people and artifacts as an inherent quality; see Barad, 2007; see Chapter 2) that were

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<sup>1</sup> Though there are only two full case studies in this dissertation, I learned an exceptional amount from all twenty co-researchers, and I am planning various ways to write up their data and share their stories beginning in the early stages of my post-defense career.

crucial to those (un)becomings (see Chapter 2). And because the research was uncompromisingly emergent and never stable, this dissertation draws some methodological conclusions about the *how* one might conduct the sorts of research on (un)becoming and semiotic/literate activity that I showcase, particularly, how to *deepen* and *enrich* data and narrative accounts through research practices that support *dialogic openings*.

Next, I briefly locate this research around broader fields of scholarship. Then, I introduce the site from which I have drawn co-researchers, “The Clergy Project.” I map the research questions and central arguments to be found here. And lastly, I provide chapter sketches for what’s to come.

### **Locating the research**

This dissertation engages with several disciplines. It is inherently a work of *writing studies* but writing studies can mean a lot of different things. I draw from fields such as Vygotskian cultural-historical psychology (Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1991, 1998; del Rio & Álvarez, 1995, 2007, González Rey, 2007), linguistic anthropology (Silverstein, 1993; Irvine, 1996; Agha, 2007, Koven, 2001, 2016), and phenomenological and flat sociologies (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973; Goffman, 1981; Latour, 2005). These all, in varying ways, help form a broader framework of dialogic semiotics (Voloshinov, 1973; Irvine, 1996; Agha, 2007; Prior & Hengst, 2010; see Chapter 2) for literate activity that is shot through my methodological practices, including my own writing of the research (see Chapter 2). Writing, here, is one element of broader semiotic/literate activity, a “unit,” part of a “unity,” to use a Vygotskian metaphor (Vygotsky, 1994; Blunden, 2016; González Rey, 2011). It is not easy, or worthwhile, to separate writing—as activity and as artifacts left behind as traces of activity—from the fundamentally laminated and distributed processes of being and *becoming* charged by semiotic/literate activity

broadly (Smith & Prior, 2020). Thus, as I explicate further in Chapter 2, I draw from Prior's (1998; Prior & Shipka, 2003; Prior, 2008; Prior & Hengst, 2010; Prior & Schaffner, 2011) landmark accounts of literate activity (and semiotic activity broadly) as situated, mediated, dispersed, remediated, assembled, disassembled, and reassembled—as laminated literate assemblages that rhizomatically permeate the whole lives of persons.

I utilize this framework to study the trajectories of semiotic *becoming* (Prior, 2018) of members of The Clergy Project, an organization for former or current clergy members, like Lon, who no longer believe in god<sup>2</sup>. While the Clergy Project has members who are still practicing clergy, harboring a secret loss of faith, at the time of writing this, all my co-researchers have transitioned to secular lives/livelihoods (one, “Alex,” did so while we were co-researching; see Chapter 3; see also Ware, 2022). The Clergy Project has strong ties to organizations such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation, and connections to very well-known scholars and/or public intellectuals such as Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Dan Barker. These aspects, along with the content of and motivations for this project being deeply secular, locate this research, at least peripherally, in conversation with broader secular scholarship out of what has been called the “New Atheist Movement.” In fact, it was scholarship in New Atheism that led me to ask what writing studies and related fields could contribute to scholarship on secularism<sup>3</sup> and/as non-belief, and what new insights I might provide regarding secular becoming and the role of literate activity in that becoming.

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<sup>2</sup> I do not capitalize my own use of “god,” not for reasons disrespectful to any faith, but to acknowledge the myriad gods worshiped in the world—none of which I believe in. As a matter of usage, it's simply not necessary to capitalize when I'm not addressing one in particular as I would a proper noun like “Jesus” or “Mohammed.” See Seidel (2019) for a similar approach.

<sup>3</sup> I use secular/secularism as a term encompassing traditional definitions (separation of church from religious institutions), but also broadly as a blanket term for non-belief/non-believing people and institutions.

My work is set apart from other scholarship out of New Atheism in several ways that I will map here. To start, it is a commonplace of literature from the New Atheist Movement to describe religious *becoming* as completely coincidental. In most cases, many argue, geographical location strongly predicts the religious beliefs of those who are born, live, and die in given locale (see Harris, 2004, 2006; Dawkins, 2006, Dennett, 2006; Hitchens, 2007). In this way, religious *becoming* has been, to varying degrees, black-boxed by undertheorized conceptualizations. Missing or buried in these scholars' accounts (of geographical location predicting religious belief) are ways that the social practices of a family, church group or congregation, etc., involve individuals being socialized into becoming particular types of persons through learning and participating in sociocultural directive practices and genres. As I will show through case studies, religious beliefs are rooted in and distributed across the sociocultural practices of peoples, and individuals develop cultural architectures for mind and agency (del Rio & Álvarez, 1995; 2007) through intra-acting with sociocultural practices. As individuals increasingly *become-with* the sociocultural practices of the groups of which they claim membership (or are claimed *by*, by familial tradition in many or most cases), believers are (re)produced in contiguity with the cultural architectures they enact in emergent, open-ended ways.

Lost to New Atheism, alongside religious *becoming*, are the exceptionally fraught processes of *unbecoming*, of losing/leaving faith. In essence, the New Atheists argue *why* to not believe, but leave untheorized and unillustrated *how* to not believe. Scholarship in New Atheism also does not engage *directly* (i.e., beyond hypothetically) with the sociocultural, socioeconomic, psychological, and familial ramifications for leaving faith, and the marked trauma that can be experienced resulting from these factors. While Dennett and LaScola (2014) do provide accounts of clergy members' stories as they moved out of faith, neither they nor other New Atheists take

up in a careful way religious *unbecoming* as semiotically mediated trajectories of *becoming*, nor do they linger long on the exceptionally complex ramifications that come with believers leaving their faiths behind. After all, none are semioticians or social scientists, and none (apart from Dennett & LaScola, 2014) do ethnographic work.

This dissertation takes a situated, ethnographic approach, drawing on dialogic semiotics and sociocultural theories of learning, development and *becoming* (Prior, 1998, 2018; Smith & Prior, 2020; Kell, 2015, 2017; Wertsch, 1991) to explore the ways in which semiotic/literate activities help facilitate trajectories of semiotic *becoming*. I study these phenomena across the lives of former clergy members who have, over time, become non-believers in god(s) and other supernatural aspects of their respective religions. Several scholars in writing studies have addressed literate activity related to people's religious lives. For instance, Fishman (1988) traced the disparate types of literacies extant in an Amish community and found that her participants' cultural groups maintained control over the literate activities people utilized, helping preserve their fundamentally Amish culture. DePalma (2011) traced religious discourses as resources (for students and teachers) for teaching college composition. Kelvie (2018) draws from a study of a church reading group to study religious literate activity and civic engagement of aging adults. Roozen (2010), Roozen & Erickson (2017) and Durst, (2019), all draw peripherally on religious literate activities and show how people utilize those practices in varied ways across their lives, offering insight into ways that religious beliefs and practices are distributed across lifeworlds (Schutz & Luckman, 1973). Crapanzano (2000) does some work in linguistic anthropology around biblical literalism in religious and secular spaces in the United States. Fannell (2010) also in linguistic anthropology, takes up secularism/secularization for an "anthropology of Secularism." However, this dissertation is, to my knowledge, the first study in the field of

writing studies of its kind. I have found, to date, no other scholarship that examines the semiotic/literate activity of atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, freethinkers, etc., and how semiotic/literate activities have helped them *become* as such. Thus, utilizing my dialogic semiotic theoretical and methodological framework, this dissertation aims to answer these two questions broadly:

- 1) What trajectories of semiotic becoming led individuals from belief to nonbelief?
- 2) What roles have literate activities played in individuals' trajectories of semiotic becoming as they shifted from belief to non-belief?

As is common to qualitative, ethnographic research, several new questions (related, but more focused) developed as I researched these. Those I will map as they become relevant in various chapters of the dissertation.

Next, I describe “The Clergy Project.” This dissertation is not inherently *about* the “site” from which I met and recruited co-researchers. Rather, it is about individuals who are *members*, some of which are deeply involved in the organization, some who hardly mention it. Nonetheless, I spend some time describing the organization because The Clergy Project, its board of directors, and the many incredible people who are a part of it, have made this dissertation possible. Without The Clergy Project and its people, this work would not *be* at all.

### **The Clergy Project**

Elephants are extremely intelligent animals and have memories that span many years. We, as Clergy Project participants are a relatively intelligent and empathetic herd. We have decades of memories, vast quantities of experiences to share, and mountains of lessons learned that can be of great benefit to the millions of current and ever doubting

religious professionals around the world. We are doing a good thing here at The Clergy Project. It's up to us to make sure everyone knows we are here.

*Elephants* – Lon Ostrander, 2018

The epigraph is a part of Lon's written address to members of The Clergy Project (TCP) from 2018. In that address, he mapped his goals for the organization and its members, making a broader call for TCP to make itself more known. "We have talked before about The Clergy Project existing in a bubble," Lon writes, "that stays primarily within the secular movement." He continues:

We have discussed the idea that most religious professionals are not even aware of our existence. Our ability "to provide support, community, and hope to current and former religious professionals who no longer hold supernatural beliefs<sup>4</sup>" is severely restricted to those few who know we exist.

Lon calls, then, for TCP to be the *elephant in the room*, and asks for members to help "propagate" knowledge of TCP out beyond the secular movement, not as "atheistic evangelism," but so that practicing clergy who are struggling with doubt or nonbelief, or former clergy who need a community can find the resources they need in TCP.

The Clergy Project was founded in 2011 as an online resource for current-and-former religious practitioners (priests, pastors, nuns, rabbis, imams, people in parachurch/other religiously affiliated organizations, etc.) to connect and share stories of "deconversion." It also, more importantly, serves as a support system for those in clergy roles who have lost faith, and are seeking guidance in how to transition to a secular life and livelihood.

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<sup>4</sup> This is from TCP's mission statement; see below.

The origins of the TCP are in a qualitative research project conducted by Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola (see Dennett & LaScola, 2010; 2015). Dennett and LaScola postulated that there must be preachers who do not believe that still carry out their duties for their churches and congregations. They did, in fact, find nonbelieving clergy. Their pilot project included 35 Christian clergy members, and culminated in a 2010 article for *Evolutionary Psychology* titled “Preachers Who Are Not Believers.” The article drew from five of their participants. The goal driving the research was to answer qualitatively: “What is it like to be a pastor who doesn’t believe in God?” After the publication of the 2010 article, the study expanded to include 30 more respondents and resulted in Dennett and LaScola’s (2015) book *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind*. Out of the initial pilot study, however, The Clergy Project was also founded.

Dennett and LaScola worked closely with former clergy-turned-author, Dan Barker, to form TCP, but then decided that they should not be members nor serve on its board of directors because neither had ever held clergy positions. Thus, TCP is run only by those who qualify for membership. To qualify, members must have been (or be) in religious leadership roles and must have deconverted from faith. TCP’s mission is “to provide support, community, and hope to current and former religious professionals who no longer hold supernatural beliefs<sup>5</sup>.”

TCP started as an online resource: a “private, safeguarded, and multifaceted Online Community of Forums” for members to communicate with each other about their stories, support each other, and forge friendships with like-minded clergy and former clergy members. TCP received 501(c)(3) status as a charitable, tax-exempt organization in 2015 and is growing steadily—having just reached 1000 members in 2020 with participants from over 50 countries (though more than 70% are US citizens<sup>6</sup>). While most (more than 700) members of TCP are

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.theclergyproject.org>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://clergyproject.org/clergy-project-demographics/>

former Christians, coming to nonbelief is not a uniquely Christian phenomenon. The Clergy Project also has members of several religions, such as former rabbis of Judaism, and former imams of Islam. And, there is also great diversity in the shades of beliefs, and identity stances toward belief. For instance, whereas some members were former literalists (Crapanzano, 2000), others have come from more liberal backgrounds (i.e., do not believe the Bible is the inherent word of god). For instance, not all Christian denominations believe, as Catholics do, in transubstantiation—that saying particular words over a wafer and a cup of wine literally transforms those into the body and blood of Christ. Understandings of religiosity *and* practices of religion also change drastically over time. For instance, while Joiya Martin (see Chapter 4) is no longer a practicing Christian, she still attends church (currently a Unitarian Universalist denomination) because the social components, and some of the ritualistic aspects of services bring her comfort.

While still primarily online, it does now reach more into people’s lives in tangible ways. TCP lends crucial forms of support to members in need. For instance, they offer “Transitional Assistance Grants” (TAGs) to members leaving clergy roles and in need of financial aid as they make career transitions. Included are outplacement services that help members find employment, in many cases when all they have ever known is church-related work. TAGs and related outplacement services are supported through TCP’s partnership with the Stiefel Freethought Foundation and are presided over by TCP’s “Career Development Committee.” TCP also partners with Recovering from Religion’s “Secular Therapy Project” and provides twelve *free* sessions of psychotherapy with licensed therapists. The therapy is geared toward helping members work through the drastic mental toll of loss of faith, as well as the sociocultural and familial chaos that admitting lost faith can have on people from deeply religious places. I draw

particularly on data gathered around one co-researcher's ("Alex Taylor") experiences – and successes – with a therapist she worked with through TCP (see Chapter 3).

To be clear, TCP does not seek to deconvert people. Participants must apply to join, are vetted rigorously, and take part only in the activities they choose. No incentives for deconverting are offered – only assistance in the fraught process of such profound changes and coping with them *ex post facto*.

### **Contributions**

Using documented narratives (Prior, 1994; Roozen & Erickson, 2017) of dynamically nonlinear trajectories of becoming around religious belief and coming to non-belief, I contribute to understanding both developing non-belief and roles of literate activity in semiotic becoming in far-reaching ways. That is, I cover disciplinary, spiritual, psychological, familial, sociocultural, and socioeconomic ramifications around unbecoming religious and becoming secular.

Becomings are constantly reoriented and renegotiated through literate activities across the lifespan (Dippre, 2019; Bazerman, Applebee, Brandt, et al., 2018); thus, this research aims to contribute to the call for lifespan accounts of writing, in some cases taking into account writing that co-researchers have done over a decade or more. This dissertation is also firmly located in cultural-historical work that traces the development of psychological activities. Particularly, I offer accounts of “word sense” (Vygotsky, 1987); “subjective sense” and “subjective configuration” (González Rey, 2011); and “*perezhivanie*” (Vygotsky, 1994; Blunden, 2016; Fleer, et al. 2017; see Chapters 2 and 4) as integral to tracing human becoming across the lifespan. Thus, this research contributes to lines that trace the lifespan development of psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1987; Valsiner & Connelly, 2003). And critically, it also

aims to refine methodological practices for tracing semiotic activity and becoming *dialogically*. I describe this in depth in the next chapter.

### **Standpoint as Primary (Co-)Researcher**

My relationship to the content of this project is bound up with my own biographical experiences with faith and realizing non-belief. My grandparents—grandfather in particular—were very religious. Having been raised by my grandparents, I was heavily indoctrinated into the Catholic faith from very early on in childhood. I attended church every Sunday (and often Wednesday evenings). I also went through formal catechism at my congregation, consisting of a few hours of schooling every week after Sunday morning mass. *It was delightful.*

At the age of eight, I was tapped to become an “acolyte,” or, more commonly, an *altar boy*. I helped Father Marcel Doumoulin—a person I saw as a wonderful man of integrity and of whom I still think fondly—prepare for masses, and I served the altar each Sunday (in the morning and evening), employing a series of ritualistic practices common in Catholic tradition. It is a shame that I must make this clear: I experienced no abuse at church (unless you count the teaching of violent theologies of hell to young children as abusive, which I admit that I might<sup>7</sup>).

The catch is that the indoctrination simply didn’t take. I can’t remember ever actually believing in any aspects of the faith. This is striking because I *can* remember believing in Santa very early in my childhood. I do remember a deep appreciation for the organ music during church services, and I remember that it was important to me to see people from the community seeming happy, and being kind to each other, even if only as briefly as turning to those near and uttering “peace be with you.” Pax vobis.

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<sup>7</sup> I include this line on abuse because, one co-researcher, a former Carmelite nun (described briefly in Chapter 5), hypothesized that I stopped believing at such a young age because I might have been abused.

When I was ten, I started to feel a tension with the work I was doing for the church. I think of it in retrospect as having reached an age when I was beginning to “reason” about the faith I was caught in. I remember one experience of astonishment when learning that one could *buy* the wafers that were supposedly (transubstantiated into) the body of Christ; that was detrimental to whatever faith I might have had. I no longer wanted to serve mass. I was preparing for confirmation, which meant extra hours of catechism, when I decided to tell my family that I no longer wanted to *do* church altogether. I think I also just wanted to be a kid, to listen to my Nirvana cassette tapes on my Walkman (it was the early-mid 90s). Either way, I stopped my work as an acolyte, quit going to catechism and church, and I was never confirmed. Thus, my “deconversion” as some of my co-researchers describe loss of faith, was relatively smooth, and I was very lucky that my grandparents respected my wishes. Catholicism never again played a role in my life. But I always felt a simmering sort of distrust of religion-in-the-world, and it might have been helped along by the sorts of music I listened to, and the non-believers on television that I frequently watched. For instance, on my all-time favorite show *Seinfeld* (which from very young I grew up watching as each episode aired), George Costanza, when asked by his therapist, “I thought you didn’t believe in God?”, replied, “I do for the bad stuff!”

But I never labeled myself until early adulthood. I’m still hesitant to do so because it doesn’t really matter what I am not. In fact, I never even learned the term “atheist” until my freshmen year of college when I was part of a debate in a public speaking course. I chose to argue *against* organized religion, that historically it has done *far* more harm than good (a point emphasized *now* as I watch the religious right wreck the US even more). My research for that debate did awaken the dormant sort of distrust for organized religion, and it grew substantially.

It's likely that I would not have conducted the research for this dissertation had I not begun thinking about religion and secularism at 18 in that 100-level public speaking course.

I will not map my non-belief in full here, as, there have been a few, distinct “periods.” But as the primary co-researcher and writer on this project, it's necessary to make known my relationship to non-belief and organized religion as it stands. I find terms like “atheist” to be not very useful or interesting for various reasons, but I do not believe in the existence of any god or gods, a Cartesian dualistic soul, or anything commonly referred to as “supernatural.” After the public speaking course and particularly in my late teens and early twenties, I described myself as an “anti-theist” (probably in an angsty sort of way)—adamantly opposed to any sort of organized religion, particularly those that have and wield political power. Anti-theists (see Hitchens, 2007) tend to argue that all religion (as an entity with a sort of intentional stance) does exceptionally more harm than good in the world. They also can be quite strident and caustic. To be as honest as I can: I *am* still highly critical of *organized* religion and feel great disdain for Christian nationalism and the ways in which cherry-picked theologies are enacted in our “secular” politics. But anti-theists and some atheists (particularly Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens) tend not only to attack the belief and the organized systems, but also the *believers*. That is, they have often slipped into describing believers' mental capacities, at least as they relate to faith, as deficient. They fall into accounts of higher psychological functions that I read as in line with what Wertsch (1991) describes as *heterogeneity as genetic hierarchy*—disparate higher psychological functions are “better,” “more developed,” than others, and a higher vs. lower or primitive dichotomy is advanced. I find that sort of thinking exceptionally dangerous too and reject the idea that believers are in any way cognitively deficient. Nonetheless, a *subjective configuration* of exceptionally critical feelings for and attitudes towards belief/believers and

organized religion, in general, is something I have had to work out over the years so that I do not fall into the trappings of some inflated sense of superiority in my nonbelief.

In my early contact with The Clergy Project, the site of recruitment for the research, I was encouraged to identify as “something familiar” by one of the founders of the organization (Linda LaScola, phone communication) so that I might develop trusting relationships with my co-researchers. I chose “secular humanist” to showcase my lack of faith and commitment to an ethical and moral life without religion. All that said, I have long been interested in secular movements and, more recently through the study of dialogic semiotics, *how* people, once of faith, *become* secular, and the processes through which people leave their faith(s) behind. My secular becoming was not fraught in any real sense; but I anticipated that I was an aberration, and I hypothesized that literate activities in some sense *must* play some role in religious unbecoming. As I show in the two cases I detail in Chapters 3 and 4, they sure do.

### **Chapter Sketches**

The chapters that follow represent the first culminations of a project that I anticipate continuing in all conceivable ways. That is, I am still in touch with nearly *all* the twenty co-researchers I’ve worked with. Some have found that 4-5 meetings were “enough,” and are interested in keeping in touch but feel like they’ve co-researched as much as they would like. Others (Lon, above, and Alex and Joiya that follow, included) are still deeply engaged as co-researchers, and are waiting for me to be ready to generate more data in co-research activities. To that end, this dissertation is only the beginning.

In Chapter 2, “Dialogic Theory/Dialogic Methods,” I describe the inextricable nature of theory and methods in a dialogic project such as this one. I synthesize a dialogic semiotic theoretical framework that draws from writing studies, phenomenological sociologies, linguistic

anthropology, and most importantly, cultural-historical psychological approaches to human becoming. I then sketch a dialogic semiotic methodological approach to studying lifespan literate activity, semiotic (un)becoming, and the development of psychological functions across the lifespan. Crucially, I describe all facets of “co-research” (Roozen & Erickson, 2017). I also map the approaches to data collection, analysis, etc. Specifically salient are my *dialogic animation* and *dialogic analysis* protocols. The former elicits rich intra-actions and dialogic openings with texts (and other semiotics) that co-researchers have brought to the project; the latter is a recursive, iterative procedure for managing the complexity of *becoming* data, and for sharing deep and enriched accounts in research narratives.

In Chapter 3, “God’s Absence During Trauma Took its Toll,” I draw from one case study with “Alex,” once a deeply faithful Christian who, over complex trajectories of semiotic becoming, lost her faith and was left to make sense of drastic perspectival shifts, in large part, through literate activity. Weaving analyses of talk across two years, fifteen interviews, and multiple texts and textual interactions, I trace a narrative of Alex’s trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming. Particularly, I utilize “lifespan semiotic (un)becoming” as a reference frame to trace a broad biography of Alex’s coming away from faith in varied ways. Then, utilizing Vygotskian “word sense” as a reference frame, I zoom in on moments of consequence across years that show Alex redeveloping a “lifeworld perspective” and she moved from being *certain* to being *uncertain*.

In Chapter 4, “Bipolar is Not that Great of an Environment to Live In,” I draw from my work with Joiya Martin. This chapter traces the fundamentally messy, laminated, nonlinear trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming that Joiya facilitated with 10 years of blogging. Particularly, I situate “subjective sense” and “subjective configuration” in the wider frame of

“*perezhivanie*” and becoming, and I utilize ontogenetic timescales to show how Joiya managed “directively” a severe bipolar diagnosis that completely upended her life and livelihood. I focus on three particular threads of semiotic (un)becoming: “triggers” of her bipolar symptoms, bipolar mania and euphoria and the consequences it registered across her life, and her deeply entangled loss of faith and *becoming* atheist that was a direct result of her bipolar diagnosis. Throughout, I show how Joiya’s *subjective sense* and *subjective configurations* were reconfigured over a decade of *working over* and intra-acting with the symptoms of her bipolar.

In Chapter 5, I then draw broad theoretical-methodological conclusions from the case studies and the broad work of this dissertation. In doing so, I elaborate particularly on the ways in which dialogic semiotic theory and methods served *dialogic openings* for the project that ultimately led to a *deepening* and *enrichment* of the data collected, of the documented narratives that grew from those data, and of the dissertation project widely. I end by describing five other co-research cases to argue that, while all co-research stories are disparate, the focal cases in the dissertation are representative of the wider project.

## CHAPTER 2: DIALOGIC THEORY/DIALOGIC METHODS

### **Dialogic Tracing of Literate Activity and Becoming Across the Lifespan**

It seems like when writing about becoming, one *can't not* begin by citing Lemke's (2000) questions of "how do moments add up to a life? How do our situated moments together add up to a social life as such?" (p. 243). They are, after all, exceptionally interesting questions that can be explored in exceptionally diverse ways. I explore these questions by drawing on a dialogic semiotic framework for studying *becoming* with (and of) literate activity. I base my theoretical-methodological framework broadly in cultural-historical scholarship (CHAT, but without the triangle model of activity systems) rooted in the psychology of Vygotsky and some of his followers (Vygotsky, 1987; del Río & Álvarez, 1995, 2007; Fleer et al. 2017), the historical semiotics of Bakhtin's circle (Bakhtin, 1980, 1986; Voloshinov, 1973), some varied work in phenomenological and flat sociology (Schutz & Luckmann, 1975; Latour, 2005), linguistic anthropology (Silverstein, 1993; Irvine, 1996; Agha, 2007; Koven, 2000, 2016) and the agential realism of Barad (2007). In this chapter, I first map the dialogic semiotic theory I utilize. Then, I hinge that theory on the dialogic semiotic methodological framework for tracing lifespan literate activity and trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming.

#### ***Dialogic Semiotics and Literate Activity***

...every outer ideological sign, of whatever kind, is engulfed in and washed over by inner signs – by the consciousness. The outer sign originates from this sea of inner signs and continues to abide there, since its life is a process of renewal as something to be understood, experienced, and assimilated, i.e., its life consists in its being engaged ever anew into the inner context (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 33).

I first encountered Voloshinov while reading Prior and Shipka's (2003) "Chronotopic Lamination: Tracing the Contours of Literate Activity." It was my second semester in the master's program at University of Maine. I was thinking about dropping out because I didn't think I was smart enough to move on (and still don't, at times). But that week in February in my first methods course, reading Prior and Shipka's work showed me what *studying* writing could be. And the ways in which theory and research were woven through that piece entire, informing the analyses in ways that I had never seen a framework do, made me decide to stay. Drawn to their use of Voloshinov, particularly, I immediately bought *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and read it studiously, understanding very little. The quote above drew me immediately, from my first reading, on a long journey of simply trying to understand what it means. In this context, it signals, from the beginning of this long chapter on dialogic semiotic theories and methods, that human minds are fundamentally dialogic in all senses—historical, emergent processes of *renewal* as they are *washed over* by inner-and-outer semiotics as they intra-act (in Barad's, 2007, sense) with complex social worlds. As people are fundamentally dialogic, studying with them must be fundamentally dialogic.

The dialogic semiotic approach (Voloshinov, 1973; Irvine, 1996; Agha, 2007; Prior & Hengst, 2010) that I employ is fundamentally woven with the conceptualization of literate activity I draw from (see Prior, 1998; Prior & Shipka, 2003). It aims to capture sign phenomena and use as historically emergent in laminated literate assemblages (Smith & Prior, 2020). It foregrounds the entangled *co-development* of people, practices, and material artifacts in intra-active becoming (Barad, 2007). It also foregrounds trajectories of signs and semiotic practices traveling across various modes as “concrete, historical, situated, and social phenomena” (Prior & Hengst, 2010, p. 2). Practices typically labeled writing, reading, speaking, listening, gesturing,

drawing, etc. involve a complex entanglement of semiotic resources, so individual modes simply don't hold as tenable foci (Prior & Olinger, 2019). Prior's (1998) landmark account of "literate activity" as situated, mediated, dispersed, and laminated, and later of assemblages of entangled practices (Smith & Prior, 2020), is thus an integrative approach to semiotic/literate activity, one that highlights the ability for signs and practices to be built into emergent assemblages as well as the mobile nature of both. All literate activity involves dialogic semiotics in that it is built of concrete, sociocultural-and-historical laminated assemblages (Prior & Schaffer, 2011; Prior, 1998; Prior & Shipka, 2003). It is in, through and *across* connected, layered dialogic semiotic activities—and *moments* (see below)—over time, that people become who they are (Kell, 2015, 2017; Prior, 2018; Ware, 2022).

Since Prior's (1998) account of literate activity, research in writing studies has grappled with how to trace the complex ways in which writing and its entanglements with a profusion of other semiotic/literate activities mediate people's lives within and across specialized as well as broad settings. Recently, Durst (2019) has argued for a "lifeworld perspective" on becoming, literate activity and disciplinarity as one way to do this work, showing how Ashlynn's becoming an engineer is inextricable from the myriad places, people, activities, and practices not typically included in disciplinary research. Drawing on her account, I also argue a lifeworld perspective—which I gloss as the entangled, richly laminated ways of being and seeing across the moments that make lives—on my co-researchers' becoming non-believers across complex topographies of semiosis that become intra-actively imbricated with literate activity.

### ***Semiotic Becoming***

A dialogic semiotic approach to literate activity is particularly useful in tracing individual *becoming*. Becoming happens as literate "moments add up to a life" (Lemke, 2000) as

individuals engage with literate activities across an array of times, spaces, and modes, and co-develop *with* activities and artifacts. However, formative moments don't always add up expectedly, and some seem to *subtract* earlier additions. This is of fundamental importance to the work of this dissertation, as it was the case with Lon's opening vignette. Years of rich moments added up complexly, as he searched endlessly for answers to all the contradictions he saw in the bible while he strove for ordination. He acquired neither and decided to *subtract* faith (and literate practices like reading and interpreting the bible) from his lifeworld perspective. Thus, trajectories of becoming can shift, fluctuating between *unbecomings* (which I describe below) and *becomings*, branching out in shoots and buds. Semiotic becoming then is not only fundamentally dialogic, but also *dynamically nonlinear*. It encompasses not only growth and addition across lives, but also change, loss, and contradictions (Engeström, 1996) which must be central to our understanding of becoming and unbecoming—*the making, unmaking, and remaking of persons, artifacts, and the broader world in intra-activity*.

In writing studies, the term “becoming” is relatively new in use, but there are related areas of scholarship. For instance, there is a robust history of scholarship that links writing to the development of identities (Ivanič, 1998; Bazerman, 2003; Burgess & Ivanič, 2011) and while identity making is integral to becoming (see later, *subjective sense* and *subjective configuration*), becoming as I take it up, encompasses not only the development of identity/identity *processes*, but also the complex host of other factors crucial to human development across the lifespan. Like the shift from product models of writing to process-based accounts, scholarship in writing studies came to see not only texts as always in process, but also *people*. Of note, here, is Herrington and Curtis' (2000) longitudinal study of four students, persons *in process*, as they wrote their way through their undergraduate work. Ivanič (1998) traces the links between writing and identity,

and the depth of her case study of Rachel sheds light on the processual, negotiated, and often contested nature of the active construction of identities. Ivanič argues, broadly, that writing is a fundamental act of identity and identity making, of alignment with various sociocultural possibilities for self-hood. While these (and other peripheral studies like these that take up development, e.g., Beaufort, 2000; 2007) are related in showing the development of persons through the scope of identities, they are predicated on discourse community theories broadly (see Durst, 2019). This dissertation *is not*.

My work here is more attuned to scholarship that takes a fundamentally semiotic approach to becoming and human development, and work in a recent special issue of *Learning, Culture, and Social Interaction* on transliteracies and *becoming* is representative of the approach I employ. Smith and Prior's (2020) work demonstrates a Flat framework for tracing the becoming of individuals (in this case, Prior's daughter Nora; see later) and of groups (Urban Word NYC), and they also highlight *across-ness*—the ways in which becomings are mobile, happening transcontextually over a multiplicity of times, places, and experiences. Olsen and VanDerHeide (2020) trace the processes of four students *becoming as writers* (also encompassing the development of identities) *across* their lives but in the local context of classrooms. Roozen (2020), in the same special issue, eschews oft assumed disciplinary boundaries to trace the fundamentally intertwined ontogenesis of person (Alexandra) and practices across various “representational media.” Also resonant with my approach is Kell's work (2015; 2017) that traces the highly transcontextual nature of meaning-making, how people and objects are in constant motion as “things make people happen” (2015: 442). Kell (2017) also offers, importantly and in line with some in writing studies (Prior, 1998, 2018; Roozen, 2009; Ware 2022), *trajectories* as units of analysis in the development of people and things. Smith and

Prior's, Roozen's, and Kell's insistence on *people* and *practices* and *things* is a crucial one. Discussions of becoming typically center on people. But people are always engaging with a host of other things, sociohistoric practices and activities, etc. The cases I draw on in the following chapters foreground the ways in which becomings are always emergent concatenations of people and a suite of other things in *intra-action*.

The last, crucial point to make is that *becoming* is fundamentally dialogic. People draw on complex histories in emergent becoming: histories of lived-experience, histories of acting-with other people, artifacts, and the broader world. Becoming, then, becomes about *redirecting histories* in the constant making and remaking of persons, activities, and social worlds at large.

### ***Intra-active becoming and unbecoming***

One important question that has emerged from my research is: What useful sense can we make of arcs of becoming that are not *explicitly* coherent or are explicitly *divergent*? I found early on that I would need to think about semiotic becoming as more than *addition*, as semiotic moments adding up to make a life and social life. To make sense of trajectories of semiotic becoming of the cases that follow (particularly, of marked chains of moments of *loss*), it became necessary to deepen the theory to better account for the semiotic becoming of objects, including text-artifacts; for change, loss, contradiction, and “unbecoming”; and, for the semiotic becoming of psychological processes important in lifespan development. Barad's (2007) materialist account of intra-action calls attention to the becoming of practices, artifacts, and the world-at-large (see Prior, 2018, and Sheridan, 2018, for productive uptakes of Barad's work). Informed by Bohr's quantum mechanics, Barad's theory complements approaches to dialogic semiotics by inviting researchers to attend to subtleties of emergence and movement in trajectories of becoming (both human and non-human). Their neologism, “intra-action,” which contrasts with

“interaction,” highlights the “mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (p. 34). Barad disputes the idea that people and things are pre-determined before moments of encounter, and whereas interaction suggests people and objects possess agency before interacting, intra-action holds that multiple forms of agency, and the objects and people themselves emerge as they become entangled and come to matter with one another. Intra-active agential realism critically destabilizes fixed ontologies of people, spaces, tools, practices, and things, calling for more complexity in our theoretical-methodological approaches and representations of our becoming data.

Intra-action showcases how entangled agencies come to matter, but most interestingly for the cases that follow, it can also account for how entanglements, across trajectories, come to *not* matter, matter less, or matter in completely reconfigured ways through change, loss, contradiction, etc. To foreground change, loss, and contradiction along trajectories, as well as moments of oscillation between disparate senses, feelings, positions on *faith*, etc., I describe these phenomena—particularly in chains of moments with things are *unsettled*, *wavering*, etc.—as “(un)becomings.” That is, at points, in tracing the trajectories from belief to non-belief in the two case studies that follow, the unmaking of lifeworld perspective, and of psychological sense (see later) is so foregrounded (i.e., away from faith) that “(un)becoming” describes the processes more precisely. Of course, in the processes described, co-researchers were also becoming non-believers and remaking their ways of life and social relations. Intra-active (un)becoming captures the instability, emergence, and nonlinearity of such trajectories *when necessary*, and helps account for not only moments of *addition* (how moments *add up* to a life), but change, loss, and contradiction across a life.

## *Ontology of Moments*

In our work in pulling together scholarship around *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1994; Fleer et al. 2017; described later) Paul Prior, Julie Hengst, Bruce Kovanen, Larissa Mazucelli, Niki Turnipseed, and I found, when approaching Lemke’s key questions, that we needed to develop an “ontology of moments” (Prior et al., unpublished manuscript) to account for situated experiences both in moments and across chains of moments. Moments are fundamentally chronotopic, encompassing more than the microlevel counting of time, and they are more than just envelopes into which we can dump our experiences (for instance, commonplace phrases like “it was in that moment that...”). Moments (and chains of moments) are fundamental units of human becoming across the lifespan. Moments are numerous distributed subjective symbolic units (see later) experientially sliceable into segments of time-space (“chronotope”) *ex post facto*. It is languaging and reflection that affords the slicing of moments, and the instantaneous flashes as *subjective senses* of moments can become integrated into broader configurations (see later) of personhood. Moments are embodied, affective, intra-actional, semiotic, and relational. To be sure, not all moments are equally important to becoming across the lifespan; so, my colleagues and I think about moments around *consequentiality*. I approach moments of consequentiality particularly through dialogic methods for research that seek to trace dialogic resonances (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017; see later) across data. In situated analyses of moments of consequentiality, I highlight indexical, affective, and historical intensities that have become crystallized in text-and/or-semiotic-artifacts, as well as in ethnographic video-recorded data (particularly in Chapter 5). Developing an ontology of moments has been crucial for elaborating Vygotsky’s notions of sense and *perezhivanie* (1987; 1994), two concepts that he never fully articulated and that figure importantly across the cases that follow.

### *Vygotskyan Sense/Meaning*

When conducting dialogic semiotic research on semiotic becoming, certain theoretical-analytical constructs, what Valsiner (2007) calls “reference frames,” will be necessarily foregrounded/backgrounded for disparate sorts of analyses. These are “general conceptual positioning devices within the minds of researchers, who set up their research questions and construct methods in ways that unify different levels of the methodology cycle” (Valsiner, 2007, p. 331). To trace psychological (un)becoming, I foreground Vygotsky’s (1987) concept of “word sense” to magnify important moments around the use of and co-development with individual words (Chapter 3), and I trace González Rey’s (2011; González Rey et al., 2017; see also Fleer et al., 2017) expanded notion of *subjective sense*, particularly around their development across the lifespan through varied activities (Chapter 4).

Vygotsky’s work, classically oriented to learning/becoming, emphasized an important relationship between words in inner speech and the development of consciousness, and how individuals develop relationships to the world and *become-with* words. His theory distinguished abstract meaning from word sense:

A word's sense is the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word. Sense is a dynamic, fluid, and complex formation which has several zones that vary in their stability. Meaning is only one of these...enrichment of the word through the sense it acquires in context is a basic law of the dynamics of meaning. The word absorbs intellectual and affective content from the entire context in which it is intertwined...the sense of a word depends on one’s own understanding of the world as a whole and on the internal structure of personality (p. 275-76).

Under Vygotsky's description, sense foregrounds subjective experience, individuals' historically laminated, particular accretion of psychological facts and experiences around words. Meaning is collectively definitional, quasi-stable, and quasi-shared as a social phenomenon, a historical residue of referentiality, as Prior and Shipka (2003) point out in their study of chronotopic lamination. Another crucial aspect of Vygotsky's definition of word sense is that he notes that words absorb disparate types of content from *the entire context in which it is intertwined*, and I read this as Vygotsky signaling word sense as a more distributed sort of analysis, seeing minds as fundamentally woven into sociocultural environments.

The sense arising in consciousness as a result of a word plays, in varied ways, with words' collectively constructed, quasi-stable-and-shared aspects. For instance, in Alex's case (see Chapter 3), the word "certainty" was fundamental to her understanding and experience of the world. I show later that the shifting sense of the word helped partially account for her (un)becoming and co-development with literate activities along her trajectory to nonbelief. She discovered this by engaging in literate activities about the word (poetry writing, writing about certainty for therapy, and through methods employed in our co-research), bringing into sharp relief how the co-development of person, literate activities and text-artifacts *become* in entangled ways through intra-action, as well as how the lifespan development of psychological functions (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003) was reconfigured through those literate engagements. Yet, Vygotsky's concept of sense was left to be developed further and, unfortunately, it has been underutilized in writing studies with few exceptions (*c.f.* Prior & Shipka, 2003).

### ***Recent Directions: Subjective Sense and Subjective Configuration, Feelings and Emotions***

Fernando González Rey attempted to reorient Vygotskian scholarship to better represent the scope of his ideas across his short career, to go beyond (while still including key insights

from) his instrumental period which focused on heavily on semiotic mediation, internalization, and cognition (González Rey, 2011). In doing so, González Rey pushed back against dominant CHAT models that separate emotion and feelings from cognition and relegate subjectivity as epiphenomenal to activity (González Rey et al., 2017; Fleer et al., 2017). González Rey (2011) points out that in Vygotsky's early work (see Vygotsky, 1971) and in his final period (see Vygotsky 1987) he focused on issues that have been largely swept aside in CHAT scholarship—chiefly, psyche, emotions, subjectivity, imagination, personality, sense and *perezhivanie* (discussed later). While my work may draw from all these at least peripherally, of particular importance are feelings, emotions, subjectivity, *sense*, and *perezhivanie*. I start here by briefly reviewing some of González Rey's (2011; 2017) theoretical work on the concepts of subjective sense and subjective configurations, and then I distinguish between *feelings* and *emotions* (Damasio, 1999).

González Rey (2017; González Rey et al., 2017) explains subjectivity as an ongoing process and dimension of human consciousness that, as Fleer et al. (2017; same volume) argue encompasses “thought, motivation, imagination, perception, personality” (p. 4). Subjectivity, in González Rey's view, is an interplay between instantaneous flashes of emotional-symbolic content (subjective senses) and more rooted organizations of those called subjective configurations. González Rey (2017) writes that “[t]he *subjective senses* are the instantaneous emotional-symbolic units that characterise the flux of human experience as life is subjectively lived” (p. 183). Like word sense, subjective senses are historically and socially conditioned, and they are in constant movement. Concatenations of subjective senses, over time, become integrated as or with subjective configurations. González Rey (2017) describes these as “self-generative” formations that are more enduring than the individual and instantaneous subjective

senses and can be more pointed toward processes of personality and identity (p. 184). But they are still also emergent processes that are constant flux. Subjective senses and subjective configurations are embodied, affective, fundamentally multi-semiotic, distributed, and inextricable from the rich environments that individuals intra-act with. Subjective configurations become what González Rey et al. (2017) call “bearers of a sense of identity” (p. 226) in particular chronotopes (but perhaps not in others). A conceptualization of subjectivity predicated on subjective senses and subjective configurations thus

leads to a rethinking of personality, understanding personality not as a unified autonomous system comprised of stable and universal traits, but as a dynamic system of subjective configurations that express the most relevant individual experiences as they are subjectively configured. Personality represents the historical moment of the individual during personal current action (González Rey, 2017, p. 183).

These conceptualizations are increasingly important for dialogic semiotic theories of becoming, as they understand subjectivity as agentive, creative, emergent, and particularly, as intra-active (Barad, 2007) processes, rather than as a stable or fixed ontology of consciousness. Through these concepts, I see becoming as the instantaneous processes (subjective senses) in conjunction with the dialogic redirecting of histories toward subjective configurations both social and individual.

González Rey et al. (2017) argues for a more robust notion of cognition, cognitive experience, and consciousness that does not create a dualism between feelings and emotions on the one hand, and cognitive processes on the other. Much of this work is predicated on the expanded notion of subjectivity as an ongoing process and dimension of consciousness, and particularly on sense and subjective sense. Given that one aspect of subjective sense is that it is

embodied, sense *must* include feelings and emotions predicated on those feelings. I turn to work in neurobiology for a precise representation of feelings and emotions, one suited for tracing *becoming* and one that bolsters discussions of sense. My colleagues (see Prior et al., unpublished manuscript) and I have found useful a biological conceptualization of feelings and emotions (Damasio, 1999). Damasio (1999) makes a distinction between feelings and emotions:

the term *feeling* should be reserved for the private, mental experience of an *emotion*, while the term emotion should be used to designate the collection of responses, many of which are publicly observable. In practical terms this means that you cannot observe a feeling in someone else although you can observe a feeling in yourself when, as a conscious being, you perceive your own emotional states (42).

Feelings, then, are the historically conditioned subjective senses as interpretations of emotional states (Prior et al., unpublished manuscript). Feelings and emotions, after all, are affective processes that should not be separated from cognition and subjectivity. As I show primarily in Chapter 4, individuals *do* more with subjective senses and configurations than bear witness to their unfolding.

### ***Directivity***

There are *directive* (del Río & Álvarez, 1995; 2007) qualities to subjectivity, subjective senses and subjective configurations. “Directivity” is constructed from emotion and voluntary action, as del Río and Álvarez (1995, p. 387) argue. del Río and Álvarez later (2007) argue that individuals can “master” themselves with the use of directive psychological activities like prayer, writing of varied sorts like poetry (see Chapter 3), personal organizers, diaries, and I add *blogging* (see Chapter 4), and that these “instruments” allow individuals to “evaluate and operate” on their consciousness, on their thoughts and feelings (p. 381). Individuals’ activities in

regulating their emotions, as collections of responses to feelings (sometimes private, sometimes public), are a sort of directivity. Directivity is a distributed action, not a purely cognitive activity. For instance, we can read Prior and Shipka's (2003) environment-selecting-and-structuring practices as a sort of consciousness tuning that is markedly directive. Their participants actively worked to structure their environments including objects, other people, pets, and ambience (e.g., music, aromas, lighting) to stabilize mental states. For example, as one professor (Orlie) structured her writing time with the use of external aids like a watch with an alarm, furnished her writing space just so, and even crafted plans to move to a quieter geographic location out of the city, she was engaging in situated and long-term sorts of directivity through environment-selecting and -structuring practices (ESSPs) that encompass far more than simply cognition.

Individuals utilize directive functions across their lifeworlds to regulate their behavior, and even who they feel they are, and in this way (and many others), directivity plays crucial roles in becoming. For instance, del Rio and Álvarez liken the cultural architectures of religion, broadly, and the numerous religious practices (*c.f.*, prayer) as directive functions of consciousness. *Distributed* or *mediated* directivity (del Rio & Álvarez, 2007) like cultural architectures of religion—and particularly of the consequences of *abandoning* those cultural architectures—play a role in shaping the branches that developed out of my ongoing co-research. Specifically, my research has come to focus on a second key question: How do individuals direct subjective senses, subjective configurations, *perezhivanie*, and the development of lifeworld perspectives with *literate activity*? I think about the questions I have been mapping in conjunction with Lemke's (2000), but with a focus on how moments can also seem to *subtract* important facets of individuals' identities and related subjective senses in an ongoing re-visioning of subjective configurations around personality and action. To these ends, my research

methods have aimed to collect accounts of the struggles of the unmaking of deeply entrenched directive cultural architectures for mind and agency (del Río & Álvarez, 1995; 2007), and particularly, the ways in which literate activities mediated those unmakings and remakings of directive actions and activities, identities, and lifeworld perspectives.

Directivity plays key roles in the facets of the dialogic semiotic becoming framework I have been sketching. Regulating the making and maintenance of lifeworld perspectives, subjective senses, and subjective configurations in intra-activity, and the many dispersed semiotic/literate activities that facilitate such regulation is a complex entanglement of processes. Researchers can utilize trajectories (Kell, 2015, 2017; Roozen, 2020) to trace these processes as they relate to moments of consequentiality across semiotic becoming. Next, I describe a key buttress that can join and bolster all the constructs around dialogic semiotic becoming that I have described so far with its scalability across becomings and directivity in life projects as well as around *in situ* moments. This concept is *perezhivanie*.

### ***Perezhivanie/iya, and Developing Lifeworld Perspectives***

Perezhivanie (переживание) is a common name for direct psychological experience. From a subjective perspective, every psychological process is perezhivanie. In every perezhivanie we distinguish: firstly, an act, and secondly, the content of perezhivanie. The first is an activity related to the appearance of certain perezhivanie; the second is the content, the composition of what is experienced (Varshava & Vygotsky, 1931, p. 128 in Veresov, 2017)

As defined above, “perezhivanie” (pluralized: “perezhivaniya”) stands in danger of affording *everything* being a *perezhivanie*. And while, as I point out at the end of this section, *perezhivanie* is a ubiquitous *dimension* of human *becoming* (Prior et al., unpublished

manuscript), the question becomes how can it be useful in studying *becoming* across literate lives? First, I briefly review some of the literature relevant and important to my thinking about *perezhivanie* since encountering the term, and then I map the ways in which my colleagues and I have rearticulated the concept in a recent manuscript.

I've noticed *perezhivanie*—as a word—seems to have a strangeness to it when I first mention it to other English speakers. In fact, when I heard it for the first time in Paul Prior's office as he told me I might be interested in the concept, I thought—and had written in my notes— “Per Giovanni,” thinking he was telling me the name of a scholar I should read up on. I searched for a couple hours and found the term when reading for clues around the scholarship we were discussing that day. *Perezhivanie* has no English equivalent capturing the breadth of the concept. What's more, Blunden (2016) argues that some translations of Vygotsky's work render the concept “invisible” (274). *Perezhivanie* is often boiled down to “an experience,” often with qualifiers like *lived* experience (Mok, 2017), and *emotional* experience (Vygotsky, 1934; see later). These do not fully capture the active, directive, and most importantly, *distributed* psychological processes of *becoming* that are part and parcel to *perezhivanie*.

Mok (2017) discusses the disparate possibilities buried in the Russian word, describing a number of conceptualizations of *perezhivanie* from Stanislavsky to Tolstoy, to Freud, and crucially, to Vygotsky. In line with the rest of the theorizing of *becoming* earlier, I find the tracing of *perezhivanie* through Vygotsky most useful. Mok (2017; see also González Rey, 2009; 2011) traces the (re)appearance of concepts around *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky's later work (particularly in *Thinking and Speech*) and the fundamental connections with the notion of *sense* (see earlier), arguing that it's plausible that when Vygotsky was writing of *perezhivanie*, word

sense and meaning, he was creating an overall new approach to cultural-historical psychology predicated on *sense*. Mok writes of *perezhivanie*, and *sense/meaning* that

First, they are methodologically analogous. Both concepts are described as units of analysis: empirically discoverable parts of the whole. Understanding how word-meaning is used to inform an understanding of the development of verbal thought should also provide insight into the way in which *perezhivanie* relates to and provides insight into, the development of consciousness (2017, p. 32).

The connection to sense, overall, is an important one, as I will describe below and later (see Chapter 4) because *sense* is a key dimension of *perezhivanie* and one channel toward tracing *perezhivanie* on trajectories of semiotic becoming.

As a concept, *perezhivanie* is also often reduced—by some *translations* of the term—to some sort of relation to affect or emotions (see Fleer et al., 2017; González Rey et al., 2017). This is showcased in a rather long section of the following translation of Vygotsky’s (1934) *The Problem of the Environment*:

Today, whilst basing myself on a concrete example of the theory about the environment, I would like to show you a few such units with which psychological research operates. One example of such a unit is the emotional experience [*perezhivanie*]. An emotional experience [*perezhivanie*] is a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented, i.e. that which is being experienced – an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*] is always related to something which is found outside the person – and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*]; everything selected from the

environment and all the factors which are related to our personality and are selected from the personality, all the features of its character, its constitutional elements, which are related to the event in question. So, in an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*] we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in the emotional experience [*perezhivanie*].

The translation above marks all instances of *perezhivanie* as *emotional* experience by adding the term in brackets. While that is certainly part of *perezhivanie*, it fails to capture the breadth of the concept, which, as Blunden (2016) notes, is a deeply entrenched part of Russian culture<sup>8</sup>.

However, in this extract, there are some important clues to how Vygotsky was intending the concept of *perezhivanie* to function in his psychology. One is the inextricable relationship between *perezhivanie* and social environment. It also links, crucially, biographically situated embodied minds (I argue particularly as a flow of subjective senses) with enriched environments (see Prior et al., unpublished manuscript). These point to the fundamental characteristic of *perezhivanie* as a *distributed* unit of analysis.

Another nuance of *perezhivanie* that has shaped my research is described by Blunden (2016) as the active *working over*, *over-living*, or *living-through* of experiences, and how those processes can help shape the development of persons, their lives and life projects. His piece,

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<sup>8</sup> I was interested to see what a Russian friend might say about the term, so I wrote to her a sense of how scholarship I draw from (described this section) conceptualizes the term. She wrote back: “Usually we use not the noun but the verb - “*perezhivat*.” It has two meanings depending on the contexts. First one is between “being worried” and “being sad.” Close to “be concerned” but with more sad tones. The second meaning is to live through something. It’s close to what you described but again, in modern language we usually use the verb. It doesn’t exactly have to be an experience with a beginning, a middle, and an end but the focus is on the continuity of the process of experiencing something. The experience itself can be short but the emotions someone felt while living through it is the focus. So the verb is close to “survive something” or “get through something.” It usually is used with negative connotations and experience but in some cases, it can be used with positive things like “I cannot believe I survived that crazy Moulin Rouge performance, it was mind-blowing.” A third meaning of the verb, it can also mean “to outlive someone or something” when talking about people or things. The word “*perezhivanie*,” as a noun, is not used very frequently in modern language, but was used in written or academic Russian before.”

*Translating Perekhivanie into English*, clearly expresses this sense of *perekhivanie* and I quote it at length here.

Perekhivanie comes from the verb perekhivat. Zhivat means “to live” and pere means carrying something over something, letting something pass beneath and overleaping it, something like cutting out a piece of space, time, or feeling. So perekhivat means to be able to survive after some disaster, that is, to “over-live” something. To illustrate, the force of pere: terpet means to endure some pain, so pereterpet means to live until a time when no pain is left, to outlive the pain; pereprignut means to overcome some obstacle, to jump, or fly over it...In the same way, perekhivat means that you have passed as if above something that had made you feel pain; and in the base of each “again living” lies a pain and you know that. There, inside of a recollection that we call an “again living,” lives your pain, not letting you forget what has happened, and you keep living through it over and over again, working through it, repeating it until you have passed through it, and have survived...But it is also important that there can be good, as well as painful *perekhivaniya*...that *perekhivanie* is not only surviving a life-changing disaster, but also consolidating on a dramatic leap forward in your life, a daring move you made, a risk that paid off and opened a new phase of your life...Fully developed *perekhivaniya* are tied up with the fate of one’s life-projects and are life-changing episodes in your life, and they begin in a moment of especial clarity (p. 276).

*Perekhivanie* as working over, over-living, living-through is one chain of conceptualizations of the term that became increasingly important to this dissertation, particularly so once I started learning about the lives of my co-researchers over *extended* cases (meeting more than five “sessions”).

What emerged from many of those cases was that losing faith and rebuilding a life was often a painful experience, overflowing with emotion, grief, anger, etc.; that it was an experience that my co-researchers, on many occasions, had to *again-live* as they constructed new senses of the world, new lifeworld perspectives; and that working over, or over-living such fraught, exceptionally directive *perezhivaniya* (predicated in most cases on semiotic/literate activity) was crucially a *life project* that was managed over complicated trajectories of semiotic becoming. To be clear, I am hesitant about the way in which Blunden describes “fully developed *perezhivaniya*” because it seems to me that it seems to come close to taking a distributed process and unit of analysis and stuffing it back inside the person. Nonetheless, the sense of *perezhivanie* as *again-living* or *working over* is mostly foregrounded when I think about co-researchers utilizing directive psychological tools to make and remake subjective senses in intra-action with becoming in the world at large<sup>9</sup>. I foreground it at points in Chapter 4 when I discuss the ways in which Joiya Martin “wrote and wrote” (see Chapter 4, analysis of *Triggered: Church Diaries*) to understand herself after a diagnosis of severe bipolar, how her diagnosis affected her life, her mental states, and her faith (and loss of it).

### ***Perezhivanie Rearticulated***

The varied senses of *perezhivanie* that I mapped in the brief review above remain in play at in various spots in varied ways, across my dialogic analyses (see below). In ways, they have become folded into the nuance of the concept as rich, layered dimensions of *perezhivanie* and *becoming* that Paul Prior, Julie Hengst, Bruce Kovanen, Larissa Mazucelli and I spent more than two years (as a study group) rearticulating, and then drafting into a manuscript—parts of which have made it into this dissertation (see Chapter 4). We offer a robust, theoretical

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<sup>9</sup> “*Dialogic animation*,” which I describe in the methods section below, seem particularly suited to intra-active moments of consequentiality around *perezhivanie*.

conceptualization of *perezhivanie* that sharpens our understanding of an ontology of moments.

We describe *perezhivanie* as

a *ubiquitous* dimension of human existence and activity (not an isolated process that can be turned on/off or something we are trying to create); as fundamentally *semiotic* (not limited to or represented by specific modalities, behaviors, or types of resources); as *flat*, dialogic, rhizomatic assemblage (not abstractly governed, static or anchored to specific spatial-temporal scales); as *embodied* (socially, biologically, and ecologically situated); and as *emergent, intra-active becoming* (Prior et al, unpublished manuscript, p. 13).

This formulation resists *perezhivanie* being frozen as any one of the myriad conceptualizations that have come since Vygotsky (1987; 1994) began developing the concept. And while it encompasses a broad range of phenomena as a ubiquitous part of human *becoming*, it resists the trap of everything being *perezhivanie* noted at the beginning of the section by offering several key dimensions of the concept, and by being inherently linked to our formulation of *consequentiality* in and *across* moments.

One more crucial nuance to *perezhivanie* that I have mentioned is its characteristic *distributed* nature. *Perezhivanie* is important in scholarship that explores *sense* and *becoming* because it is a unity of person and environment (as a process and a unit of analysis). *Sense* is what is happening in persons across subjective processes in direct intra-action with their broader sociocultural environments. *Perezhivanie* is not reducible to a subjective, emotional experience or *sense* because it is fundamentally distributed in and across persons and their environments and intra-actions. And so, one great advantage of *perezhivanie* in scholarship on *becoming* is that it does not reduce experience and *sense* to interiorization but sees those as components of *perezhivanie* distributed across intra-actions with environments (and other people), and the

registering of *perezhivanie* in the person(s). I draw examples of this in Chapter 4 as I describe the relationships between Joiya Martin’s environmental triggers of bipolar symptoms and her subjective sense(s).

Like all theoretical concepts should be, *perezhivanie* is tied directly to a methodology for exploring it. While I discuss methods later, I describe here the ways in which I trace *perezhivanie*. First, my colleagues and I locate *perezhivanie* in moments of *intensity*—indexical, interactional, affective, and historical. Next, we locate it in moments of *turbulence*, *disruption*, *genesis* (Vygotsky, 1997; Latour, 2005; Smith and Prior, 2020) that can be either longitudinal or short-lived. Then, we locate it in moments of intra-action with hardened cultural-historical, figured worlds. Last, we locate it in moments or chains of moments that show strong, dialogic *resonance* (Stornaiuolo et al, 2017) with other moments or chains of moments. In this research (particularly as I demonstrate in Chapter 4), I have come to look at *perezhivanie* in the ways in which co-researchers reach dialogically backward and forward in time, bringing theres-and-thens to heres-and-nows in complexly situated, fundamentally semiotic, indexical, embodied, intra-active, and affective ways.

### ***Reflexivity of Theory***

Like each of the concepts and/or theories I’ve described across this chapter so far, a theoretical orientation is not a static frame. Rather, it needs to be adjustable and adaptable to the different sorts of analyses necessary to bring richly dialogic, intra-active data to relief as semiotic value. “Reference frames” (Valsiner, 2007; described above) have helped me develop an adaptable theoretical-methodological approach that is able to foreground and background concepts (as reference frames) depending on the emergent needs of the co-research and analyses. Reference frames provide ways to link different zones of the methodology cycle to overarching

narratives (see Chapter 3, e.g., the distinction between tracing a lifespan trajectory and tracing *word sense* along trajectories).

Another way that I imagine my theoretical-methodological approach as emergent and reflexive is by conceptualizing it as something like methodological frameworks of transdisciplinary action research (TDAR) (Perrin, 2012; Pohl & Hadron, 2008). Perrin (2012) writes that TDAR projects are “designed cyclically and planned incrementally to allow for unpredicted developments and foster mutual learning,” that they “define and solve a complex real-life problem[s] sustainably” and “handle risks related to crossing borders” (18). It has become clear to me that a theoretical framework would be served well by these characteristics. Constructing narratives out of the interplay between theory, methods of analyses, and data is an exceptionally interpretive activity. Theoretical interpretive frameworks thus must be predicated on and emergent from, to a degree, the types of data that unfold from a project. So, theory is designed and re-designed *cyclically* to adjust to the uncertainty of data exemplars, particularly around the reference frames that will best suit the construction of semiotic value in a given narrative that aims, of course, to be faithful and ethically responsible to the extant data. For instance, this project is built of many disparate cases. While all draw from the dialogic semiotics I describe, across the two focal cases that demonstrate my analyses, at points, I foreground the use of certain reference frames while others become backgrounded. For example, in Chapter 3 I focus heavily on Vygotskian conceptualizations of word sense as the construction of word sense was exceptionally important to “Alex’s” construction of a lifeworld perspective. But, in Chapter 4, *word sense* is subsumed by an overarching theoretical framing around subjective sense, *perezhivanie*, and *becoming* as I trace “Joiya’s” complex semiotic becomings across a decade of

blog writing about her diagnosis with bipolar disorder, and the ways in which that diagnosis upended her entire life and livelihood.

Working from these theoretical frameworks, I next describe the broad methods I have utilized for conducting this research. These research methods are fundamentally linked to the dialogic semiotic theories I have described so far in this chapter, and are, thus, dialogic semiotic methods for investigating lifespan literate activity and *becoming*. They encompass everything from the co-researcher framework I utilize, to data collection, and to idiosyncratic approach to *writing* with data (which should, I argue, always be described in conjunction with research methods).

## **Dialogic Methods**

### ***On the term “co-researcher(s)”***

Those who participate in ethnographic work like this project need to be conceptualized dialogically, not as participants or subjects but rather as (dialogic) people first, and as *co-researchers* in a dialogic, open-ended, investigative endeavor. People are historical, social, cultural, and all of these are, of course, shot through each other. A co-researcher framework (see Roozen & Erickson, 2017) is crucial in this study, and I use the term throughout my work to represent the process, to refer to myself and to replace “participants” or “subjects.” Roozen and Erickson (2017) write,

In qualitative research, those individuals at the heart of the inquiry are commonly referred to as “subjects,” “informants,” or “participants.” While perhaps meant to function as neutral descriptors of the individuals under scrutiny, these terms frequently index the particular roles played in the process of conducting research as well as the relationship between the researched and researcher. The term “participant” suggests a more active

role in the research process, and perhaps implies a somewhat closer relationship between researcher and researched than do “subject” or “informant.” And yet, it also frames the person’s identity in terms of the researcher’s project. In addition, it fails to clarify both the nature and degree of the participation, and thus its very46research46ty renders it little more descriptive than either of the previous terms (2017).

I decided it was necessary to advocate for the role of co-researcher to invite the types of active engagement-with, agency in becoming-with, and ownership over the research process from those who choose to participate. I argue that the more enriched role—of *co-researcher*—facilitated gathering the sorts of richly complex narratives of co-researchers’ lives and literate activities than I might have had I invited the more typical participant roles.

I discussed the idea of being co-researchers and explicated the difference from the more traditional notions of “subject,” “participant,” etc., with all who participated in my study, as, the framing invites the very agential role that co-researchers can and often choose to take in our work. Co-research may, but does not have to, involve co-authorship of research reports, but it does need to involve an agential stance in the research and co-researchers, to varying degrees, have taken up a deeply involved roles in helping me trace their trajectories of (un)becoming. Both Alex and Joiya, the two cases I develop in Chapters 3 and 4, have actively shaped our co-research through several activities. For instance, both have pitched topics for discussion and actively worked to schedule those co-research sessions, an activity typically the responsibility of the researcher. We (both Alex and I, and Joiya and I, as separate pairs) have discussed being co-researchers on many occasions and consider ourselves to fit its sense. It has served importantly in constructing mutual trust and openness essential for the longitudinal sorts of research necessary for tracing trajectories.

The co-researcher configuration also transforms interviewing/interview methodology, foregrounding them as a different type of social practice than is typical of ethnographic work (Olinger, 2020). In both focal cases of Chapter 3 and 4 (and with other co-researchers in the wider project) I have co-constructed goals, questions, and practices with co-researchers in partnership. For instance, I might co-construct plans with co-researchers based on our interests at the tail end of sessions, utilizing our emergent conversations as planning ground for future sessions. Or, if I have been working on/in/with transcriptions from co-research sessions (often in conjunction with text-artifacts collected; see later), I use email to propose tentative topics for co-researchers to approve, alter/revise, or reject outright and propose other directions. The co-research framework has also helped set the boundaries of what is talked about on- and off-record and how data is represented in the co-research from storage to publication.

### ***Recruitment of co-researchers***

I learned about The Clergy Project nearly a decade ago from an online lecture featuring Daniel Dennett. I was immediately interested in the organization due to my childhood exposure to Catholicism, my own religious (un)becoming, and my interest in secularism broadly. When I began to see more clearly that studying literate activity with a dialogic semiotic lens necessitates looking longitudinally at the trajectories across which people become who they are, I began imagining potential sites. With a long interest in pedagogy and teacher training, I began with a study on representations of writing with instructors at the University of Illinois. While I am still interested in those threads, I wanted to conduct my research and write my dissertation on something that I was genuinely excited about, as well as a site and/or group that was not necessarily tied to one given academic discipline, professional workspace, etc., but one where I could study varied becomings disparate—and marked in interesting ways—from what has been

done in our field thus far. As I engaged with writing studies scholarship, I felt both the absence of attention to secular practice (i.e., non-believing/non-religious) and developed a growing sense that our field could contribute to understanding secular practices. Thus, I worked out the early research proposal with Paul Prior, a proposal predicated on The Clergy Project as a site hypothesizing that, because members are a diverse group with varied (former) faiths and the organization is made up of people who are (or were) practicing clergy members (in many cases hiding their non-belief), co-researchers' lives might offer the potential to examine marked, deeply interesting cases of (un)becoming.

Before applying for IRB approval, I contacted Daniel Dennett and he put me in touch with Linda LaScola (both are conductors of the original study leading to the inception of The Clergy Project). I inquired whether TCP would work with me in my research before drafting an application predicated on them as site. Linda interviewed me to ensure that my intentions were well-grounded. She then connected me with TCP's president, Lon Ostrander (introduced in the opening vignette), who was exceptionally warm and helpful, welcoming my research from the beginning (also becoming an active, engaged co-researcher on the project). After IRB approval, the TCP Board approved my recruitment materials, and Lon sent them out to all members. The materials included my informed consent form and an introductory email explicating my research, my interest in literate activity, and ways in which those interested could contact me (see Appendix A). I received around 60 responses in the first week. About half followed through in the second round of contact.

The co-research for this project will continue long after my finalized dissertation has been filed away. However, at this point, I have conducted ethnographic work with 20 co-researchers. I consider 7 of those co-researchers as meeting my criteria for *extended cases* in that

we have met between 8 and 15 times, have discussed a capacious number of text/artifacts, and are still working together as co-researchers.

### ***Consent***

My consent documents (see Appendix B for Informed Consent and the disparate types of additional consent protocols; see also Olinger [2020] for a discussion of ethics around consent/recording) allow me and co-researchers a great deal of latitude in setting *exactly* what is recorded, how, and how the recorded data will be used in various projects. Most of my co-researchers agree or have agreed for their audio/video and artifacts (see below) to be used freely in publication, presentations, etc. Some, though, are (or were at early points in co-research) concealing non-belief from families, employers, etc., and wished to remain as anonymous as possible. For instance, “Alex Taylor” (see Chapter 3) was limited by a faith/lifestyle agreement she signed for her employer. She had agreed widely to uphold faith and Christian values across her life—not just at her place of employment—and this led her to choose to allow audio-recording only (no video), as well as the use of pseudonym<sup>10</sup>. Only two co-researchers (Alex included) requested pseudonyms.

### ***Dialogic Methods for Data Collection***

***Interviews.*** My methodological tools aim to acknowledge the dialogic, emergent nature of ethnographic work, bent toward what Stornaiuolo et al. (2017) describe as an “inquiry stance” in which (co-)researchers follow pathways unimagined by research designs without (in the case

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, “Alex Taylor” is a pseudonym for her original pseudonym. She participated in The Clergy Project under pseudonym and wanted to be protected further in publications such as this (and a *Written Communication* article [Ware, 2022] focused on her case). She feels her parents could be easily identifiable, and those in TCP could identify her based on the pseudonym she uses through the various fora. I only learned Alex’s real name nearly a year into our co-research.

of this research) assuming or predetermining particular important semiotic trajectories (beyond, obviously, tracing trajectories toward *non-belief* broadly).

One primary source of data aligns with ethnographic, semi-structured interviews (Prior, 1998). I call them “sessions” because of the transformed nature of co-research. Commensurate with my goal of creating spaces in which co-researchers are active agents in their own *becoming-with* the co-research process, I argue that interview spaces need to be “broken.” Koven (2014) argues that interviews as practices and interview ideologies can facilitate particular sets of power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, which can contaminate the interviews (and the data). She encourages “scholars to consider how methodological choices may reflect and contribute to broadly distributed ideologies and practices” (pp. 501). So, *breaking the interview* means disabusing co-researchers of conditioned stances toward interviewing they may have learned as being part of an “interview society” (Koven, 2014), and asking them to take on a different sort of active engagement with the co-research process, at times assisting in the design of sessions, what gets taken up, and how.

To these ends, while I enter sessions with a guide of questions I hope to ask, or a set of themes to cover, these sorts of things are almost always co-planned with my co-researchers beforehand. We practice this co-planning in different ways, depending on where in the research cycle we are. For instance, we might plan at the tail end of sessions, utilizing our emergent conversations as planning ground for what’s to come during our next session. Or, if I have been working on, in, or with transcriptions from our sessions (often in conjunction with artifacts collected), I use email to propose tentative topics for our subsequent discussion for my co-researchers to approve, alter/revise, or reject outright (which does happen) and propose their own directions. The level of engagement regarding setting the course of sessions is obviously varied

across my co-researchers. Some tend to go with the flow of research and rely on me to drive what happens. However, several of my extended case co-researchers (Alex, and Joiya, for instance, who are the focus of Chapters 3 and 4 respectively) are comfortable and motivated enough to contact me and propose that we set times to discuss on record current developments in their lives, artifacts they are working on, or simply peripheral thoughts that have crossed their mind related to the themes we have been discussing.

*Artifacts.* At the start of co-research with each co-researcher, I began sessions by gathering broad biographical accounts of their early lives as believers, and their pathways out of faith up to the point of our first session. At the end of the first session, I asked all co-researchers to talk to me a little bit about what drew them to the research project, and to talk broadly about the types of literate activities they engage or have engaged in across their lives. Asking those questions led to conversations about the exceptionally rich, disparate literate lives of my co-researchers and led to the second key source of data that informs this study: the artifacts that co-researchers were willing to share.

My Informed Consent (see Appendix B) mapped the wide array of artifacts I was interested in collecting, ranging from texts related to co-researchers' lives in clergy roles or their pathways out of faith that they had written or were writing at the time, but the main consent noted that what I count as writing is broad, including notes about readings, journal writing, speeches/sermons, annotations or inscriptions in texts, posts to online fora, blogs, fiction, poetry, essays, drawings, diagrams, and beyond, as I aimed for a truly semiotically-diverse set of artifacts (which I did receive from most participants). I did not bound my cases to particular artifacts or assume what I was looking for, but followed an inquiry stance (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) anticipating emergence in the research process. Emergence, Stornaiuolo et al. (2017)

argue, can “tune researchers to the indeterminacies of meaning making across interactions” (pp. 77). Stornaiuolo et al. (2017) also offer tracing “resonance” as useful tool in an inquiry stance, arguing that it “helps researchers address questions about how ideas, practices, symbols, objects, and the like become ‘shared’ and circulate across spaces and times, even when they do not seem to share direct links or traces to follow” (pp. 80-81).

Literate activities that seem completely unrelated to a trajectory of becoming might, in dialogic semiotic analyses, play crucial roles. For instance, Lon Ostrander, President of The Clergy Project and avid “car guy,” used to create spreadsheets tracing statistics from magazines and publications related to vehicle performance, as pointed out in the introductory vignette. When he joined TCP as a regular member, he thought that perhaps he should trace early on and maintain a record of all the members of the organization. This was, of course, a useful tool for TCP as burgeoning organization. Lon took on more responsibilities over time and is now leading The Clergy Project (see Chapter 1). Thus, to trace resonances requires casting wide nets, and collecting all possible traces of literate activity and related artifacts left behind—a *heterogeneity of artifacts* that was a fundamental part of my dialogic methods for tracing becoming. Overall, I have collected more than 2,000 pages of artifacts from co-researchers, spanning a number of genres and modalities. Due to the highly idiosyncratic nature of the artifacts collected, they are not usefully or cleanly reducible to a tabular set of typifications. Thus, I will provide tables and/or narrative descriptions of artifact collection from individual co-researchers in the findings/analysis sections in each chapter (i.e., Alex, in Chapter 3 has a table of artifacts; Joiya, in Chapter 4, has a narrative description).

After the first sessions, co-researchers and I used artifacts to guide our subsequent discussions that aligned in ways with text-based interviews (but I developed my own, intra-active

dialogic methods for data generation described below). We also used the very transcripts I generated out of our sessions to guide our work, and thus another key data source became the *co-research artifacts* we generated. I transcribed all sessions and sent them to co-researchers for comment—with, in some cases, varying lengths of time in between due to the busy nature of data collection in a project of this scope. In many cases, the deeply engaged comments that I received on transcripts from co-researchers guided subsequent sessions in ways that illustrated the complexity and richness of these processes of co-research in comparison to more conventional member checking. I call this phenomenon dialogic *animation* broadly and developed several dialogic animation tools in this research, some of which I describe next.

***Dialogic animation: eliciting richer accounts of intra-active becoming.*** I have developed and refined a range of dialogic animation protocols that ask co-researchers to animate artifacts (from their past that they have composed or not, or that they are composing) by reading aloud, interpreting, talking about, writing about, and reflecting on them. I use the term “animation” partly in Goffman’s (1981) sense, where *animator* (“sounding boxes”; p. 144) is one role in his mapping of production formats. However, animation also involves performing utterances and embodied stances and it signals *intensity*. Following my work with Paul Prior, Julie Hengst, Bruce Kovanen, Larissa Mazuchelli, and Niki Turnipseed (unpublished manuscript), I use *intensities* here to signal not only affective dimensions of embodied activity, but also indexical intensities (e.g., the management of multiple, laminated indexical grounds), historical intensities (e.g., the channeling and/or redirecting of histories), and intra-actional intensities (e.g., distributed intensities across literate activities, conversations, research practices such as interview scenarios and other protocols, etc.) (see Chapter 4). When co-researchers engage in dialogic animation, they are not passively reading aloud from text-artifacts; rather,

they are engaging in complex dialogic semiosis across which new layers of sense/meaning are made through intra-action with text-artifacts (sometimes spoken aloud, sometimes through extensive written annotation). Dialogic animation has been central to tracing semiotic trajectories in this research because it elicits accounts of how meanings are transformed across chronotopes in heterochronous ways (Lemke, 2000) and how word senses, meanings, subjective senses, lifeworld perspectives, etc., are mobile and shift along complex pathways of growth and change. Dialogic animation can focus on diverse artifacts that have been involved in maintaining lifeworld flows of personhood, including meaningful poems authored (or not) by a given co-researcher, or lists of books read across a lifespan, such as those Alex shared and animated (see Chapter 3, Table 1). Below, I describe two separate—but related—dialogic animation protocols: *Read-Aloud/Think-Aloud animations* (RATAAs), *sideshadowing protocols*<sup>11</sup>.

***Read-aloud/think-aloud animations.*** del Rio and Álvarez (2007) argue that “the analysis of spoken and written protocols...emerges as a strategic method, for the study of both directivity in general and that of religious activity in particular” (p. 386). I add that it also facilitates a wider scope of phenomena, such as the dialogic character of lifespan literate becomings, trajectories and intensities around sense and meaning. I also add non-religious activity and activity that transforms religious activity along complex pathways to their appraisal of spoken and written protocols.

Figure 1 details the “Read-Aloud/Think-Aloud Animation” (RATAA), one dialogic animation tool I developed. Olinger (2020) notes that when “reviewing and even reading aloud previously written text...writers may convey their feelings about their discursal and authorial

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix C for the “image animation” protocol, for instance, that asks co-researchers to perform think-alouds with images, photographs, etc., that they’ve taken. I do not narrate here because I have do not draw on analyses in the two cases that follow, but did utilize it across other co-research cases in the wider data collection.

selves” (p. 192). I show in later analyses how RATAAs also shed light on features around trajectories of (un)becoming that might have remained hidden. RATAAs represent a variation on “think-aloud” protocols, broadly understood as collecting accounts of activities as co-researchers are engaging in those activities. Rather than focusing on concurrent cognitive composing processes (Flower & Hayes, 1984) or read-alouds of others' texts, RATAAs are designed to elicit features buried/crystallized in texts read by the author in the context of a study's key questions and growing lines of inquiry. RATAAs (and other dialogic animation practices) involve combinations of reading-and-talking-aloud, annotation, text-based and semi-structured interviewing, and they are aimed at seeking depth of response to probe various intensities. One inspiration for the RATAAs came from Giltrow's (2003) use of reading-aloud protocols, where she asked academic writers to read texts they'd written, reporting what came to mind as they read to elicit constructs of writers' linguistic consciousness. RATAAs were also influenced by Prior's (2004) call for dialogic (rather than categorical) analyses of think-aloud protocols.

### **Section 1.**

#### **Before we begin, I'd like to have a general talk with you about**

- Your goals when writing the text
- Your context(s) for writing the text
- Your writing process(es)

### **Section 2.**

#### **Then, I'll ask that you read through your text out loud. As you read, stop at any moments when you feel you can explain more**

- Your feelings *in* or *about* the text
- Meanings you see in the text
- Meanings you see differently now
- Influences present in the text (from other reading or writing, thinking or talking with others, etc.)
- Also, *any* peripheral thoughts that come to mind as you read your text aloud, even if you're not sure why

**Stop at any point if you need to refresh yourself, collect your thoughts, revisit this list, or ask me any questions.**

**Figure 1.** *Read-Aloud/Think-Aloud Animation*

When conducting RATAAs, I review the various possibilities for what the components might mean for co-researchers by explaining key terms and inviting questions. Then, I invite them to talk through the general features regarding writing/writing processes (Section 1). Following Section 1, co-researchers perform Section 2, reading-and-thinking-aloud focused on the five components. RATAAs are opened-ended (and *emergent*; Stornaiuolo et al., 2017); thinking-aloud generates conversations of varied length (ranging from single utterances to multi-turn exchanges) before we return to the RATAA proper. My role is to be a conversational partner and co-inquirer, not a passive listener. When co-researchers finish, I ask about features from the second list they may not have covered, and any follow-up questions I did not raise during the protocol. This portion of the RATAA bears a family resemblance to semi-structured interviews, the key difference is that we often move back and forth between the text-artifact being discussed, which can, at times lead to more reading-aloud and thinking-aloud. In this sense the RATAA incorporates, at times, text-based-semi-structured characteristics as a versatile research method. Because RATAAs elicit both long monologues from co-researchers as well as extended conversations, they can take an entire session hour, depending on the length of the selected text. When a text is simply too long (typically longer than three pages) to do a full read-aloud, we negotiate which portions will be read aloud.

Here, I elaborate on the RATAA components in depth. Section 1 of the RATAA yields histories of (and wider contexts for) texts and writing processes. Section 2 is geared toward types of dialogic animation I am most interested in as the primary co-researcher:

- the category “Feelings *in* or *about*” texts invites co-researchers to animate affective dimensions related to texts – what they felt, and what feelings the text elicits during the animation itself;

- the categories “Meanings...in the text” and “meanings seen differently” invites co-researchers to animate what/how meanings are mobile, transforming across contexts (Kell, 2015), and how such meanings – even down to the meanings at the level of the *word*, as I show in Chapter 3 regarding “certainty,” can shift drastically and take on new dimensions in/of consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987);
- the category “Influences present” helps me to trace intertextual relations (Bazerman, 2004) across other texts<sup>12</sup>; and,
- the category “...*any* peripheral thoughts” invites co-researchers to articulate literally anything that comes to mind as they are animating texts, often yielding stories that *deepen* the dialogic animation.

The dialogic insights that emerge from the RATAAs have been key in tracing semiotic (un)becoming. I understand RATAAs not as representations of stable, settled activity, but as continuing intra-active (un)becoming processes of person and artifact through the activity.

Unlike other text-based interviewing practices, the RATAA aims to elicit accounts less centered on researcher agendas and aligns with a dialogic semiotic approach that sees (un)becomings as open-ended, emergent, constructive, intra-active processes.

***Sideshadowing.*** During the first semester of my master’s program at the University of Maine, I took a seminar in “Teaching College Composition” with Dylan Dryer. As a culminating experience, we were asked to create our own theoretical framework in conjunction with a course syllabus and assignment sequence that we would teach the following semester with a section of first-year writers. In the last seminar before turning in the assignment sequence, Dryer handed us an assignment sheet that was stapled shut, asking that we not open the prompt until we had made

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<sup>12</sup> Text here refers to any coherent complex of signs (Bakhtin, 1986), including semiotic events, encounters, or practices not conventionally figured as textual.

the final revisions to our course materials. When I opened the stapled assignment, I found that it was to “sideshadow” our entire dossier of course materials. It was such an elegantly designed assignment that I began using it with my own students. Years later, while preparing for this dissertation research, I subsumed it into my dialogic semiotic methods for studying co-researchers’ engagements with literate activity. All this is to say, Dryer’s assignment has its own trajectory across multiple facets of my academic life, and some of my protocol retains language originally drafted by Dryer.

Sideshadowing has a history in writing studies and literary criticism broadly. Morson (1991; 1994), through analyses of Bakhtinian dialogism, developed the notion of sideshadows:

To comprehend development, to understand the moment, is to understand what else might have resulted from it. It is to see time not under the *foreshadow* of an already written future but as accompanied by...*sideshadows*: the other possible presents that might have been and that might still be (1991: 1086).

Welch (1998) argued, following Morson (1994), for sideshadowing as an effective tool for teacher response to students in the writing process. Luce-Kapler (2006) developed the notion of the “sideshadow interview” as a qualitative research tool in research on students’ writing processes and used it mostly *in* the oral interviews. As I use it, sideshadowing is distinct from the sideshadow interview in that I ask co-researchers, following Dryer’s original assignment, to provide the sideshadows in the form of comments on their own writing or artifacts (most often using the comment feature in Microsoft Word).

Sideshadowing (see Appendix C) as another form of dialogic animation that I used, is related closely to the Read-Aloud/Think-Aloud animation but affords different avenues for co-researchers to engage in varied types of reflection, and over a more extended period (they are not

bound by our session time). The focal instructions for the sideshadowing animation are as follows:

Specifically, I am asking that you use the margins to unpack some of the ways in which you see yourself attempting to **make sense of thoughts and feelings in the text** you wrote, the ways in which you might be trying to **create and/or maintain a particular identity through writing**, but also to account for some of the broader contexts present, if unacknowledged (the “**backstories**”), in this sample of your writing. I am also asking, when you see fit, that you account for what might have changed for you since writing the text initially and as you animate the text now. Do **new meanings** come in from the side? Are **futures** unimagined playing out since your writing of the text?

For dialogic animation purposes, inviting co-researchers to engage in sideshadowing works to break open the chronotopic representations of not only histories as related to the here-and-now, or the then-and-there of their literate activity, but other peripheral and imagined chronotopes extant or possible. Moreover, the types of sideshadows are not limited to choices they made in the text/artifact, instead encompassing wider dimensions such as their thoughts and feelings in and about their text/artifact, instances where they might be creating or maintaining identities, alongside any *new* meanings made from the activity, and other peripheral “shadows” that may come in from the side during dialogic animation—“even if they are not sure why” which I use as an important distinction to maintain that we simply can’t always fully account for or understand emergence.

After co-researchers have sideshadowed a text, we negotiate a time to hold another session, during which co-researchers talk through their work, first broadly covering their experiences with the process. Then, I ask that they walk me through the sideshadows themselves.

It is here where sideshadows have led to exceptionally fruitful avenues for discussion of trajectories of becoming. This practice also affords *another* layer of dialogic animation, as they animate orally to me the annotations-as-animations that they made on their text/artifacts.

I use this protocol with co-researchers because, like the RATAAs described above, I find both practices to be a way for me to embrace and embody an inquiry stance in my research on writing. That is, rather than devising pointed questions about texts based on facets that seem important to me, the co-researchers are active agents pointing out what is most at stake for them in the texts/artifacts they have produced, and the unimagined avenues that sideshadowing texts (and RATAAs) have brought co-researchers and me to have been exceptionally important in the tracing of trajectories of semiotic becoming (e.g., the "sandbox story" in Chapter 3).

RATAAs, sideshadowing, and dialogic animation protocols in general, help with three main aims of my dialogic methods and analyses. First, they support *dialogic openings*; that is, they open the research space to the possibilities of the *what else?* and *what's changed?* These are important questions in studying the re-directing of histories as emergent becoming. RATAAs, sideshadowing, and dialogic animation broadly also open the research space to themes that may not have surfaced in more conventional sorts of interviews. Next, RATAAs, sideshadowing, and dialogic animations support a *deepening* and *enrichment* of data through their propensity to surface fine-grained accounts of stories, their relationship to the artifacts being discussed, and their relationships to the trajectories of semiotic becoming of individuals and artifacts through the activities. Last, RATAAs, sideshadowing, and dialogic animations help uncover the *acrossness*—the emergent chains of resonance between and across stories, and how those histories are playing out in emergent becoming. I take up these three facets in both focal cases in Chapters 3 and 4.

## **Dialogic Analyses of Data**

Dialogic analyses differ from but complement dialogic animation protocols in that they continue the link between method and theory with dialogic interpretive/analytical practices. Crucially, they also include methods for representing data in *writing*.

While my approach to dialogic analyses differs depending on what is emergent in particular cases, they do include three distinct, but often overlapping phases. The three phases often lead to the refining of my research questions for particular cases based on the emergent trajectories of (un)becoming. The approach I developed is dialogic (see also Prior, 2004) in that it seeks to probe the fundamentally historical nature of co-researchers' intensities around language and literate practices, to find *resonances* (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) between them, their talk about them, as well as any dispersed dialogic influences that surface. The three phases<sup>13</sup> are also based in a *holistic* approach to analysis (Prior, 1998; Roozen & Erickson, 2017; Durst, 2019) and focus particularly on tracing emergent trajectories by individual case. Thus, phases 1-3 below describe the broad pattern of how I worked with individual co-researchers' data, with some examples from the two focal cases in Chapters 3 and 4. Phase 1 can be summarized as *dialogic distributed transcription*, phase 2 as *dialogic distributed writing as analysis*, and phase 3 as *dialogic distributed production of documented narratives*.

### ***Phase 1***

Olinger (2020) argues that a “central site for exploring the situated, co-constructed nature of interviews is transcription,” that in “writing research...conventional transcription practices tend to make speech resemble writing” (p. 193). Methodologically, I refer to transcribing as

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<sup>13</sup> This is true, but also not for Joiya's case in Chapter 4. I went through phases 2 and 3 with her data *several* times between 2020 and 2022, and I could not find (and still haven't), particularly, the “best” way to convey her case in a documented narrative.

“*transcription-as-analysis*.” I produced full transcripts of each session, using various theoretical-methodological tools to mark the (un)sequential nature of talk, demonstrating that talk is never fully organized by simple turn-taking (e.g., Jefferson, 2004) and is seldom like writing (see Appendix F for an example of transcription conventions). As noted earlier, I sent transcripts to co-researchers as an opportunity for dialogic animation via sideshadowing. This practice went beyond simple member checking and generated new data. Often, co-researchers produced lengthy written responses to topics we discussed using Microsoft Word’s comment feature, adding further *dialogically animated* layers to our data (e.g., see Alex’s descriptions of working with transcriptions in Chapter 3). During this phase, I also sketched emergent, resonant “themes” which served as broad categories around which I organized instances of talk as well as artifacts in a “*writing-as-analysis*” subdocument.

## ***Phase 2***

I conceive of data as signs that are collected, organized, analyzed, and re-represented dialogically across iterative cycles to construct new sign values (see Valsiner, 2007) as documented narratives. Across all cases, I organized all data chronologically, creating a corpus of transcripts from sessions in the order we had them. I also organized artifacts chronologically by date created (roughly if hard dates were not available). At times, when it made sense, I organized artifacts that I discussed with co-researchers right into or alongside our session transcripts during which we discussed them, integrating artifact with data generated about the artifact. When I did this and then sent transcripts to co-researchers, it often surfaced more resonances than had I kept data pools separate.

Then, I analyzed the data *holistically* and thematically (see Roozen & Erickson, 2017; Durst, 2019). Using the integrative features of Microsoft Word, I created a “master document”

into which I inserted a session corpus and all artifacts collected as “subdocuments.” I worked recursively through the transcripts and artifacts and created hyperlinks within and between subdocuments. For instance, for Alex Taylor (see Chapter 3), the word and feeling of “certainty” that faith once provided her emerged as important from our very first meeting, and I organized mentions of “certainty” as a theme in a *writing-as-analysis* subdocument. In Joiya’s case (see Chapter 4), I organized instances of talk and writing that I read as being *directive* in her management of bipolar symptoms<sup>14</sup>.

I note *writing-as-analysis* here as a fundamental part of my methods because, as writing studies researchers, we do well to acknowledge *more* the fundamental role writing plays in *our own* methods. With *writing-as-analysis*, I trace resonances (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) across data that are related to trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming. With various themes, then, I used *writing-as-analysis* as an interpretive practice. I drafted many sections around resonances in a *writing-as-analysis* subdocument connecting points in my corpus, detailing histories of emergent themes in co-research, and connecting the description of themes to broader literature across the fields I dialogued with. For example, with Alex’s case, through *writing-as-analysis*, I connected the emerging analyses to literature around literate activity and Vygotskian approaches to sociocultural-psychology, particularly, the notion of *word sense* (Prior & Shipka, 2003; Vygotsky, 1987). For Joiya’s case, I connected various points in her blog writing and in her talk to scholarship around *directivity* (del Rio & Álvarez, 1995; 2007). This is an example of what I described previously as “reflexivity of theory,” when theoretical underpinnings and interpretations are necessarily foregrounded and backgrounded. Reflexivity of theory also necessitates a “reflexivity of method” and “reflexivity of dialogic analysis,” and various methods

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<sup>14</sup> These do not reflect all of the themes I documented on the focal cases.

for data collection (e.g., RATAA and/or sideshadow) and methods for dialogic analysis (e.g., *writing-as-analysis* around theme or resonance and/or *writing-as-analysis* as documented narrative) are also foregrounded or backgrounded at varied points, but are, *always* ever engaging with the other in dialogic interplay. *Writing-as-analysis*, in disparate ways, is a crucial part of *dialogic analysis* (Prior, 2004) and becomes part of, or heavily informs, phase 3.

### ***Phase 3***

I continued *writing-as-analysis* by producing overall *documented narratives* (Roozen & Erickson, 2017) of the cases, aiming to integrate and share samples of data within a narrative account but that also allow myself and readers deeper glimpses into the data through the dialogic interpretive analyses and through the documented claims made possible by incorporating large segments of data directly into the narratives. Much of the analysis represented in the following chapters is repurposed directly from my *writing-as-analysis* practice. Documented narratives are intended to keep the complexity and nonlinearity of data, but also, despite those characteristics, to represent data and analyses in legible arcs that readers can critically engage with. In phase 3, I also share emerging manuscripts with co-researchers and offer them opportunities to engage in further dialogic animation. For instance, Alex dialogically animated the documented narratives of our work (the article that was eventually published in *Written Communication* and that is now Chapter 3) twice using sideshadowing, and we met twice about it at different stages of the drafting and/or revision process. Those sessions that led to richer, more precise documented narratives now available for the wider field of writing studies<sup>15</sup>.

Dialogic semiotic approaches to research on literate activities and trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming are best conceptualized as a total package of theory, methodology and methods,

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<sup>15</sup> While Joiya has seen various texts in which I have drawn on our co-research data, she has not engaged in dialogic animation of those materials for various reasons.

and analysis procedures that can help maintain as well as manage complexity in ethnographic research. *Transcription-as-analysis* (the chronological and thematic organization of data) and *writing-as-analysis* at multiple scales (at the levels of theme, resonances, and the level of overall documented narrative) serve as an integrative, dialogic semiotic method for managing and writing up research, allowing for the zooming in on specific phenomena while also telling broader documented narratives of semiotic (un)becoming and lifespan literate activity. These practices are necessarily tightly woven with the dialogic semiotic theoretical synthesis and methods for collecting data (sessions as emergent co-research, in-depth, heterogeneity of artifact collection, and dialogic animation protocols) from which I draw. In the two cases that follow, I employ the dialogic semiotic theory and dialogic semiotic methods that I have described across this chapter.

### CHAPTER 3: “GOD’S ABSENCE DURING TRAUMA TOOK ITS TOLL”

#### Preface to the first case study

This chapter<sup>16</sup> has undergone several transformations, and it is a pleasure to see it take its place in the dissertation. In January 2020, I decided that I would write my talk scheduled for CCCC 2020 based on this case; that I would then take any feedback that I got at CCCC and draw from it to develop a manuscript to submit to *Written Communication*; and then that, finally, that manuscript (published or not) would slot nicely into the dissertation as a chapter. Of course, the pandemic happened. CCCC was mostly cancelled. But I still had all the material I generated for the talk. Paul Prior and I decided it would be a good thing to focus on, as whether I was going to participate in the job market in the fall of 2020 or not, it might be advantageous to have an article manuscript at least under review. I wrote a draft of the article, Paul Prior and Kevin Roozen both gave an exceptional amount of feedback, and I wrote 5 or 6 more drafts before submitting it to *Written Communication*.

It took 17 weeks to hear back from Chad Wickman, editor at *Written Communication*. The manuscript received, overall, very positive reviews. Reviewer 1 wanted a little more focus to the manuscript and argued that there were multiple articles lurking in the guise of a single submission. However, I argued for the complexity of the various moving parts of the manuscript, and Chad, as editor, supported me. Reviewer 2 offered, mostly, praise and noted that they could not wait to try read-aloud/think-aloud animations (RATAAs) in their own research. My second draft in response to the Reviewer feedback led Chad to decide that the piece should move forward. Chad was exceptional as an editor, acknowledging the fundamentally dialogic process of the work of manuscript revision, and left me copious notes that I could integrate into the

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<sup>16</sup> This chapter is repurposed by from Ware (2022) with permission from Sage Journals and *Written Communication*.

piece, or not. After working closely with Chad, the manuscript was slotted for a January 2022 publication in the journal.

I learned a lot about myself as a writer while moving this piece from draft to publication. Most importantly, I learned about the sorts of writing I wanted to do with the data I had collected for the dissertation, and how those were at odds with what dissertations typically looked like. To these ends, I have several article manuscripts (my favorite sort of medium, currently) and/or book chapters planned across many of the cases that are slated for after the dissertation.

I am exceptionally proud of this analysis and that it was accepted into a major journal. For those reasons, along with having worked on the it for more than a year (and with two years between draft and final publication, and *numerous* voices that have played a role in shaping the text), I have decided to leave it mostly as it is published in *Written Communication*. One reason for this is that the numerous, chronotopically dispersed voices that shaped the text are a dialogic product of not only the role of advisor and mentor and collegial feedback that has benefited this piece, but also the remarkably interesting role that reviewer feedback and editorial activity play in the fundamentally dialogic processes of the production of scholarship. The two anonymous reviewers helped me refine terminological issues that early drafts suffered from. Namely, I was using “textual activation” a la Dorothy Smith (2005) almost interchangeably with dialogic animation in a decidedly complicated, unnecessary way. Reviewer 2, particularly, helped me see that I did not need to account for *every* dialogic influence, and that dialogic animation, as I have conceived of it, can stand on its own as a suite of research methods that encompass textual activation, for sure, but that expands activation or *animation* to other semiotic modes beyond text. Chad’s editorial comments were, too, formative, and he helped me refine the document in innumerable ways. Most notably, he pushed me to go deeper into nearly all the analyses of

Alex's talk and text. That is, in textual moments where I drew from Alex's talk and/or text as documented claims of becoming (or unbecoming) Chad pushed me to say more, to ground my analyses for readers in ways that articulated clearly what motivated the use of data across the sections of the documented narrative. And so, my dialogic analyses were distributed across the chains of responses to reviewer and editorial feedback, and those sorts of responses became dialogic influences on the ways in which I would later draft Chapter 4 on my work with Joiya.

There are, however, a few changes. Most obviously, I have removed the theoretical framework, as the framework was expanded into a much more substantive version that appears in Chapter 2. I also removed *most* of the methods section with some exceptions. As I make the argument in Chapter 2, methods for studying the sorts of (un)becomings around lifespan literate activities and psychological processes that I do in this case are necessarily emergent, adaptable, and certain theoretical constructs and methods will necessarily be foregrounded and/or backgrounded depending on the case. So, some of the methods particular to Alex's case remain. I also utilized the broad conclusions of Alex's case from the published piece in varied ways that made sense for the final chapter on conclusions.

Another notable change is that, since the submission of the final, now published piece I have shifted in how I think about "unbecoming/becoming." In the published article I utilize "unbecoming/becoming" to show the instability of becomings and unbecomings, the makings and unmakings that mark lifespan trajectories. However, in this chapter and dissertation entire, I now have deferred to using "(un)becoming." I think that this still captures the instability of becoming and can signal makings and unmakings nicely. It also captures the addition or *becoming* of consequential moments across a life, as well as moments of what seem to be

*subtraction* and moments of change, loss, contradiction, etc. In the end, “(un)becoming” feels less awkward and more in line with my sense of the concept.

While Alex and I still consider our co-research “active,” we have been on a hiatus since early 2021. Thus, the table in the chapter (see later) that tracks our co-research sessions is current. We have not generated any new data for the research project since my work on the penultimate and final drafts of what came to be the *Written Communication* article, but we do keep in touch and plan to pick back up on co-research in the very near future, particularly so because Alex has all sorts of new exciting life developments that she is ready to tell me about on the research record.

Drawing on “‘God’s Absence During Trauma Took its Toll’: Dialogic Tracing of Literate Activity and Lifespan Trajectories of Semiotic (Un)Becoming” published in *Written Communication* volume 39, issue 1, I now present of the case study with “Alex Taylor.”

## **Introduction**

A few decades ago in an East African country, a four-year-old North American girl, born in Africa to missionary parents, and a boy of similar age native to the country, were playing in a sandbox. The girl asked the boy if he knew Jesus. Terrified by his negative response, she sought to intervene:

I remember explaining to him the whole belief system...asking him if he would like to pray with me to have Jesus come into his heart so he didn't go to hell. And he did...I was so excited because now my friend wasn't gonna go to hell. I ran in the house and told my mom, “Peter just accepted Jesus, he's not going to hell!”

The little girl was Alex (a pseudonym). Alex’s entire life, long into adulthood, was fundamentally predicated on Christianity. Yet, across a complicated trajectory of semiotic

becoming (Prior, 2018), she lost her faith and her life changed in drastic ways. She reflected on what we named the “sandbox story” in our subsequent discussions:

I feel bad and embarrassed...it seems so arrogant for a Caucasian person who's a foreigner in the country, even though I was born there, to say, “hey, guess what, I know things that you don't know, I'm going to heaven and you're going to hell unless you believe what I believe.” It's like this personal form of colonialism...Who has the right to do that? Christians think they do.

In our co-research, literate activities have illuminated these childhood moments and Alex’s recent reflections on them. Densely evocative moments like these are the kinds that “add up to a life” (Lemke, 2000, p. 273), and seem to resonate with others on broader trajectories of semiotic becoming. This moment, I argue, is a prime example what my colleagues and I (Prior et al., manuscript under review) have sketched as *consequential* in our ontology of moments that can resonate with others across timescales in textured ways to situate experiences in and across moments. This particular moment (and Alex’s reflection on it) points to an important aspect of becoming for Alex’s case (and I suspect, it is characteristic of all *becomings*): moments don’t always add up in expected ways, and some seem to *subtract* earlier additions along complicated pathways of change, oscillating between *unbecomings* and *becomings*. Trajectories of semiotic becoming, then, are not only inherently dialogic, but also dynamically nonlinear. They encompass moments of growth and addition across the lifespan, as well as change, loss, and contradiction (Engeström, 1996). All these features are fundamental to semiotic becoming (and unbecoming): the making, unmaking, and remaking of persons and artifacts<sup>17</sup> in activity.

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<sup>17</sup> My use of “artifact” is in line with Prior (1998’s) notion as any material object made or utilized by people, including “durable symbolic forms” (p.31) like languages. I foreground “text-artifacts” around literate activity most prominently in Alex’s case, and name them as such (see note 5 for elaboration on “text”).

This case explores the ways that Alex intra-acted with literate activities across chains of mediation that helped her to lose faith and to become a nonbeliever. I showcase, across two different sorts of documented narratives, the roles that semiotic/literate activities played on the roads between Alex, the child in the sandbox, and Alex, the adult reflecting on the colonialist nature of Christian exceptionalism. To these ends, I draw on the theoretical and methodological base of the previous chapter to present a documented narrative (Prior, 1994; Roozen & Erickson, 2017) of Alex's dynamically nonlinear trajectories of semiotic becoming around religious belief and coming to nonbelief across her lifespan. I also aim to contribute to the call for lifespan accounts of literate activity (Dippre, 2019; Bazerman, Applebee, Brandt, et al., 2018), and with a focus on the Vygotskyan (1987) concept of *word sense* across time, it also contributes to lines of research that trace the lifespan development of psychological functions (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003). Lastly, and critically, I also aim, as in the following chapter, to refine methodological practices for tracing semiotic/literate activity and semiotic becoming dialogically across the lifespan.

To aid in this work, I have developed flexible, theoretically grounded tools to uncover and keep in play the situated complexity of semiotic becoming across lifespan trajectories. These tools, I argue, helped Alex find *dialogic openings* that ultimately resulted in the *deepening* and *enrichment* of the stories Alex shared and drawn from here, as well as the *acrossness* of those stories—the ways in which those stories travel and change across the lifespan and across literate engagements. Thus, in this chapter, I utilize *dialogic animation* presented in Chapter 2, methodological tools grounded in dialogic semiotics (Prior & Hengst, 2010) that facilitate rich probes into lifespan becoming. I also utilize *dialogic analyses* that help in the interpretation and representation of complex data.

I turn next to the methods particular to Alex's case and her role as co-researcher. Then, weaving analyses of text and talk across fifteen interviews and textual interactions (shared texts, emails, transcript comments) over two years of co-research, I provide a documented narrative of Alex's lifespan trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming, the role of literate activities in Alex's pathway to non-belief, as well as the development of psychological functions across the lifespan, namely, around *word sense*.

### **Co-research methods, data collection, and analyses particular to Alex's case**

#### ***Recruitment***

I recruited Alex's participation in the co-research through The Clergy Project (see Chapters 1 and 2). Alex is a member of TCP but never actually served in a clergy role, serving instead in a related role as a "spiritual director" at a parachurch organization. Alex took part in various activities through TCP, including lurking and sometimes participating on TCP's online community, and particularly important for this chapter, she utilized the twelve free sessions of psychotherapy with licensed therapists from the "Secular Therapy Project" to get help as she worked through her loss of faith.

#### ***Alex as co-researcher***

Alex took up a deeply involved role in helping me trace her trajectories of (un)becoming. We've discussed being co-researchers on many occasions and consider ourselves to fit its sense. It served importantly in constructing mutual trust and openness essential for the longitudinal sorts of research necessary for tracing trajectories, particularly because Alex initially had concerns about participation due to a faith/lifestyle agreement mandated by her employer: "I am not 'out' yet. I still work for a Christian organization, and no one knows I have deconverted. If they found out, I would lose my job" (first email correspondence, January 2019).

## *Interviews*

We have met fifteen times (so far) for co-research sessions across more than two years<sup>18</sup> (2019-2021). Alex and I co-constructed goals, questions, and practices together in partnership. For instance, we devised plans together based on our interests at the tail ends of sessions. Or, I often notified Alex of the particularly interesting things that I saw emerge in our co-research data, and I often wrote to her to propose tentative topics for her approval. She often altered, revised, and proposed other directions as part of her co-researcher role. She still often writes to me with life developments, books she has read, things she's thought about related to our work, etc., and critically, during the first two years of co-research (now on hiatus) routinely proposed that we meet to discuss them on record. The co-research framework helped us set the boundaries of what we talked about on- and off-record and how data is represented in the research from storage to publication. Particularly, Alex often noted zones of our conversations as off-limits—at least for now—for publication for varied reasons.

## *Text-artifacts*

As a co-researcher, Alex also generated for our work all the text-artifacts (including prose, poetry, email chains, notes from therapy sessions, etc.) I utilize in the analysis that follows. Table 1 below maps all materials I collected with Alex. We used those text-artifacts to guide subsequent sessions with *dialogic animations* that align with, but go in much more depth than, text-based interviews. Another key source became the sessions-as-text-artifacts we generated together. I transcribed all interviews and sent each to Alex for comment and she engaged with them in dialogic animation. In many cases, her deeply engaged comments guided subsequent sessions in ways that reflect the fundamentally dialogic nature of the co-research. In

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<sup>18</sup> While we have been on a hiatus in our co-research since the publication of this chapter in *Written Communication*, our co-research is ongoing, and we have kept in touch across the months I have been writing.

all, she shared 33 poems and several other text-artifacts, and she chose the 19 (so far) that we focused on for dialogic animation. In fact, we first uncovered the “sandbox story” as a peripheral memory she wrote casually and in brief as a *sideshadow animation*; she was surprised at how interested I was in the story as we further explored it across multiple sessions. Alex also sideshadowed our co-research transcripts and her elaborations added numerous new dialogically animated layers to our data that have been enriching and often surprising.

**Table 1.** Alex’s co-research text-artifacts. Items **bolded** have been dialogically animated.

<b>Deconversion Poetry</b>	
1) <b>Demise of D.O.M.A. Limerick</b> (Defense of Marriage Act) – 06/29/2013	17) Sweet Hum (A Shakespearean Sonnet) – 08/10/2015
2) <b>Roundelay: What's Up With Christianity?</b> – 12/23/2013	18) Change is In the Air (A Haibun) – 09/07/2015
3) The Howling Hourglass – 06/16/2014	19) Caught – 12/13/2015
4) <b>Burning Sacred Temples</b> – 07/27/2014	20) Perfection – 01/01/2016
5) <b>An Agnostic's Advent</b> – 11/20/2014	21) <b>Front Row Pew</b> – 01/19/2016
6) <b>Losing Certainty</b> – 12/16/2014	22) <b>Three Little Words</b> – 03/27/2016
7) Penitent – 12/21/2014	23) Poison – 03/12/2016
8) <b>Diablo's Pebbles</b> – 02/15/2014	24) <b>Fade to Black</b> (A Sidlak) – 04/19/2016
9) My Mind is Like the Land of Oz – 2/16/2015	25) Grave (A Reverse Cinquain) – 04/19/2016
10) Apostate (A Sedoka) – 03/19/2015	26) Healing Wound – 04/26/2016
11) <b>Personal Babel</b> – 03/22/2015	27) Goodbye (A Tyburn) – 04/25/2016
12) Chokehold – 05/18/2015	28) The Wheels on the Bus – 07/24/2016
13) The Televangelist – 06/01/2015	29) Truth – 12/31/2016
	30) <b>Write</b> (A Shadorma) – 01/14/2017

<b>Table 1 (cont.)</b>	
14) The Lurid Reservoir of My Mind – 06/15/2015	31) Far From Wonderland – 01/28/2017
15) Truth – 07/14/2015	32) Seeing Red – 02/14/2017
16) <b>Wildflowers</b> – 07/27/2015	33) <b>Rise</b> – 04/02/2017
	<i>Other poetry:</i>
	<b>Wild Geese</b> by Mary Oliver
<b>Prose</b>	<b>Co-Research Sessions (transcriptions)</b>
1) <b>Word Picture</b> – 01/2019	1) <b>2019-03-26</b>
2) <b>“Deconversion Notes: Why I don’t Believe in God Anymore”</b> – 04/2018 - 06-2018	2) <b>2019-05-27</b>
3) <b>TCP Therapy Notes</b> – 04/2018 - 06/2018	3) <b>2019-08-12</b>
4) <b>List of 30 Theological Books</b> (n.d.)	4) <b>2019-08-19</b>
5) <b>Email chains with pen-pals</b> (n.d.)	5) <b>2019-10-30</b>
6) ~100 co-research emails (2019-2021)	6) <b>2019-11-14</b>
	7) <b>2019-11-25</b>
	8) <b>2019-12-03</b>
	9) <b>2020-01-22</b>
	10) <b>2020-02-19</b>
	11) <b>2020-03-04</b>
	12) <b>2020-04-02</b>
	13) 2020-10-22
	14) 2020-11-12
	15) 2021-01-26

### ***Dialogic Analyses***

I utilized the dialogic analysis practices mapped in Chapter 2. The three phases (*dialogic distributed transcription, dialogic distributed writing as analysis, and dialogic distributed production of documented narratives*) of my dialogic analyses particular to Alex’s case are:

**Phase 1.** I produced full transcripts of each session and sent them to Alex for sideshadowing (she has not engaged with our last two meetings, as reflected in Table 1). She often produced lengthy written responses, adding further dialogically animated layers to our data, and we always discussed her comments in subsequent sessions. During this phase, I tracked emergent “threads” (for instance, “certainty,” “prayer,” “marriage,” “loss,” “grief”)—broad

categories around which I organized repeated, chained instances of talk and text-artifacts as evidence of *becoming* in a “writing-as-analysis” subdocument.

**Phase 2.** First, I organized all co-research transcripts chronologically. I organized text-artifacts chronologically by date created (roughly if hard dates were not available). I analyzed the data holistically and thematically (see Roozen & Erickson, 2017; Durst, 2019) by creating a master document using Microsoft Word into which I inserted our session corpus and all text-artifacts collected as subdocuments. I worked iteratively through the transcripts and text-artifacts and created hyperlinks within and between subdocuments (e.g., the word “certainty” emerged as an important thread from our very first meeting, and I organized threads linking mentions of “certainty” related to Alex’s trajectories of [un]becoming). Writing-as-analysis is an exceptionally useful part of phase 2, and I utilized that practice as I traced various threads to varying degrees; that is, as I was analyzing, I took many shorthand notes, created links between documents, and produced full, more polished paragraphs that I needed to capture during analysis. Thus, writing-as-analysis became a dialogic interpretive practice; focusing on threads through writing-as-analysis then was a crucial part of dialogic analysis and became part of, or informed, phase 3.

**Phase 3.** I continued writing-as-analysis by producing a documented narrative (Roozen & Erickson, 2017), aiming to integrate and share samples of Alex’s data within narrative accounts. In phase 3, I also shared emerging manuscripts with her so that she had the opportunities to engage in further dialogic animation with the new semiotic values I was constructing out of our co-research. As noted in Chapter 2, she dialogically animated the narratives that follow twice using sideshadowing, leading to a dialogic product that both Alex and I were happy with.

In the following sections, I first showcase Alex’s nonlinear trajectory of semiotic (un)becoming, broadly drawing on dialogic analyses of data collected via the methods described in Chapter 2 and here. Then, I showcase how dialogic methods and analytic practices can be used to magnify threads of (un)becoming, focusing on literate activity and *word sense* around the term “certainty,” and tracing the lifespan development of psychological functions (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003) in conjunction with semiotic/literate activities.

### **Documented narrative: (Un)becoming across a life**

The trajectory documented here is partial, focusing on moments of marked consequentiality. These are moments that Alex represents as particularly formative for her complex pathways of change across her lifespan. I ground this first part of the documented narrative in a 235-word text she composed that she called a “Word Picture” (both the title of the text as well as the genre) as a dialogic analysis technique that keeps and manages complexity. The Word Picture represented in prose her pathway from belief to nonbelief around a single core metaphor. As I tell Alex’s broader (un)becoming trajectory, I break this first part of the documented narrative into four subsections that begin with discussion around parts of Alex’s Word Picture. The parts—always italicized and offset by one extra indentation than is usual for a block quote—are presented in order, so that by the end of this overall section, the entire Word Picture will have been represented.

During our second session, Alex dialogically animated her goals in a RATAA of the Word Picture (“Section 1”; see Fig. 1):

I thought I should write something based on this narrative or life trajectory. I thought “what would be the best word picture I could come up with to explain how I feel about

this, where I've come, where I'm going?" I thought maybe it's easier to explain if there's something you can visualize.


The Word Picture became intertextually woven through our co-research as we drew on and referenced it in talk across many sessions. As a method of *dialogic analysis*, the text, here, serves as a text-topography onto which I plot points of resonance (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) from her talk and text-artifacts regarding her trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming.

***Becoming-with-faith***

Alex’s Word Picture begins:

*My parents crafted me this beautiful, solid boat, built on generations of rock-solid faith, to carry me through the waters of life...*

Alex was born in an East African country to Caucasian North American missionaries. They taught her a faith she would carry well into adulthood. She conjures a sturdy watercraft predicated on generations of familial religious practice. In a RATAA of her Word Picture during our second session, she elaborated in figure 2.

RATAA – “Word Picture”	
Reading-Aloud	Thinking-aloud
<p><i>My parents crafted me this beautiful, solid boat, built on generations of rock-solid faith</i>            ((pause))</p> 	<p>when I say generations, I mean generations. My parents, my parents' parents, their parents, everybody was born-again Evangelical Christians that lived completely Christian lives, went to church, believed everything.</p>

**Figure 2.** *RATAA – Word Picture.*

Her family life was enveloped in worship, outwardly as representatives of the church, and privately as they intra-acted devoutly with religious practices. She continued, they were “not just religious on Sundays,” but had family devotions, prayer before meals, and faith permeated all

their activities, “so obviously that was built into me from the beginning.” Alex’s description of the importance of her family’s traditions and practices of belief and their role in helping her build a solid faith foundation resonates with del Rio and Álvarez’s (1995) analysis of religious practices. Particularly, highlighting that “cultural activity systems” like families with their temporally patterned practices, like daily prayers and devotions, “and the complexes of symbolic mediation they incorporate,” like theologies, “are simultaneously the effect and the cause of the design and construction of the mind” (p. 217). However, as we will see across Alex’s trajectories (as del Rio and Álvarez also note), minds are flexible, changing, adaptive, and faith and its practices can be transformed across pathways.

Socialization and learning as legitimate peripheral participation in sociocultural practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are useful reference frames for understanding Alex’s trajectories of becoming with deeply involved missionary parents. For instance, discussing the sandbox story in our eleventh session, I asked Alex how she learned to convert people:

Mom ran...Good News Clubs in our backyard with all the neighborhood kids...also I memorized scripture as a child...I knew, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" and, "God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten son"...You just know from growing up around that all the time, this is the script...if you don't accept Jesus into your heart, "no man comes to the Father but through me." That's how even at four, I was able to ask questions in the sandbox about “what do you believe?” and “have you asked Jesus into your heart?” I knew how to do that because I watched my parents do it. They did it at huge youth rallies. They did it in our backyard...I guess it was just like another language that I was fluent in<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Alex is not wrong in calling her sandbox conversion a “personal form of colonialism.” Good News Clubs are an indoctrination practice of the Child Evangelism Fellowship that “evangelize boys and girls with the Gospel of the

Through watching her parents and partaking in varied activities, Alex was socialized into her parents' lifeworld and culture of Christianity, learning the practice of (sandbox) conversion. She was not just a missionary-kid, but became a child-missionary in the sandbox, indexing her historied participation in missionary practices and religious architectures for mind and agency (del Rio & Álvarez, 1995).

The “sandbox story” and her reflection on learning conversion practices stand out as *consequential* moments of Alex's trajectories of semiotic becoming. It highlights the way her agency as missionary-kid emerged through intra-action (see Chapter 1 and 2) with her childhood friend in the sandbox. Drawing from the first part of the Word Picture, that her parents were missionaries, that faith and faith-practices played prominent roles in Alex's public and private life, and that she learned faith-and-missionary practices through participating in them with her parents all became part of what Alex calls her “*beautiful, solid boat, built on generations of rock-solid faith.*”

So far, I have focused on Alex's early childhood, further contextualizing the sandbox story, and describing aspects of her family life. In the next section, I move into moments that stand out as important in Alex's adolescent period that begin to set the stage for change, loss, and contradiction around faith that is to come later.

### ***Acceptance: Early tensions as “storms”***

Further describing her “boat,” the Word Picture continues:

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Lord Jesus Christ and establish (disciple) them in the Word of God.” One need only note the use of the verbs “evangelize” and “disciple,” both pointed toward conversion, to imagine the countless people across history, young and old, who have had westernized religious practices forced upon them. (See <https://www.cefonline.com/ministries/goodnewsclub/>).

*...I accepted it, took care of it as my own, put some of my own nails in it, conscientiously patched it, waxed it and kept it in tip-top shape for decades. And, so, it got me through a lot of storms,*

Growing up immersed in missionary work, Alex's early life was already a marked case of becoming regarding faith/religious work. Having spent her formative years abroad, Alex also identified as a third-culture kid (*cf.* Rounsaville, 2014). "You don't really identify with a culture or a country, but rather with people who can understand this displacement and cultural confusion," Alex said in our first session. Her becoming involved a complex entanglement of agential stances as missionary-third-culture-kid. She also discussed her experiences as a self-described "visible minority" in her (East African) country of birth, which made even going to church and Sunday school difficult:

Any time the Sunday school teacher would ask a question, they would always look to me for the answer because I stood out...they would always try to call on me...I guess it accentuated my difference even more. So, church was an uncomfortable place for me.

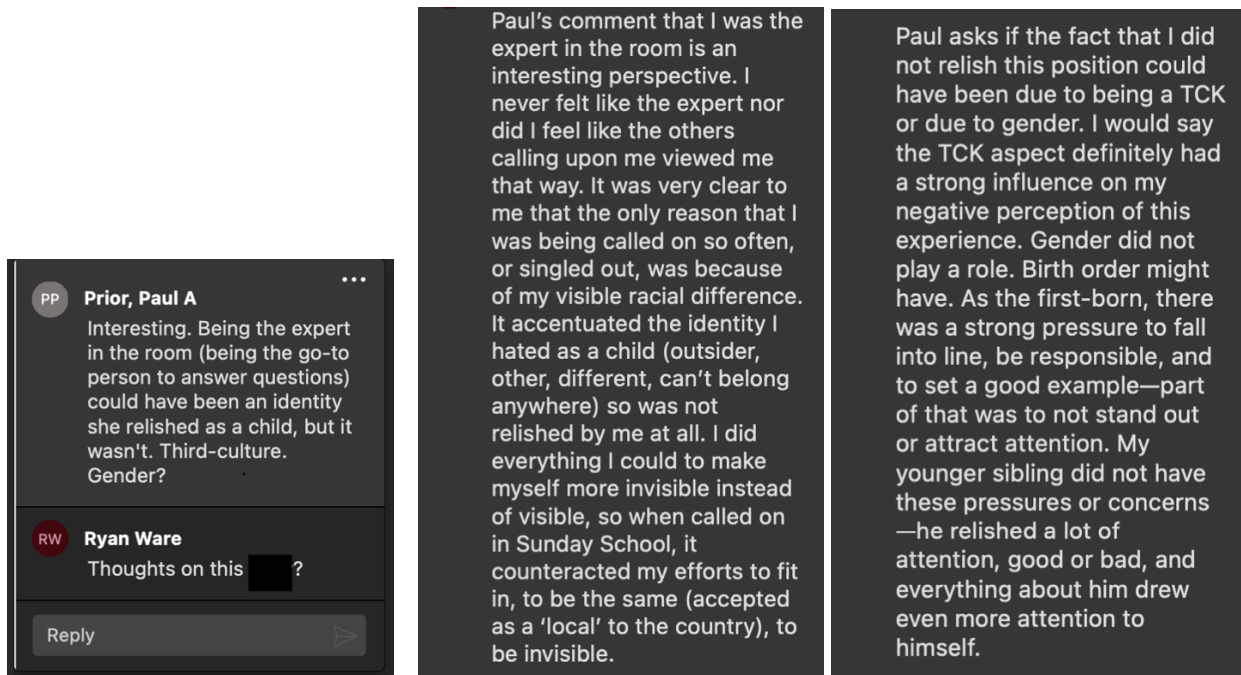
The officialized religious spaces quintessential to her lifeworld perspective and activity as a missionary-kid were uncomfortable, but so were nearly all other public spaces.

As shown in Figure 3 just below, Paul Prior commented, on a very early version of this narrative, inquiring about avenues for analyses around her discomfort in those spaces as related to her being a third-culture-kid, and perhaps, to her gender. I thought about these for a while and decided I would leave the comment in a version of the manuscript that Alex sideshadowed<sup>20</sup>. Figure 3 is interesting for varied reasons. Methodologically speaking, it demonstrates the extent typical of Alex's re-engagement with our co-research artifacts as she dialogically animated them,

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<sup>20</sup> Note: This figure and discussion of it was not presented in the *Written Communication* article.

as she produced substantial new lines of semiosis across our artifacts. I also find interesting and compelling to represent the dialogic exchange between two people who have never met but have theoretically and methodologically influenced this project in enormous ways. What’s more, Alex elaborates further on issues that come up in more depth just below: her consistent struggles with her outsider identity as third-culture-kid, one who must set an example of strong Christian values due to her parents’ occupation as missionaries.



**Figure 3.** *Paul Prior’s comment and Alex’s sideshadow (Alex’s real name has been removed from the image).*

Thus, fused with her sense of cultural displacement as third-culture kid, Alex felt “this sense of obligation to be good, to be obedient and do everything I was supposed to” because not doing so could jeopardize her parents’ work:

If we got kicked out, we’d have to move to a different country...it was this crazy sort of pressure...Everybody was looking at me to represent...religion was so tied into external

appearances for me...So I just bought into the whole thing and went over the top to be responsible and good.


Such duress would be exceptionally difficult for any person, particularly one in the throes of fraught becoming typical of adolescence. Alex felt pressure to perform as missionary-kid in the face of further cultural displacement.

Tension built during adolescence, and Alex experienced a crisis of identities. Her missionary-and-third-culture-kid entanglements were intra-acting turbulently, leading her toward the need to reconcile who she was. She said in our first session:

I thought, "I just believe what my parents believe but I've never really owned it. I just do it because I'm supposed to. I'm a missionary kid, I'm living up to their expectations. But...my culture isn't mine, my identity isn't mine, my faith isn't mine." So around thirteen I had this massive cultural-faith-identity crisis...I begged my parents to let me leave the country and move to North America to figure this out.

Alex moved away from her parents in Africa to their home country and went to a Christian boarding school. It was during that time she facilitated her becoming-with-faith, forging her own relationship with Christianity divergent from, but commensurate with, her parents'. She *"accepted it, took care of it as [her] own,"* but, importantly, she *"put some of [her] own nails in it"* (see Word Picture above). In the RATAA of the Word Picture, she noted that she "doubled down on the faith thing" becoming a "super-Christian."

After four-years in North America, Alex's life changed drastically. When reading-aloud her Word Picture, she paused to describe a life-changing event, as shown in Figure 4.

RATAA – Word Picture	
Reading-Aloud	Thinking-Aloud
<i>And, so, it got me through a lot of storms</i> ((pause)) 	when I say “ <i>a lot of storms</i> ”...I got pregnant when I was 17 and was not married. That was really difficult. I think having my faith and thinking, “oh, God forgives me” because I was a sinner for getting pregnant before I was married, feeling like God forgave me and then I could move on. That was a storm.

**Figure 4.** RATAA – Word Picture

Pregnancy is often a tumultuous experience, and it was especially so for Alex. She was in North America while her parents were abroad; she had gone directly against evangelical values—no sex prior to marriage. In short, she felt like a “failure.” During our eleventh session (more than a year after the RATAA above), she described the consequences of becoming pregnant, sending ripples throughout her familial lifeworld:

My dad called me very upset and said he felt like maybe he should resign as pastor of the church because there's a verse in Timothy "if you can't control your own household, you can't lead the church." So, my failure was his failure.

Resonant with her description around not jeopardizing her parents’ work, Alex felt as though she had let down her family, her father particularly. She decided a step toward rectifying the situation would be to marry the father of her unborn child.

Around the first two pieces of the Word Picture, I have focused on consequential moments on Alex’s trajectories of becoming-with-faith through early childhood, adolescence, leading up to the point when she became pregnant. A complex set of trajectories played out after Alex became pregnant and was married. However, to bring (un)becoming around faith into focus, the documented narrative continues below close to twenty years later as she was

experiencing issues with her marriage that, through intra-action, shored up issues with her faith/faith practices, and facilitated trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming.

***Prayer, absence, disruption, and genesis***

I turn, here, to the beginnings of Alex’s foregrounded (un)becomings with faith. The Word Picture continues:

*...but the constant bailing of water throughout my difficult marriage and unsuccessfully trying to mentally and emotionally incorporate God’s absence during trauma took its toll and that boat sprung some pretty heavy-duty leaks. I could not bail water fast enough and it finally came time to choose: sink with the boat or jump overboard into non-belief.*

In this section, I show one way Alex “jump[ed] overboard into non-belief” by tracing an (un)becoming of the practice of prayer through “disruption” (Smith & Prior 2020) in conjunction with marital problems she was experiencing. I also show how nearly a decade later, she was still making sense of these issues through “genesis” (Vygotsky, 1997; Latour, 2005; Smith & Prior, 2020) around co-research activities.




Alex’s unbecoming of prayer was centered around faulty counsel she received from her church. In our first session, as we discussed becoming-with and out-of-faith, she recalled attending a summer series at church about marriage, dealing with marital issues:

They were basically just, “pray harder, it’ll be fine.” And I was like, “*no*, that’s not how it works.” The first sort of pin to drop for me and my faith was around prayer, and how bogus that was.

Up to this point, Alex noted having described herself as a “prayer warrior.” Prayer warriors are common in evangelical Christian denominations, imagining themselves actively intervening in

the world with prayer. “It was so natural to me to pray...like breathing,” she noted in our seventh session, “it’s just like a conversation, so continual.” Alex prayed bible verses persistently, and prayer was a way for her to manage her anxieties. She was always talking to her god, she noted, much of her inner speech was cast toward her god’s ear.

In a poem written during her deconversion titled “Personal Babel” (described more later), Alex dealt with the ways her prayers and doubts were being stacked, towering so high they *must* reach her god. In a RATAA, she noted:


RATAA – “Personal Babel”	
Reading-Aloud	Thinking-Aloud
<p>I stack my doubts And staggering questions One on top of the other Piled high to God’s ear My own personal Babel ((pause))</p> 	<p>I kept reaching out to God saying, “if you’re there, let me know.” I’d prayed so many times for my marriage, I’d piled these prayers up to God’s ear so many times, and it was silent. No answer. I felt like they were so high...if there was a God, it would be like the Tower of Babel where it’s going to finally reach heaven...it didn’t work in the bible, and it wasn’t working for me either...that was one of the clinchers for me in deconversion was the silence. If God really cares and wants us to know him and have a relationship with him, and we’re supposed to pray, why is there just silence met? Your deepest hurts and problems are met with silence.</p>
<p>((reads-aloud)) I can reach Him no more. ((pauses))</p>  	<p>I felt like, that part was sad to me...because prayer used to be a huge part of my life. I actually felt like I had a relationship with God...The confusion that took over, the doubts and uncertainties, not being able to reach Him was like a complete relationship loss for me...It actually felt like a grief and a loss.</p>

**Figure 5.** RATAA – *Personal Babel*

“Disruption” and “genesis” are key in illuminating how activities and assemblages break down and come together in semiotic (un)becoming (Vygotsky, 1997; Latour, 2005; Smith & Prior,

2020), highlighting features hidden while activities are (or were) working smoothly. Prayer became entangled with her relationship with her husband as she sought her god’s help with her marriage. Though she had “piled these prayers up to God’s ear,” her marriage did not improve, and she felt her god’s absence, disrupting her *becoming* around prayer. Prayer, disrupted, no longer made sense for her. At a time when she was dealing with the decision to separate from her husband, she was also beginning to doubt/lose her faith. Entangled lifeworld flows of personhood (practicing prayer, being a Christian as well as a partner in marriage) were breaking down, as change and loss were foregrounded as semiotic (un)becoming.

Alex’s “personal Babel,” along with being told to “pray harder” for her marriage, pushed her toward perspectival shifts in relation to church, prayer, and her marital issues. This was certainly a “cut” to her faith. The “imaginary being” was never listening or helping her “*bail water*” flowing into her boat as the entanglements of coming to doubt faith and struggling with her marriage intra-acted. Her faith-as-boat fell into disrepair, but it was not for her lack of effort.

RATAA – “Word Picture”	
Reading-Aloud	Thinking-Aloud
<p><i>God’s absence during trauma took its toll and that boat sprung some pretty heavy-duty leaks. I could not bail water fast enough</i>            ((pause))</p> 	<p>When I say, “I could not bail water fast enough,” I tried. I read books. I started with Brian McLaren, <i>A New Kind of Christian</i>. I tried whatever I could, “how am I going to keep this faith? How am I gonna bail this water and still stay in this boat?” I did whatever I could to figure out a way to still hang on to some belief...initially, I found, “okay, religion is bullshit. It’s man-made, but there’s got to be still some kind of personal God”...that was my initial fall down the slide. Then, “well, wait a second: If religion isn’t true and religion is what made God, maybe God’s not true either.” It was this gradual, you know...But I did try really hard.</p>

**Figure 6.** RATAA – Word Picture

As shown in Figure 6, Alex's faith was being tested, she turned to literate activities around reading, reflection, and writing poetry. Instead of recuperating her faith, those activities facilitated more "storms" of doubt, and her faith-as-boat sprung "heavy duty leaks" she could neither patch nor bail the water from.

Alex came to understand this period in her life even more through the "genesis" around co-research activities. As noted, part of our co-research methods involves Alex's dialogic animation (sideshadowing) of transcribed sessions. That genesis of co-research activity led to semiosis regarding her unbecomings of prayer, and her relationship to both her god and husband. She reflected on this over email in January 2020, one year after we began co-research, and wrote to me excitedly about a sideshadow session with one of our transcripts she completed on her own time:

It struck me that my relationship with God was a lot like my relationship with my husband...he would constantly say he loved me and wanted a relationship, but then I could not reach him and/or he would continually contradict himself so that it was impossible to know what he wanted...Just like God! It was exhausting trying to be a mind reader. I had never made the correlation before until reading this recent transcript. No wonder when I left both my husband and God, I felt so much relief, so much more freedom.

Alex's reflection years later, through the genesis of dialogic animation, captures poignantly how the disruption of her prayer practices was entangled with her struggles to keep a relationship with her god and her husband. She made the choice to separate from her husband, and during that difficult time, she could not "mentally and emotionally incorporate God's absence." As I show

next section, she made the choice to come to non-belief, primarily across intra-actions with varied literate activities.

### ***Deconversion***

This final section that superimposes Alex's Word Picture with her lifespan trajectory showcases her realized deconversion and non-belief. The Word Picture ends:

*...I reluctantly dove. At first, the waters were cold and harsh and the unfamiliar darkness threatened to drown me. But, as I got my sea legs and learned to tread water, even to rest and float a little now and then, I began to see and feel the incredible rush of beauty in an ocean so vast it cannot be contained by manmade explanations. Sometimes I get tired of the uncertainty, the wave of questions that still come unbidden, and I wish for the comfort of that solid boat. But, I know that even if someone restored it, I could never again trust it to carry me without more than blind faith to sit on.*

In the RATAA of the segment above, she described the first few months as “like a spiral and it’s tightening, you feel like you’re just going to suffocate or drown. Eventually that opens up and you gush out the other end, and it’s like a birth.” Importantly, Alex frames her jumping overboard into nonbelief (see above) and diving reluctantly, as a choice. She claims agency in her nonbelief because, as she put it above, she tried so hard to keep faith, especially through literate activities—reading books, writing poetry, etc. Yet, “Language and literacy events” she wrote in our first ever correspondence, “had a huge impact on my journey into non-belief. So much so that I would say that, without them, I probably would not have made the journey.”

A host of literate activities played roles in Alex’s “journey.” For instance, while deconverting, she began a pen-pal relationship with a friend who is still a full-time Christian

pastor. Alex noted in dialogic animation (sideshadow) of an early draft of the article that became this chapter how “ironic that my friendship with someone who is still in full-time Christian ministry had such a HUGE influence on my deconversion.” Together, they read and discussed many books (see Appendix E for list of books and Alex’s thorough narration of them and her timeline). The texts became incrementally less religious. Eventually, Alex was reading atheistic books about faith like *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists* (Barker, 2008), among many others. In our seventh session, Alex said, “I've looked so hard and so long and read so much, I don't feel like I just walked away from my faith for no reason.” Her trajectory of semiotic becoming is marked, then, by her struggle *against* unbecoming-with-faith.

Literate activities continue to play important roles in her semiotic becoming as a non-believer. She reads voraciously, participates in a Living Without Religion group, is a member of TCP taking part in various activities like online forums and counseling sessions with a licensed therapist, listens to podcasts, and watches documentaries, all while writing and reflecting in some capacity about all these activities. More, her activities as co-researcher cannot be left out: writing the Word Picture, *dialogically animating* numerous artifacts including her own writing, our transcripts, and even the article that became this chapter, helping trace broad and focused trajectories of semiotic becoming—all intra-actively shape Alex’s ongoing becoming. “The process of semiosis,” Witte (1992) wrote, “has at least the potential to go on endlessly” (p. 281), and through dialogic animation and co-research broadly, Alex continues this ongoing process of semiotically forging a lifeworld perspective, now as a non-believer.

So far, I have used a lifespan trajectory as a reference frame (Valsiner, 2007) for constructing a documented narrative of semiotic (un)becoming out of my dialogic analysis. I

have also used one text she wrote as a text-topography on which I plotted points of resonance across our co-research data. This narrative captures the broadly semiotic character of instances from Alex’s lifespan (un)becoming through analysis of important moments (e.g., taking up the semiotic practices around her parents’ missionary work; “doubling down” on her parents’ faith to make it her own; the breaking of prayer resulting from the metaphor of her “personal babel” and god’s silence and absence; the fight to keep faith in spite of doubt and uncertainty, which seemed to result in the increasing secularization of her literate activities). The dialogic analyses and reference frame of lifespan trajectory as narrated here serves to *deepen* and *enrich* Alex’s story, particularly by coupling in with the Word Picture as a sort of text-topography. But crucially, it has begun showing how RATAAs can lead to *dialogic openings*: without having performed these RATAAs, the data I collected with Alex would not have been as rich, nor would the stories have such depth, and I would not have been able to trace the points of resonance (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) between her talk about her life and her broad metaphor constructed in the Word Picture as easily, if at all.

Next, I utilize Vygotskyan (1987) “word sense” as a reference frame for dialogic analysis that helps magnify some roles literate activity played in Alex’s deconversion. I show particularly how dialogic semiotic methods and analyses help to trace lifespan development of psychological functions (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003), and to showcase the intra-active (un)becoming of person, literate activity, and text-artifact(s).

### **Word sense and (un)certainly: Literate activity and reconfiguring a lifeworld perspective**

Vygotsky’s (1987) notion of word sense calls attention to the multiple, dialogically colored dimensions of particular words that individuals develop across trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming, and a word’s sense can account for an individual’s subjective engagements with

the world. Tracing sense across instances of talk, text-artifacts, etc., is one reference frame useful in dialogic analyses of (un)becoming. In this section, I trace the ways in which Alex's lifeworld perspective changed in conjunction with her sense of "certainty," in part writing her way through the process of deconversion.

### *Losing certainty*

One of the most central facts about Alex's faith was it provided certainty. Certainty was at the core of her lifeworld perspective, a lens through which she saw the world, guiding her intra-active becoming with/in it. Alex described the sense that certainty gave:


I based my life on it, bet my life on it...I stayed for twenty years in a bad marriage because I was certain that's what God wanted and that Christians don't get divorced. I put a lot of life in, behind my beliefs and certainty. It impacted the way I parented... the way I was in my marriage...did I take a job or not? (Session four).

However, she developed a tension around certainty as she actively worked on her faith across literate activities. Describing the "shift" to uncertainty in our second session, she said,

that was a huge shift for me because as a Christian, I thought, "I'm certain about this and I know I'm right." Well clearly I wasn't...To shift from that place of thinking I knew everything and that I was right, to a place where I don't really know anything, it's a completely different paradigm.

She struggled with shifting to a new paradigm, I argue, because her sense of certainty was one of the most important facets of the religious architectures for mind and agency (del Rio & Álvarez, 1995) that Christianity afforded. The shifting sense of certainty is crystalized in texts she wrote between 2014 and 2018.

During the mid-to-late 2010s, Alex wrote *hundreds* of poems on an anonymous blog, and shared 33 that were related to her deconversion (see Table 1). She noted, writing “gets things out of me...frees me up to be less tied to whatever the emotion was.” Alex’s literate activity around certainty highlights one thread of her intra-active becoming with practice(s) and text-artifacts. On July 27, 2014, Alex wrote the poem *Burning Sacred Temples*. In session eleven, when she dialogically animated that poem, she said her goal was to deal with her emotions “wrestling so much with these questions” around her doubts. She described the poem as managing how “letting go” of everything she believed would greatly impact her life.

RATAA – “Burning Sacred Temples”	
Reading-Aloud	Thinking-aloud
<p>We hold dear our mythologies But what if these Shackles of solace Chain us, unnecessarily To a divine script [...]            Masquerading as certainties? ((pauses))</p> 	<p>The meaning, the feeling in that, was definitely my doubts were screaming to be examined. I was thinking about them almost constantly, reading so many books, trying to find answers to my doubts...I was constantly examining these doubts...even though in the moment I didn't know I was deconverting, I think that it was an important part of my deconversion that I did examine the doubts...I think because I've looked so hard and so long, read so much, I don't feel like I just walked away from my faith for no reason...I was so sure all these things were true, I was certain. But...when I was writing this, I wasn't so sure anymore. I was wondering if those certainties were maybe not really certain.</p>

**Figure 7.** RATAA – *Burning Sacred Temples*.

Literate activity mediated her management of struggles with her lifeworld perspective around certainty and continued to serve those purposes in subsequent months.

Five months later, Alex composed *Losing Certainty*. The first half describes Certainty as a lover, “Always there// Without fail// Until, one day// He isn’t.” The second half describes his departure:

I am baffled by his sudden disappearance  
For weeks, I almost think I catch glimpses of him  
Here and there amidst the crowds  
As I look for his smiling assurance  
[...]  
Doubt stalks me  
I begin to lose faith  
Until, eventually  
Uncertainty settles in  
To my heart  
A softer, gentler Lover.

Across *Burning Sacred Temples* and *Losing Certainty*, Alex holds differently configured perspectival alignments to “certainty,” a shifting lifeworld perspective she wrestled with through writing poetry. In “Burning Sacred Temples,” she’s *questioning* – what if divine scripts are really just unnecessary chains in masks of certainty? In *Losing Certainty*, she mourns the loss of a love, but takes a new lover. Residua of her attempts to keep faith and certainty are encoded here as she writes of seeking Certainty-personified in crowds. But the affix “un” appears, evidence of an (un)becoming of lifeworld perspective through an (un)becoming of word sense. She is also brave enough, here, to write for the first time in the record of data, “I begin to *lose* faith.” Writing, then, as she noted above when describing why she writes, is “getting things out of” her and she is

perhaps attempting to “free [herself]” from being tied to the emotions around doubt, (un)certainty, and losing faith.

When discussing the trajectory of Alex's deconversion in the first results section, I utilized the poem *Personal Babel*. Written three months after *Losing Certainty* in March 2015, *Personal Babel* continues to wrestle with certainty/uncertainty:

My own personal Babel  
Towering to heaven  
In deafening silence  
Until the weight  
(Of unanswered prayers  
And uncertainties)  
Crushes my faith  
The tower crumbles  
Confusion reigns.

The poem conveys the burdensome weight of her Babel across shifting perspectives, how the loss of certainty was crushing and confusing. In session 4, as she reflected on her goals for writing it (“Section 1”; see Fig.1), she said:

I wrote it out of frustration and in the moment when I was pretty angry. But even when I read it back now...there's a sadness that comes with that...It's not just anger, because losing everything that you believed in your whole life is not easy.

Frustration, anger, sadness, and loss mark the shifting sense of certainty. Alex noted in January 2020 during a meeting centered on reflecting together on our co-research methods (a session topic we generated from the email in which she likened her relationship to her god with that of to

her husband; see above), “there's so many intersecting trajectories that impact the deconversion journey...it's not just one isolated thing. You can't pick it out.” But the (un)becoming is partially crystalized in *Burning Sacred Temples*, *Losing Certainty*, and *Personal Babel* as text-artifacts showcasing the ways her unbecomings around prayer, doubt(s), and certainty were concatenated, how she mediated the complex disentanglement of her sense and broader religious architectures for mind and agency with literate activity, transforming her lifeworld perspective. It's nothing short of the intra-active (un)becoming of person, literate activity, and text-artifact(s) in conjunction with a shift in her psychology across longitudinal, lifespan trajectories (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003).

### ***Certainty “defused”***

Alex's coming to nonbelief went on for years and was mediated through intra-action with literate activities beyond poetry writing. In 2018, three years after writing those three poems, she began sessions with a therapist from The Clergy Project. She took exceptionally detailed notes of all therapy sessions and was able to focus more on what certainty was and what losing it meant.

One of those notes read:

He [TCP therapist] said that my rigid frameworks brought me some familiarity, a sense of safety in chaos – “it was like home when I didn't have a home” – wow, yes! He said that a lot of people turn to church because it provides explanation. Now that the roof of certainty is gone and I'm out in the cold and open, I am vulnerable.

As part of certainty's word sense, I read a residue of her fraught life as missionary kid, growing up in countries that never seemed home. Her exclamatory “wow, yes!” was a becoming of semiosis around framework-as-home in a precarious world, and importantly, the cold, vulnerability of home without the “roof of certainty.”

Alex noted in our sixth session that in therapy they discussed certainty a lot, “because we were trying to make the connection between how losing my faith and losing that certainty was also impacting my life, in relationships, in work.” To explore these issues further, her therapist suggested she write about how faith, and losing it, affected her life. In response, she composed a list titled, “Theories of Why I Believed as Long as I Did.” The first two (of six) make sense of her transformed notion of *certainty*:

1) *Making Sense in Chaos*: it struck me this past week that one of the reasons I believed as long as I did was because I needed a framework to help make sense in the chaos of my life—there was so much that was uncertain and shifting and that did not make sense in my childhood, but this framework was certain and made sense—it was a well-defined box that I could rely on to never change when everything around me was constantly changing.

2) *The More I Know The Safer I Feel*: one of my lifelong themes was that I have used knowledge and certainty to help me feel safe. I can be obsessive about knowing things... Why? Because the more I know, the less chance there is that something will...take me by surprise and hurt me, or that I will be blind-sided by trauma again...if I know things then maybe I can protect myself from being a victim. With Christianity, the whole premise is that we “know this to be true”—there is no room for doubt...I wanted certainty and Christianity gave me that.

Alex’s sense of certainty, so long embedded in/as lifeworld perspective, was drastically transformed across entangled experiences, remediated across a complex topography of chronotopes, artifacts and intra-actions. Writing through certainty-uncertainty is simply one thread in tracing the semiotic entanglements of sense across the laminated assemblages of text-

artifacts, talk, accounts of intra-actions with others, and the relationship of the word(s) to her deconversion from faith. But it also sheds light on the development of psychological processes around sense and certainty that she worked on through intra-actions over more than five years.

As of our co-research, Alex is still becoming and developing nuanced understandings of her sense of certainty/uncertainty. She noted when discussing a dialogic animation (sideshadow) of our first session transcript:

I saw reading back over the transcript, a theme in my life has been this certainty-uncertainty, wrestling with identity, and is it really mine? You asked me if I had more ownership over my uncertainty than of anything else in my life...and I do actually think that. I had never really thought of that before...but I do actually feel more ownership of uncertainty than the other things like culture or faith before, and I think it's because I wrestled so much with certainty and lost it through such a long, hard battle...It was so hard to hang on to that I think now that I'm in uncertainty, I do feel more ownership of it.

Notice Alex's wording, "now that I'm *in* uncertainty." An interesting finding emerged in dialogic analysis of Alex's sense of certainty: her striking descriptions of varied features of faith/belief as containers, things she lives or can be *in*. In the Word Picture, she imagined her faith as a boat that she inhabited and that carried her through life. Certainty was a "framework," a "box" in which she was protected from life's precarities, a home that lost its "roof" leaving her in the "cold and open." With uncertainty, which she lives in now, she has come to own the precarity she once fought against. Vygotsky (1987) wrote, "The *infusion* of varied sense content into a single word constitutes the formation of an individual," and notes that entire complexes of thoughts, feelings, sensations, affective alignments, etc. can be expressed in a single word in inner speech (p. 279, emphasis added). Certainty was, perhaps, *defused* of aspects its sense

around faith as uncertainty became *infused* with sense as she came to nonbelief across the redevelopment of her lifeworld perspective.

Certainty clearly helped constitute her becoming-with-faith across an array of semiotic/literate activities; likewise, uncertainty clearly helped constitute her unbecoming-with-faith across semiotic/literate activities. Both constitute the formation of Alex, her lifeworld perspective, her dynamic intra-active becomings and reconfiguring psychological sense. “The meaningful word,” Vygotsky wrote, “is a microcosm of human consciousness” (1987, p. 289)—and now, after years of semiotic (un)becoming, the word *uncertainty* seems to be very much a microcosm of Alex’s consciousness.

The analyses presented in this section (and subsections) utilized word sense as a reference frame in conjunction with RATAAs of key poems to showcase how Alex’s sense of the word “certainty” shifted across semiotic and literate engagements. I argue here in closing that the flexibility of methods for collecting data through co-research (dialogic animation in particular) and for interpretive dialogic analysis supported further *dialogic openings* that served to *deepen* and *enrich* the first part of the documented narrative in which I told, with Alex, a broad lifespan trajectory. The ability to bring to sharp relief Alex’s engagements with a single word sheds light on one facet of her trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming that would likely have remained obscure had we not dialogically animated her poetry in our exploration of her semiotic (un)becoming. The poems and Alex’s RATAAs of them also showcase *acrossness*: they enabled us to trace how “certainty” was a constant for her for decades, but then how her relationship to that word and its entanglement with/in her conscious experience shifted over a four-year period. I report from recent off-record conversations with Alex that her becoming-with certainty/uncertainty is still in-flux. Becomings are, after all, never settled.

## Conclusions

Across her lifespan, Alex has become-a-long-way from the child she described herself as in the “sandbox story” that opened this article. As she said during session nine:

One of my favorite verses when I was a Christian was in Joel [2:25], "I will restore to you the years that the locusts have eaten." I still get some pleasure out of that verse because I'm getting those years restored to me now that I'm not a Christian ((laughs)) because life is so much better!

One year into co-research, she sought and secured secular employment (not tied to any church/religious organization) which she has now held more than a year. No longer controlled by a faith/lifestyle agreement, she reports feeling the weight of decades-old pressures dissipating. The narratives in this chapter, a dialogic product of Alex's and my work, showcase a lifespan (un)becoming still in flux as she actively focuses on reclaiming the years she lost.

While I draw conclusions more pointedly in the concluding chapter, I make a few points about Alex's case here. Alex's case is particularly interesting for several reasons. The reference frame of *lifespan trajectory* that I traced as the first results section plotted a turbulent biography of semiotic/literate activities that she intra-acted with on her trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming. Her life as missionary kid (with prominent missionaries for parents) set her up for a life of faith. But her complicated trajectories of (un)becoming, by the point traced here, did not add up to her continual becoming as a believing Christian. Rather, across exceptionally complex pathways of change, loss, contradiction—imbricated with semiotic/literate activities—Alex came to doubt and incrementally lose faith. As she pointed out above, the first point of contradiction was around the fundamentally semiotic, directive practice of *prayer*. While experiencing tumultuous issues with her marriage, her church irresponsibly told her to *pray harder* rather than

provide the resources she needed to either work on her marriage (and they certainly would not see divorce as a Christian path). When this did not work, Alex cut prayer out altogether—the first “cut” to her faith. Alex then turned to a series of literate activities, particularly around writing poetry and pen-pal relationships in which she read lots of books based on faith and then, incrementally, based on secularism/atheism/agnosticism. In a very clear way, the literate activities that Alex utilized to *keep* her faith led her further and further away from it. In the dialogic analyses above, then, I showed the intra-active co-becoming of person-artifact-activity, what Hutchins (1995; see also Prior, 1998) might call a *functional system*.

The second results section utilized a different reference frame for dialogic analysis. In that section, I zoomed in on some of the literate activities Alex was intra-acting with on her trajectories of (un)becoming and focused on the development of *word sense*. Particularly, as Alex intra-acted with literate activities around poetry writing and therapy sessions through The Clergy Project, Alex *lost* a *sense* of “certainty,” which was slowly replaced by “uncertainty.” I marked this as a fundamental shift in her lifeworld perspective. This section of the chapter showcased the utility in remaining reflexive in theoretical-methodological approaches, allowing particular reference frames to be foregrounded and/or backgrounded depending on the emergent analyses of data.

Both results sections of the documented narrative, as I argued above, drew on *dialogic openings* around RATAAs and, to an extent, sideshadows, to *deepen* accounts and *enrich* the threads I was tracing. What’s more, they both highlight the *acrossness* of semiotic becomings, and the ways in which the trajectories people make to make themselves are fundamentally *dynamically non-linear*.

Marking word sense across Alex's case led me—and this project—on a different trajectory than I had initially imagined. I started thinking about expanded notions of subjective sense as mapped by Fernando González Rey while writing this chapter for publication. I came to see that notion as fundamental for a case that I have been working on writing for two years, now. Thus, subjective sense takes a more foregrounded role in the dialogic analyses in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: “BIPOLAR IS NOT THAT GREAT OF AN ENVIRONMENT TO LIVE IN”

**TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter takes up, *throughout*, strong themes of bipolar, depression, anxiety, suicide, and suicidal ideation.**

...particular configurations of the subjective senses resulting from different people’s experiences can be identified throughout their lives, including their subjective character, historical background, and the current contextual dynamics of their life. Relationships, activities, memories and fantasies integrate themselves into a complex network as a result of the process of the subjectivation of experience. This network is shaped into a unique and singular blend of the subjective senses within a specific subjective configuration. For this reason, subjectivity appears to be a system in which experience is organized according to the subjective requirements of the subjective system; it is not just a copy of reality.

Fernando González Rey, 2007: p. 6.

In order to understand and master themselves from their interior, human beings need to delve into themselves, and for this they use other types of directive psychological instruments that articulate analysis of the reality and of the situation with analysis of oneself, and of oneself in the situation. These more individualized instruments—personal organizers, diaries, poetry, prayer—direct subjects towards the interior of their consciousness and permit them to evaluate and operate their own thoughts and feelings.

Pablo del Rio and Amelia Álvarez, 2007, p. 381.

This chapter builds on a key concept from the last, namely *sense*, to situate *subjective sense* and *subjective configuration* in the wider conceptual frame of *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1987; 1994; Fleer et al., 2017; Prior et al., unpublished manuscript) and *becoming*. As described in Chapter 2, subjective senses are deeply tied to feelings, our embodied, symbolic interpretations of emotional states. Subjective senses are instantaneous emotional-symbolic units from which, over time, subjective configurations are generated, becoming oriented with personality, identity, and action. As with word sense (and as hinted at in González Rey’s epigraph above), subjective senses are not just intrapsychical (González Rey, 2007) but are dialogic, social *processes* as recursive blends of inner-and-outer semiotics. These psychological processes are key dimensions of *perezhivanie*, which characterizes the fundamentally dialogic, distributed, moment-to-moment intra-activity of consciousness and social world. As specified in

Chapter 2, subjective senses and subjective configurations are dimensions of *perezhivanie* in that they describe what is happening experientially with/in an individual situated intra-actively in a wider social environment. In this way, *perezhivanie* is a distributed unit of analysis with persons, things, environments, subjective sense and subjective configuration as in-roads to situated analyses of processes of *perezhivanie*.

Another key concept that I also introduce into analyses is *directivity*. As del Rio and Álvarez have noted, directivity is “constructed from emotion and voluntary action” (1995, p. 387) and is thus crucially about self-control and the situated regulation of actions and mental states. There is also a crucial evaluative component to directivity, as when individuals need to understand themselves, and their mental states in sociocultural environments, directive instruments can aid in such self-evaluation (del Rio and Álvarez, 2007). From my very first analyses of Joiya’s blog in early 2019, I saw directivity—around writing—as a key activity in her management of her fraught lifeworld across the decade her blog was active. In keeping with a project grounded in an inquiry stance (Stornaiuolo et al. 2017), I developed a new research question for analysis of this chapter: How can literate activity help to direct *subjective senses*, *perezhivanie*, and *becoming*?

In this chapter, I answer that question drawing on these concepts in depth to show how Joiya Martin struggled to understand herself after a drastic disruption to her lifeworld: a diagnosis of severe bipolar, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders that took her away from pastoral duties (and from the occupation entirely), and eventually, away from faith. Foregrounding ontogenetic scales, I trace how a decade of writing activity served directive functions for processing key dimensions of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*, namely, subjective sense around Joiya’s experiences with her shifting ontology of self and of faith (subjective

configurations). I also trace, through dialogic animations, how her subjective senses and subjective configurations, which I have read as intensities embedded as affordances in many of her texts, have changed across time.

### **Orienting to Joiya's Case**

On March 5, 2013, Reverend Joiya Martin, composed a blog post titled *Sisyphus Sends Me to the Hospital*. I reproduce it in full here:

*Note: I am working closely with my care team. I write plainly here in order to process my own thoughts and feelings.*

I am angry! Angry because I am of two minds all the time!

**Mind 1.** I have been moving toward a whole life again, making progress toward well-articulated goals: work full-time at a job that makes a difference in a world (social services, non-profits or medical); a full and satisfying marriage with my best friend, partner and lover; travel the world's islands, including the oceans and wildlife in them; rescue cats; a life full of rich friendships.

**Mind 2.** I want to kill myself. I don't want to live. I don't want to live like this. Even when using my skills to the hilt, the thoughts and feelings of never-ending pain haunt me. Despair. Debilitating anxiety. Fear that I want to hurt and kill myself. Obsessive and grotesque visions of ways to hurt and kill myself. If I could end my life without pain, I would in a heartbeat.

It exhausts me completely, utterly, to work these skills to stay alive so hard yet start over every.single.day<sup>21</sup> with the same pain waiting to grind down

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<sup>21</sup> Joiya makes several creative punctuation choices, unique capitalizations, and more. I have not altered her writing mechanics in any way (beyond spacing).

any resolve. Friends, please, Please, have mercy. Let the pain of my



disappearance not be the reason to hold on. Or for me to hold on.

Right before I go into the hospital, I am caught between these two minds and cannot distinguish which one I want more. That's where I have been today. I hate my life.

Joiya, a former presbyterian pastor diagnosed with severe bipolar disorder, wrote several hundred blog posts between 2011 and 2021 (when she discontinued her blog site). The above post is characteristic of many written across the decade, particularly for the way in which she wrestled with the symptoms of her bipolar, and with oscillating between hospital and home—and between multiple “Minds.” It is also representative of the ways in which Joiya, over long periods of time, seemed to struggle to manage subjective senses (see Chapter 2). Granted, it is tricky to infer *senses* from a text, but her texts do offer the affordances of her describing key dimensions of *sense* (e.g., being of two “minds,” and the *feelings* [Damasio, 1999] that she described as facets of those two minds). I argue that *sense* features can be drawn out of the text above, then, by reading her two “minds” perhaps as subjective configurations generated from the subjective senses that she experienced: on the one hand, urges to live a full life with her partner and to travel, among other culturally enregistered (Agha, 2007) markers of living a full life; and on the other hand, to commit suicide to put an end to the anxiety, despair, and pain, all of which are emotional-symbolic units as subjective senses that are generative of more enduring subjective configurations emergent as personality.

The activity around this post and the text itself are also characteristic of the ways in which writing served directive purposes for Joiya. As del Rio and Álvarez (2007) point out about understanding self from the interior with directive psychological tools, Joiya noted she was writing “plainly...in order to process [her] thoughts and feelings.” That is, in the post and in numerous others, Joiya attempted to *work over* (Blunden, 2016) her thoughts, emotions, and feelings through directly writing so that she might understand them, channel her anger, and shed light for her readers on what it is like to experience the world as she does with bipolar.

Across this chapter, I discuss complex chains of moments, some text-based like above—some based in talk, and some based in drawings or other semiotics—that demonstrate resonance (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) across multimodal trajectories of action towards confronting bipolar and its symptoms (triggers, mania, depression, suicidality) and towards Joiya’s loss of faith that resulted from bipolar.

### ***Data collection, analyses, and documented narrative approaches to Joiya’s case***

Since early 2019, Joiya and I have been co-researching together, following the methods I mapped for the broader study in Chapter 2<sup>22</sup>. We allowed our co-research to be emergent and followed several disparate pathways as they became interesting in naturalistic ways. To date, we have met 10 times virtually across two years (totaling 12 hours of video-recorded data; we also keep in touch off the research record during periods when our sessions are not as active). Joiya also shared with me over 500 pages of writing, she engaged in several dialogic animations of varied texts, and produced drawings and writing for the co-research. Most of our co-research sessions have been based on several of these artifacts.

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<sup>22</sup> Joiya and I have tweaked, on some occasions, our approach to dialogic animation, due to the situated complexity of Joiya’s mental states. That is, at times due to complications around years of electroconvulsive therapy, Joiya struggles to read. Thus, in some cases, I have read aloud portions of Joiya’s writing to her and, and she has paused me, or in my pauses, has conducted the sorts of thinking aloud that the protocol maps.

I have been trying to write this chapter since the Summer of 2020 (it is December of 2021 as I write these lines and it is June 2022 as I review and finalize this chapter to deposit with the dissertation), and nothing has seemed to work quite right regarding my representation of the data Joiya and I have generated in spite of having met with committee members and colleagues to talk through the challenges of representing the data from Joiya's case. While this is still a *documented narrative*, one that allows for a rich story to unfold and that allows readers to engage extensively with Joiya's talk and co-research artifacts, it is slightly different from last chapter where I was able to present Alex's story in a seemingly *biographical* arc (utilizing a lifespan trajectory as reference frame). Joiya's story has proven more difficult for me to write. For one, her case involves an *expansive* amount of data. Her blog alone (the primary data set for this chapter) spans a decade and chronicles her life after bipolar diagnosis and numerous ways in which her diagnosis affected her life. As I began to analyze the blog and sketch a documented narrative around it, I struggled to manage the complexity of the various threads I was finding important to her broader life trajectory while keeping this a *chapter*, i.e., it would either need to be twice, or more, as long, or it would need to be spread across multiple chapters (and I imagine that the three main sections in the analysis below should probably be expanded to full chapters in themselves). But, as I painfully eliminated posts, strips of talk from our sessions, etc., in preparation to finally *just write* the chapter, one thing remained clear: across trajectories of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*, Joiya used writing—directively—to understand and attempt to shift her subjective senses and re-make her subjective configurations after her bipolar diagnosis drastically altered her lifeworld. She did this to deal with a series of issues surrounding her bipolar diagnosis, as she worked on her health, as she experienced doubt and incrementally lost

faith (mostly behind the scenes of her blog), and became secular, among a host of other (un)becomings.

Considering the sheer amount of data, in this documented narrative I focus on and highlight *moments of consequentiality* (see Chapter 2) along her very complex, nonlinear, unsettled trajectory of semiotic (un)becoming. These crystallizations of consequential moments from the blog (like the one shown previously), in conjunction with talk from our sessions that serve as points of resonance on complex chains (Stornaiuolo et al. 2017), help me work on the various ways in which my colleagues and I have rearticulated *perezhivanie* as a conceptual lens (Prior et al., unpublished manuscript) with a tight focus on subjective sense and subjective configuration. Our rearticulation of *perezhivanie* supports analyses of an “ontology of moments” critical in semiotic becoming. To those ends, I focus on resonant and emergent chains of moments of indexical, affective, intra-active, and historical intensity that I situate around three key issues that continuously arose in Joiya’s blog and in her talk: bipolar triggers, bipolar symptoms (mania, depression, suicidality), and the interrelated loss of faith.

In the analyses, I also draw on Olinger’s (2020) analyzing embodied intra-actions (*intra-action* is my own shift from “interactions” in Olinger’s text in keeping with my drawing from Barad’s [2007] agential realism) to create holistic descriptions of Joiya’s utterances that include her embodied stances, affect, etc. This helps me to highlight *intensities* in useful ways. As described in Chapter 2, intensities signal not only affective dimensions of embodied activity, but also indexical intensities (e.g., the management of multiple, laminated indexical grounds), historical intensities (e.g., the channeling and/or redirecting of histories), and intra-actional intensities (e.g., distributed intensities across literate activities, conversations, research practices such as interview scenarios and other protocols, etc.). Analyzing embodied intra-actions also

*enriches* descriptions of indexicality emergent in the co-research intra-actions, as, Blommaert (2005) argued that meaning is emergent from “text-context” relations, and Joiya can be seen creating context with varied indexicals. On this note, at a few points in the analysis, I signal that Joiya is performing “calibration” (Silverstein, 1993; Koven, 2016). One way that she does this is, as Koven (2016) has put it, by linking “here-and-now narrating event[s] to there-and-then narrated event[s]” (p. 21). This is a sort of spatiotemporal calibration that often overlaps with other sorts, for instance, “reportive calibration” that draws on reported speech in varied ways to create linkages to the past.

In what follows, I contextualize Joiya’s life leading up to her diagnosis of bipolar as well as the roles writing has played for her across the lifespan. Then, I trace moments of consequentiality and resonance along Joiya’s complicated trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming around bipolar and its triggers, around lost profession and subsequent doubt and loss of faith, and how writing served as a directive psychological tool that helped her understand, manage, and communicate her inextricable inner-outer world.

### **Becoming a Pastor**

In our first co-research session on 25 March 2019, Joiya described her life to me in broad strokes. I asked her to talk about her earliest memories, and particularly those that were related to her (former) Christian faith. She was born to a fundamentalist Christian family. She described them, especially currently, as beyond evangelical, and noted that they do not attend church because they cannot find a congregation compatible with the biblical literalism they practice. Her family, she noted, follows end-time prophecy, including seeking out ways to bring about the end-times.

Joiya talked about her earliest memories as inextricable from the bio-cultural-historical weight (Prior et al., unpublished manuscript)—here referring to the deeply dialogic, cultural-historical practices that have registered consequences for her in fundamentally meaningful and embodied ways—of the faith/faith practices of her family.

I would say, um, possibly my earliest memory is of, uh, praying with my parents before bed. And I was probably (.) three. Um, I can't pinpoint whether it was earlier or not, but I'm told it started earlier than that, obviously my parents started doing that...But I was probably about three, three-years-old. Um, we had little devotional books and they would read it and they would pray a little prayer, um, I think it was the "now I lay me down to sleep" one.

Joiya also remembers playing often in a church nursery, growing up praying at the dinner table, and that generally, "God was always around," seeing everything. "I'm not sure how much of that was meant to (.) be as a (.) threat to scare you from doing what was wrong, but I internalized it that way...Um, so kind of a God essence or being is everywhere." God, for Joiya, was always a pervasive chronotopic presence in her lifeworld.

Joiya's family occasionally participated in church organizations (hence memories around the church nursery), and she was socialized into activities typical of church organizations by participating in a children's choir. She also attended Vacation Bible Schools, which she remembers as being Baptist and evangelical in practice. For instance, the children (a range of ages, though Joiya reports being five or six) were asked to evangelize on their own: If they brought other children to the Vacation Bible School meetings, they would earn extra "prizes." Joiya also recalls about these meetings that, following Baptist tradition, there was time for "altar calls." Supplicants were asked to approach the altar and either accept Jesus Christ as their

personal savior or renew their devotion in front witnesses: “I remember feeling uncomfortable (.) being asked that (.) because (.) of course He was, I guess because I just had grown up that way...It was just culturally a part of my life, part of my family’s life.” Here, Joiya’s earliest recalled memories are centered around the cultural architectures for mind and agency (del Rio and Álvarez, 1995; 2007) of prayer, and of acceptance of Jesus as one’s personal savior.

When Joiya was in third grade, her parents began researching homeschooling. Eventually they found a program through a Christian organization in Arlington Heights, Illinois. Joiya noted that she was tested to gain entrance and to determine a grade level, “and then they would send you the books every year, then at the end of every year you take the standardized test, and that would kind of (.) be, as you advanced grades.” Joiya was homeschooled from the fourth grade through high school. She noted of her parents that “their primary reason for [homeschooling] was religious. They wanted to be (.) the um, primary influencers in their children’s lives.” Joiya’s younger brother began kindergarten as she entered fourth grade and was thus homeschooled K-12. At points, especially in middle school, Joiya noted that she asked her parents to go to “regular school” but that they always talked her out of it. They did, however, let her socialize through youth groups at an Evangelical Free Church. By high school, Joiya felt as though she was making the choice to stay homeschooled because she was “learning better, faster” on her own, “and I was getting a Christian education, which seemed important (.) to me at the time.” Joiya’s becoming Christian, then, is a tale of immersion *across* all dimensions of her life. Becoming is, fundamentally, a phenomenon that is characterized by *acrossness*. Of her upbringing, Joiya now feels: “Um, (.1) I now think of it as indoctrination, what my family did.”

After describing her earliest memories, her Christian faith, and her K-12 education, Joiya pivoted:

Um, starting when I was about nine years old, I started having experiences of, um, a religious nature. Um, (.) where I would feel like, (.) well, I used to explain it as, uh, like the holy spirit was descending on me and then filling me (.) up with (.) um, (.2) I don't know, God's spirit, um, in some way, so something was (.) uh, qualitatively different about myself in those moments. Um (.2) at one point, I did speak in tongues. ((sighs)) um: that was the Assemblies of God<sup>23</sup> from my grandparents that kind of encouraged that...Um, (.1) and those experiences probably came about every few months, I mean, they were pretty common for me. Um, and sometimes it would be something that would trigger it like, ((sighs)) (.4) deeper understanding of a Bible story. Um, like somehow it applied to something going on in my life and I would be like "oh, wow" and I would get that experience. And sometimes I would get goosebumps, externally, but usually it was just a feeling of something (.) inside. Um, (.3) I never talked to anybody about it. Um, I think I figured that (.) everybody had that experience until later as an adult I realized that, that was pretty peculiar, um, and some people I told about it (.1) called it, like a special gift, like a God moment, or something like that. And, um, that most people don't experience that within their faith life at all, um, which still surprises me because it happened so often for me.

These experiences, particularly, their shifting character in intra-action later in life as Joiya managed them as an adult, will be a central feature of this chapter. As I discuss later, Joiya equates these experiences now to instances of *bipolar mania*.

After finishing high school, Joiya attended Westmont College in Santa Barbara, a Christian undergraduate institution, beginning at age seventeen. During one key manic

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<sup>23</sup> Assemblies of God are Pentecostal and evangelical in tradition, the bible is the infallible word of their god, and speaking in tongues is a regular feature of the faith.

experience, Joiya changed her major from biochemistry to religious studies. She recalled being enamored with her courses in religion, and thinking “really, you could devote your whole life to this?” She described experiences leading to a “call to ministry” that happened during a semester abroad as she was in the final year of her undergraduate studies:

As I finished college in that major, it included, uh, a semester abroad in (.) Israel-Palestine. And, um, where I had lots of religious experiences—yay!—um (.1) I’d say by the end of my senior year, (.) I was considering that I might have a call to ministry. Um, partly because several important people in my life had already named that for me and said, “think about it.” Uh, I was involved in an American Baptist church, uh, for a couple years in college, and, um, (.2) which is very liberal Baptist. They’re more mainline than they are Baptist. Um, that was important to me at the time. Um, and that pastor, (.) let me lead parts of worship, um, got me involved in doing things like leading the small youth group, that was my first youth group (hh) and I was (.) eighteen or nineteen years-old, (hh) in charge of a you(h)th grou(h)p.

Joiya describes these experiences as formative in her decision to pursue graduate study and a life in the church. In fact, until that time in her life, Joiya didn’t even know that women *could* be ministers. And to this day, her family still believes that, with her liberal ideological stances and as an ordained minister in a *presbyterian* church, Joiya *will not* make it to heaven.

Joiya applied and was accepted to graduate school at San Francisco Theological Seminary (now a part of University of Redland’s Graduate School of Religion). There, she took courses in theology, as well as professional practice courses (sermon writing and delivery, youth group management, etc.) that resemble something like methods courses in becoming a secondary education teacher. After graduation, Joiya served in various associate pastor roles in the Chicago

presbytery and became a solo pastor of her own congregation in 2010. Joiya was ecstatic, and her role as solo pastor was the culmination of all that she had worked for across lifespan trajectories of semiotic becoming.

### **Joiya's Writing Life**

Writing has always been important for Joiya, and she described the “writing voice” she enjoys most as emergent when she’s allowed to be creative. She kept a diary starting around the age of eight that she continued all the way through high school. She reported having nine book reports per year through her homeschooling program:

I just, I just enjoyed writing. So, I, um, I felt like I had a good grasp of grammar, and um, was already a good speller, so I had the tools that I could use to communicate. Um, (.) um, and that set me up well for getting into college, um, and doing a lot more writing there where more of your assignments are writing-based (Session 2).

She detailed having written a lot through undergraduate and graduate school, and that she didn’t find her “writing voice” until graduate school, where she was doing large amounts of research writing around her religious studies coursework. The self-directed nature of her graduate specialization allowed her “writing voice” to thrive. Then, as a pastor, Joiya described much of her daily work as based in writing:

The writing that I did as a pastor, um, was a lot of newsletters and emails and, um, sermons. There wasn’t as much creative writing. But I did put stuff together into, uh...I taught a lot of junior high and high school youth religious classes. So there was a lot of creativity involved in putting those classes together, even if I was already using an established curriculum. And then after a year of doing that, I got tapped by my denomination to write for the national church, um, and then I was putting together

curriculum for high school, um, high school religious classes...When I moved to a different church, I was still writing some of those classes...and it was harder to write in that context because I was preaching every week...so then I was basically doing creative writing every week, which I enjoyed, definitely enjoyed it (hhh), um, because that was the preaching voice that I had found that worked for me, and that people seemed to like...that it was more creative and less dogmatic. Um, then it was, (.2) coming out of my second hospitalization that I started the blog...and that's kind of where my writing voice lives these days (Session 2).

In this stretch of talk, Joiya gave the broad strokes of her writing life, up to her longest-running project, her blog, *Suddenly Bipolar*. Joiya noted when discussing her blog that

it's just, part of it is I feel like, instead of being a pastor I've become a mental health advocate. Um, and so I talk a lot about bipolar and depression and suicide awareness and prevention, um, at the same time, sometimes, as I'm also asking for help.

Below, I trace the early moments of her blog, where Joiya was learning to make sense out of her life post-diagnosis. Then I break into sections that describe Joiya's struggles with triggers of her bipolar symptoms, her struggles with (and perhaps *for*) bipolar mania/euphoria, and her gradual (though at times backgrounded) loss of faith.

### **Making "Sense" of Triggers, Mania, Loss of Faith**

Joiya's very first blog post (in *Suddenly Bipolar*), titled "A Sudden Diagnosis," explains a drastic disruption to her lifeworld:

Everyone has a story to tell. I've sat on one for a while, waiting for inspiration, for a flow of words, for a stronger need to go public. And now the story is more urgent. I also need more support from those family and friends that have asked what has gone on.

I still feel like my life is imploding and I haven't yet seen bottom when the pieces settle out and start sorting themselves back together again. While the tagline of the blog says "My Journey Through Darkness to Wholeness," I haven't seen that wholeness yet. I've lost my job, perhaps my profession. I've lost my sense of self and sense of who I was in the past and will be in the future. But I trust that wholeness is around the corner, waiting for me to stumble onto it. It won't always be this dark...

My recovery begins with the descent into darkness in Summer 2010. What felt like a usual mid-summer slam into the wall of fatigue turned out to be the first of several depression dips in my bipolar journey. By late September I had been hospitalized with suicidal feelings and I had gone through extensive psychological testing that said definitively I had type 2 bipolar disorder<sup>24</sup>. Later in the fall my psychiatrist added Generalized Anxiety Disorder too, a diagnosis that sooo fit my experience it was surreal! All of a sudden, in just a couple months, I learned I had a mental illness, was trying to recover from a severe bout of depression with suicidal ideation, and had a diagnosis that miraculously explained the previous 20 years of my life. What a relief!

I report, unfortunately, that Joiya's relief was short lived. But from this initial post onward, blogging became a dialogic intensity with directive functions for processing and managing some of the most difficult periods in her life, including serious depressive episodes, hospitalizations, suicidal ideations, loss of her life in the church, and loss of faith. She also wrote to understand her "sense of self and sense of who [she] was in the past and will be in the future." All these facets, fundamentally imbricated with her shifting subjective senses, and more, intra-acted turbulently across trajectories of Joiya's trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming. And so,

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<sup>24</sup> Joiya, later, was re-diagnosed with Type I Bipolar Disorder, the more severe of the two.

considering the marked pathways of change and growth I will detail through consequential moments, it is fitting that she describes it as her “bipolar journey.”

### *Setting the stage*

A few minutes into our first co-research session, Joiya noted:

As we get to know one another, too, I have, uh, bipolar, and um, anxiety. Um, I’m on disability. So that’s what actually, um, took me away from my job as a pastor...Uh, and I lost faith probably because of the bipolar...So we’ll talk more about that, I’m sure.

In that utterance, Joiya glossed a set of major shifts for her subjective configurations of personhood: Her grappling with and coming to understand her bipolar symptoms and their triggers, mania (historically), lost profession, and gradual loss of faith. These become the major foci of this chapter, and I show how those aspects of her experience intra-acted (often turbulently), and how she managed an often-kaleidoscopic sense of *perezhivanie* (around these *sense* aspects of her experience) with *writing* as she used it makes sense of and help direct the day-to-day flow of her turbulent experience.

I start by utilizing Joiya’s writing and talk to give a broad sense of what Joiya has gone (and is going) through. Joiya has constructed a “dispersed” notion of her bipolar diagnosis; pointing this out here sets the high stakes of consequentiality of the typical—turbulent—flow of her experience. In our second co-research session, she said (while performing a RATAA of her blog *Inherent Dignity and Worth* [see later]) that “bipolar is not that great of an environment to live in.” As she has done several times in her writing and in talk, she interestingly structured her orientation to her bipolar experience as an embodied-conceptual metaphor (Becvar & Hollan, 2010; see analysis of *Triggered: Church Diaries* below). In doing so, she distributes bipolar beyond her mental experience and into her wider sociocultural environment. Various

environments carry disparate indexical potentials (church environs, for instance, can be very triggering). Joiya's embodied conceptual metaphors, then, are resonant of Vygotsky's (1987; 1994) and my colleagues' and my (Prior et al. unpublished manuscript) framing of *perezhivanie* that maps experience as distributed across people and their sociocultural environments. As Joiya intra-acts with her wider sociocultural world, she constantly must take care to not experience what she calls "triggers." Clinically, triggers refer to intra-actions with environments that spark dangerous shifts in her mood (i.e., depressive episodes, states of euphoria related to mania, etc.), or, as I argue, shifts in subjective senses, which can activate and/or resonate toward disparate subjective configurations such as between poles like Mind 1 and Mind 2 previously. And so, equating bipolar to an environment reflects the precarity of Joiya's mental states, as she wrote in *Triggered: Church Diaries*, "a trigger that starts [an] obsession, could just as easily cause a delusion that skips coping skills and plans suicide with the obsessive visions in my head" (see below for discussion of *Triggered*).

As pointed out in her very first post (depicted previously), while Joiya's diagnosis was "sudden," her bipolar symptoms and related experiences with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders, were not new and played out in varied ways in her life across long trajectories. Describing her "mid-summer fatigue" as "usual" (above) is key: Bipolar tends to show itself in cycles of mood shifts, and Joiya reported that during summers and times during which there were no holidays or church events that she was preparing for, she felt a sense of emptiness in ways akin to the deep sadness and lethargy of her depression (post-diagnosis). On the other side, the preparation for the important religious holidays, various church events, and simply being around and intra-acting with activities of religious nature fed Joiya's symptoms, particularly of mania. This is also resonant with Joiya's talk previously when she noted that when she was very young,

she started having experiences that were “qualitatively different,” and embodied/affective (goosebumps), when it seemed to her that the “holy spirit” was descending upon her (I describe this in more depth later). As pointed out, also, in her first blog post, suddenly knowing that she was living with bipolar provided a sense of “urgency” for her story: she needed those close to her to understand what she was going through, and ways they might be able to help her. In *Ways You Can Help Me*, a fixture on the blog set off from and emboldened before all post categories, Joiya called for her readers to recognize the signs of a person experiencing episodes related to bipolar. She wrote:

One of my goals for remaining stable is communicating even better with those who are around me and care about me. I now authorize All of You to call me out if you see any of these behaviors! It may mean I’m tipping toward a pole and need extra treatment: therapy, meds, schedule changes, diet.

She followed this with a list of signs of mania (fast, pressured speech; racing thoughts and/or ideas with little thought or description; poor and/or impulsive decision making; secretiveness and/or lying about choices; among others), and signs of depression (dark and/or suicidal thoughts; expressing hopelessness and/or meaninglessness; self-isolation; skipping appointments; feelings of anxiety and/or of being overwhelmed; intense fatigue; loss of interest in hobbies). But Joiya also wanted to utilize the blog to help regulate her own behavior by making sense of her diagnosis. She articulated this by writing, “I blog about Bipolar Disorder because I need to understand what I’m going through, and as a writer, I can process my thoughts and feelings best with words.” From the point-of-view of an analysis of writing as serving directive functions, both early motivations for the blog are interesting in that Joiya was distributing the regulation of her behavior by inviting others to “call her out” if they notice her

displaying any of the affective and/or interactional intensities she lists. Her stated rationale is also interesting because it points directly to the notion that Joiya *writes to understand*, to make sense, and to process her thoughts and feelings in her “journey to wholeness” (see *A Sudden Diagnosis*).

Next, I continue to work deeper into the early months and years of the blog to show how Joiya’s bipolar diagnosis caused drastic disruption to important aspects of her life, particularly, her career, and her subjective configurations around self and identity.

In the earliest posts of *Suddenly Bipolar*, Joiya was coping with all that she lost when she was diagnosed with bipolar. But coping, early on, meant *learning* what she had lost (and was losing), how to be in the world, how others saw her, and how her general mental experience might change moving forward. To wrestle with these changes, she utilized writing in directive ways. The first posts deal with the change to her lifeworld, particularly, having to manage being out of the broad daily and seasonal scheduling that facilitated her life prior to diagnosis. Rather than juggling sermon writing and delivery, youth groups and other religious work, she was juggling appointments with psychiatrists and therapists, “cocktails” of medications constantly in flux as healthcare professionals struggled to find the right mix, and even regular electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). An early post titled *Reality Sets In* documents another change—being *seen*. “The reality of the situation,” she wrote, “comes crashing down when the ER personnel whispers around you, ‘Is that her?’ because when someone comes in to the ER with a psychological concern, there are special protocols to keep you and them safe.” Four days later, Joiya named the feeling she experienced in public spaces in a post titled *Shame*. She reported feeling “different, out-of-step, and several times that I was ashamed,” and later,

I felt it even when no one knew me. Could just be my own shame of myself, however misplaced that is. Then I remember times I've been tongue-tied when I've talked with those who live with depression or bipolar. There's a stigma. There's some shame as though mental illness is a personal personality flaw that I can help.

By my read, this is resonant with Joiya's embodied-conceptual metaphor of bipolar as environment, of her distributed notion of experience. She projected her shame of struggle onto her broader social world and to those who didn't even know her, and she drew here on the bio-cultural-historical weight (Prior et al., unpublished manuscript) of her personal experiences of struggling to intra-act with people she knew had depression and/or bipolar, as well as the weight of a perceived stigma around mental illness. These experiences registered consequences on Joiya's subjective configurations around self and identity that she continued to confront. By my read, Joiya was struggling with *becoming-a-person-with-bipolar*, as the symptoms and subjective senses around bipolar developed into their own sort of subjective configuration, what González Rey et al. (2017) describes as a "bearer of a sense of identity" (p. 226). But struggles with self and identity manifested in different ways, particularly around the person she had worked to become for much of her life.

In February of 2011, roughly a half year after the severe depression that took her away from her role as pastor, she began confronting (with her therapist) whether she could take up pastoral duties again. She wrote in her fourth post on the blog:

So, my therapist and I were talking today, and it is very clear to us that the profession of pastor will not work for me. It will still be several months until I find my new normal and can start looking for work. And that just can't be pastoring, which triggers my mania and offers too many places to hide when depression strikes. I am sad to the core about this

development because I think I could have been a good pastor...Being a pastor tempts me to do too much, which hurts me physically and mentally. Similarly, doing another degree (Ph.D.) would be too much. In one fell swoop two secret ambitions cast down. Truly I have no idea what is ahead of me. I trust there will be good and whole ways to be the person God created me to be. I just have no freakin clue what that might be now. One step in front of the other, that's all we ever have. But it still feels like a huge rip taken out of my soul.

While Joiya was still ordained—and is to this day—she knew ten years ago that she would almost certainly never pastor a church again. Reading this post excerpt through a lens of *writing as directive sense management*, I see it as a continuation of Joiya's *perezhivanie* and *becoming* around her diagnosis that she engages in with her therapist: she's recording here the realizations they discussed for herself, in cataloging her bipolar journey, but also for her readers. She also noted that these core parts of her sense of identity (being a pastor, leading a church) are dangerous due to intra-active, agentive potentials: to manage the potential indexical grounds around her mental states (triggers of mania, and cloaking depression) she simply cannot pastor. Joiya (with her therapist and as crystalized in this excerpt) worked to regulate subjective sense and keep her mental experience stable. But while she is still ordained, that she could not practice was a devastating loss, and Joiya marked it affectively by noting her feelings of sadness, and that it felt as though something had been *ripped* out of her soul.

A final excerpt in this section that I mark here as consequential follows the theme of Joiya's shifting subjective configuration(s) of selfhood as it is related to ECT treatments she was receiving early on (and then again at various periods across the decade of her blog). Joiya wrote often, in the first months, about the toll that ECT had on her. Most particularly, it caused her to

have distinct memory loss beyond what tends to be normal for those who undergo ECT. In March of 2011, she drafted a post titled *Memories*, and noted that she had always had a good memory, could always easily recall things, and that she could always “easily stay oriented to time, place, person.” But after some ECT sessions, she had difficulty remembering people (even some of those close to her), and, generally, appointments and routines of her daily life, sometimes for hours after a session and less frequently into the following day. Crucially, Joiya wrote,

Losing memories feels like losing part of my personhood, something that makes me who I am. Not just the ability to remember, but what it is that I used to remember: appointments, relationships, time and space. When I don’t remember them, am I the same person? Or is who I am changing as memories disappear? Not all of them return. So, am I the same person?

Joiya noted while looking back at this (and earlier posts) that she has no memories of writing them, and when I asked her if she thought her blog, early on and through the times of ECT might have served as a space to remember, she said she couldn’t answer, that she might have had underlying motives around that but didn’t want to commit because the memories are *gone*. But Joiya’s line of questioning here is poignant in that it marks another way her orientation to herself, and her lifeworld was drastically changing. While no longer being able to reasonably pastor a church was like a rip from her soul, her memories were very literally being ripped from her experience. Thus, Joiya’s subjective senses and subjective configurations were shifting in drastic ways as she intra-acted with the repercussions of her bipolar, OCD, and anxiety diagnoses. Answering Joiya’s question, she *was* changing as her subjective configurations were in flux. In these early blog posts, she seemed to be managing a whole suite of shifts in her

subjective senses and subjective configurations that, I argue, caused drastic shifts to her selfhood and lifeworld.

To sum up Joiya's early struggles with bipolar, recall that a "wall of fatigue" typical of Joiya's *cyclical* experience transformed into severe depression and suicidal ideation to the point where she required hospitalization. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and anxiety (and later OCD) which "miraculously" made sense of numerous experiences across her life (evidence of shifting *configuration* in her very first blog post). Her diagnosis required her to go on disability. These fraught shifts altered her relationship with herself, and with her wider social world and lifeworld perspective. As she confronted losing her career, which was so wrapped up in her lifeworld perspective as a believing, practicing Christian, she also had to manage shifts in being *seen* as someone with a mental illness as she confronted everyday activities out in the world. And lastly (so far), Joiya's routines changed: instead of performing manifold church duties, she was juggling new activities around her mental illness—hospitalizations, therapy/psychiatry, juggling medicines, and most recently discussed above, electroconvulsive therapy. All these shifting facets of her daily lifeworld were pushing her to questions about her self (or selves), who she was, and whether she was "the same person." These intra-actions that led Joiya to question her selfhood are consequential in that, as Fler et al. (2017) point out (see Chapter 2) subjective senses and subjective configurations are exceptionally crucial to *personality* as holding consequences of identity/identity development. Fler et al. (2017) also note that

The integrative nature of human development as a generative system that is inseparable from the individual and their social relations and material conditions is revealed through

the concepts of subjective sense and subjective configuration—theoretically and empirically (8).

I argue for a slight twist on this statement, as well. I have been building a conceptualization of *becoming* as not only encompassing growth across a rich ontology of moments, but also for dynamically nonlinear trajectories of loss, contradiction, unmaking and remaking across the moments that add up to a life. Joiya’s story so far has seen not only addition—but, like Alex’s story before, subtraction. In a sense, the *disintegrative* nature of Joiya’s generative system(s) of subjective senses is foregrounded here, as she is beginning to confront the drastic shifts in her subjective senses, subjective configurations, and in her related, broader lifeworld perspectives as her ways of experiencing the world for much of her life were breaking down (and, necessarily, being remade). Joiya *worked over* these changes to her subjective senses and subjective configurations, I argue, by utilizing *writing as directive sense management* over very long periods of time. And as I show later, she worked from managing her “two minds” (see previously) to a more integrated sense of “bipolar me”—a sort of unity or wholeness Joiya reached *with* her two minds and multiple “voices.”

Next, I work into the major subsections of this documented narrative, focusing on consequential moments of Joiya’s *perezhvaniya* around her shifting subjective senses and subjective configurations. I do this by tracing her coming to understand more the symptoms of her bipolar diagnosis, the ways she wrestled with them, and how, in backgrounded ways (on her blog, at least), Joiya lost her faith.

### ***Making Sense: Triggers***

In this, and the following sections, I span years of the blog in several “time-jumps.” The purpose of this format of the documented narrative is to manage the sheer amount of data that

Joiya generated with me. To these ends, I will focus on what my colleagues and I (Prior et al. unpublished manuscript) have described as “moments of consequentiality” for in-depth analyses, and I will gloss parts of Joiya’s story in between, as necessary. There will be other sorts of “time-jumps,” as well. For instance, Joiya wrote several of the focal blog posts a decade ago. In instances where we discussed posts that Joiya wrote long ago, I shift between the theres-and-thens of writing by drawing on and analyzing blog posts, and the heres-and-nows of our co-research sessions where we often analyze together through general discussion or through dialogic animation of varied types. This, I argue is a sort of spatiotemporal calibration (Silverstein, 1993; Koven, 2016) in which we trace *acrossness* in relation to intensities (see Chapter 2). With this dialogic analysis practice, I trace the ways in which subjective senses and subjective configurations travel and change across the lifespan over *trajectories of perezhivanie* and *becoming*. Lastly, I also trace points of resonance (Stornaiuolo et al. 2017) across the blog posts and our co-research sessions, and I often do this by linking talk about general facets of Joiya’s lifeworld and experience to blog posts, even when we did not discuss those posts directly.

Almost three weeks passed between Joiya’s writing *Memories* in which she began questioning her selfhood (see previously) and her next blog post. Usually, when time passed between her writing, Joiya updated her readers on why she had not written. On many occasions, she lapsed in writing when she was doing *well*, making progress, and was too busy living her life to blog. This time, however, Joiya did not provide explanation, but instead wrote a series of posts asking her readers for prayers, for example, in *Darnit!*, as she was “feeling disturbed, scared, nervous, not ready to deal w/ issues.” After a few days of struggle, Joiya decided that she would fly from Chicago to Dallas to be with family. Five days into her visit, she was hospitalized for two weeks. After this hospitalization, Joiya returned to her home in Chicago, and had a few

positive weeks in which she took steps to rebuild her life. In *My Schedule for Healthy Living*, she drafted a new daily schedule to which she would adhere so that she could maintain stability in her new life and, I argue, to manage the ongoing flux of her subjective senses generated out of intra-actions with her environments as well as the shifts those registered on her longer-term subjective configurations. I argue, also, that she was *becoming* a mental health advocate and that this is perhaps a precursor to *becomings* I describe later related to taking on the duties typical of a wider medical staff *on her own*. She also drafted progress posts on her management of her symptoms, particularly around her acceptance of her depression, and its spiritual-environmental triggers: “Certainly,” she wrote, “being a solo pastor triggered mania and helped me sustain it...I don’t know what understanding this about myself means, or if anything changes for me.” Nonetheless, she called her new awareness an “opening.”

Three days after describing this new sense of awareness of her triggers, Joiya decided to try attending church service. I focus on the blog post she drafted immediately after, titled *Triggered: Church Diaries*, as a *moment of consequentiality* in Joiya’s trajectory of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*. For this analysis, I read her post as a salient moment of consequential intensity and pain as she was in the early stages of learning how to be in the world, and how to manage her newly configuring subjective senses. As noted earlier, triggers refer to intra-actions with environments that spark dangerous shifts in mood for Joiya, and foreground subjective senses that could be dangerous for her mental state, and for her life.

Joiya began *Triggered: Church Diaries*:

I got triggered at church today. At the church where I’ve been worshipping it was confirmation & baccalaureate Sunday. Which I imagine I would have known if I had gone either of the last two weeks, and then I could have avoided this Sunday.

On this Sunday in May of 2011, Joiya learned that moments which might likely be consequential for her parishioners, such as confirmation and the celebration of graduating members, triggered a deep sadness for her as she longed to be pastoring people through those important sorts of moments. She continued:

Why do I keep going to church when I get triggered by being in worship? Catch-22: I feel the need to be at worship for spiritual nourishment yet every time I attend a worship service something about being in worship triggers anxiety and grief and pain. Sometimes about not being where I want to be spiritually (deeply connected to Spirit), and sometimes about not being a congregational pastor any more, or ever again.

By my read, Joiya was confronting here the ways in which, through intra-actions with her environment, her new subjective senses generated around her bipolar symptoms clash with the subjective configurations that used to be “bearers of a sense of identity” (González Rey et al., 2017, p. 226), particularly, her being at the head of a congregation, receiving—but also facilitating for others—spiritual nourishment<sup>25</sup>.

Joiya described further that going to church for nourishment simply wasn’t the same as “journeying with a congregation” and that “it was painful to be reminded that I’ve been called away from something I love so much.” Joiya stayed for the duration of the service, and the deep *sense* of pain left the service with her. Joiya ended the post:

On the ride home the heaviness and pain were just bearable enough that I wasn’t a danger to myself and others<sup>26</sup>. I hoped writing out the blog post would help the pain go away so I wouldn’t end up with thoughts of hurting myself. Writing helped a little yet mostly I just

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<sup>25</sup> In a slightly backgrounded way, Joiya also hints at the reconfiguration of her “faith” here, in gesturing toward “not being where [she] wants to be spiritually (deeply connected to Spirit).” I take this thread up later.

<sup>26</sup> Joiya describes similar experiences across the early years of the blog.

feel the pain next to me, and feel detached inside, instead of re-filled and whole, the way I feel after processing pain. I know I'm not done processing the pain of moving on from congregational pastoring. And I still need things like worship to help nourish the spiritual life that is important to me, and a big part of who I am. But it causes this hurt.

Joiya was triggered into a deep sense of pain. When she returned home, she used blogging as a nexus of semiotic, dialogic intensity with directive functions for processing triggers of pain (and the pain, itself) that came with attending church that day. This post, written over a decade ago, is a residue of her dialogic semiotic process of “working-over” (Blunden, 2016) a series of subjective senses: the emotional-symbolic units she experiences as she confronts the roles she has had but is no longer playing, the realization that she will likely never take up those roles again, and the pain, as a sense, but shot through the suite of those other *senses* and triggered by being in a church environment. Strikingly here, Joiya wrote using another embodied-conceptual metaphor (Becvar & Hollan, 2010) to structure her orientation to pain, and her description is distributed spatially, as metaphorically beside her sits a dark passenger, *pain*.

Eight years later, Joiya and I revisited the post using *dialogic animation* (particularly, a version of read-aloud/think-aloud animation). Reflecting on the post (see Figure 8), Joiya offered a retrospective account of a *perezhivanie*, and described *working-over* pain in part through writing. Below, I highlight affective and indexical intensities (see Prior et al., unpublished manuscript) that emerged across these moments in our co-research session—and across trajectories of *perezhivanie* and *becoming* since Joiya wrote the post.

			
1) I would be driving home from church and it would just be so painful and it felt so tangible and so big, that it was, that it <b>had</b> to be outside of me, wasn't something I could contain. (.3) um, and it would trigger suicidal ideation and feelings,	2) just from being in the environment of a sanctuary and going through the liturgy...and so I'm going <b>back</b> into that feeling of it being just (.3) almost like spirituality was outside of myself for a while...I couldn't contain it anymore	3) ...and writing was one of the ways to try to at least describe it even if I couldn't feel it. ((sigh)) um, but mostly spirituality brought <b>pain</b> . and, my spiritual journey is tied in with bipolar (.) journey, because two of the big factors that led to becoming an atheist,	4)...one was the problem of this pain, which I had studied and studied and <b>wrote and wrote</b> tons about the problem of suffering. you know, "is God not good? is God not powerful?" I did this as an undergraduate. I did it as a graduate student...
			
5) I had come to a certain understanding of it, that was pretty Buddhist... Just that suffering is...um, (.) dealing with being so close to <b>death</b> so often,	6) and the pain that spirituality would <b>cause</b> was so deep..., um, (.) that was a huge factor for deciding that there is no God...And then the secondary factor with that was during those first couple of years with bipolar, I was coming to terms	7) with all of the spiritual experiences, the feeling close to God, feeling almost raptured up into God's presence sometimes...realizing that some, if not all, were <b>manic</b> , and so there's a biological reason that I was having these...	8) I'm like "they were manic, these were not real." So...the great pain and then also just realizing that the spiritual experiences were manic, coming to an acceptance of that...led to becoming an <b>atheist</b> .

**Figure 8.** *Triggered: Church Diaries.* Words marked in **bold** denote moment of screen capture.

Affective intensities related to feelings and pain she experienced at the time she wrote the post—and that she seemed to feel again—can be seen both verbally and nonverbally in Figure 8. In panel 1 she tightened her facial expression as if to wince and paused for three seconds before

noting that the pain would trigger suicidal ideation. She seemed to brace/wince when recalling (and again-living; see Blunden, 2016) pain she felt, demonstrating, I argue, the *acrossness* of her embodied sense of pain. In the second panel, describing church environments, she tightened and relaxed the muscles around her eyes, wincing, then closed them while uttering "...I'm going back into that feeling," keeping them closed through the word "spirituality." She did this almost as in meditation to manage the dialogic reach of the pain here-and-now.

However, Joiya was not only managing affective intensities (see Chapter 2): in each panel she was also managing the intensities of multiply embedded and laminated indexical grounds (Hanks, 1996; Goffman, 1981), intra-actional intensities of the interview, and historical intensities. In panels 1 and 2 when she recalls her deep *sense* of pain, she describes it as outside of her, as if experiencing another being present with her (cf. Hanks, 1996, on imagined participants). In panel 2, she manages indexical grounds by "going back into that feeling," bringing it to the present intra-action, and perhaps re-experiencing it. I interpret this as a sort of spatiotemporal calibration (Silverstein, 1993; Koven, 2016) as she engages with the past and blends pragmatic and reportive calibration. In panels 3 and 4, she juggles indexical grounds as she invokes histories of her affect, embodied here by closing her eyes. Panel 4 highlights the acrossness of *perezhivanie* as working-over: Joiya reports that she "wrote and wrote" and represents that writing in direct discourse, "is God not good...not powerful," as she rolls her eyes, moving her head in a counterclockwise circle, indexing the effort she put into understanding pain. The trajectory of *perezhivanie* and *becoming* figures indexically in the there-and-then as well as here-and-now of the intra-action. Panels 7 and 8 showcase indexical intensities again around presencing. Where once she had experienced God as a close, present being (a sort of nomic calibration [Silverstein, 1993] in which she experiences God with her as a

figured other), she re-mediated those experiences later as manic and not real, altering her indexical relationship to the histories of those experiences. This is one feature of her making sense of bipolar that led to becoming atheist over trajectories of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*. In panel 8, it seems that, having moved out of a discussion of pain, her face is markedly more relaxed as she offers a direct representation of her current stances and then sums up her re-assessment of earlier religious experiences.

This dialogic animation of Joiya's post also illuminates two key things that I want to highlight here: first, subjective senses are not just "in persons" as typical understandings of the term "subjective" might suggest, but may be, rather, distributed across rich environments and people<sup>27</sup> as highly mobile emotional-symbolic phenomena. The pain Joiya felt *in* the church environment that day left with her, as she placed it next to her, in the car, as figured other. I note also the acrossness of *perezhivanie* about pain, as well as the embodied and indexical consequences registered as she intra-actionally invoked histories of experience and seemed to feel residua of the pain again.

This section on Joiya's experience of triggers serves a few key purposes for this chapter. It further develops the notion of subjective sense. In analysis of the *Triggered: Church Diaries*, I argued that not only were Joiya's subjective configurations changing, but that as she attended church, it seemed like newly developing subjective configurations of self around her bipolar seemed to not intra-act well with subjective configurations hardened through the practices, people, places, etc., of her past life, or at least the environs important to her life pre-diagnosis that facilitated particular subjective senses. This example shows the utility of *perezhivanie* as a distributed unit of analysis that can be traced through looking at the relationship between

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<sup>27</sup> For what it's worth, as Joiya and I became attuned to one another as co-researchers and friends, I felt senses of her pain empathetically, a quasi-shared intensity of *subjective sense* and *perezhivanie*.

subjective sense, subjective configuration, and an individual's wider sociocultural environment. With the analysis of the dialogic animation of *Triggered*, I also show not only how subjective configurations can change across trajectories of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*—Joiya seemed to have integrated various understandings of her experience by that point, perhaps hardened over a decade of writing and thinking about her experiences—but that subjective senses and/as feelings are durable and can appear via affective, indexical and historical intensities: Joiya seemed to feel again the pain she experienced when she initially wrote the blog post those years ago, showing this through various embodied activities.

Crucial of this extended example also is that it is representative of the ways in which dialogic animations facilitates *dialogic openings*. In this dialogic animation, Joiya *deepened* and *enriched* our co-research around *Triggered: Church Diaries* by animating it and adding new layers of meaning to it. For instance, in the original post, Joiya was still making sense of pain, triggers, and her faith. In the dialogic animation, Joiya seemed to have developed an integrated understanding of the relationship between her pain, triggers, faith, and loss of faith that she is able to articulate in reflection, and I would argue that this is a result of hardening of subjective senses toward subjective configurations. This last point highlights the acrossness of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*.

Joiya's talk in Figure 8 also serves to introduce two other key themes of focus for this chapter: Joiya's struggles with the mania pole and with faith and her loss of it. In crucial ways that I'll elaborate below, Joiya's deep experiences with pain led her to question her faith, but so too did the intense self-reflection triggered by her diagnosis all together.

### ***Making Sense: Bipolar, Mania, Figured Others***

I am Joiya's Bipolar.

Like the Genie from Aladdin, I have phenomenal cosmic powers (making mania and depression believable to her) but itty, bitty living space (neurotransmitters and brain connections). In this teeny space also reside my friends Anxiety and OCD. While powerful in and of themselves, I, Bipolar, am the one to be feared! They can trigger me into one of my dangerous moods.

See, if I get triggered – or just want to do it – then I can spiral Joiya down into suicidal depression, or I can spiral her up into mania that brings reckless behavior. I know you wish you had that much power over a person’s behavior! What’s funny is that all I have to do is adjust the mood. When I destabilize her mood, Joiya isn’t able to make rational decisions as easily. That’s when it gets fun! Either flirting with death by her own hand, or flirting with death with reckless behavior that can hurt others in the process.

Poor me. I haven’t had a fun manic experience in years now. Stupid psych meds, psychiatrists, therapists and support systems! Also because of them, I also haven’t been able to make Joiya attempt suicide. That’s what I really want, in truth. I am Bipolar! I cause early deaths!

(Giggle) I have a secret weapon. Anxiety! I can summon him at any point in my many moods and let him take over. “Worry, fret, fear the future! Fear that you might follow the thoughts!” says Anxiety. I think Anxiety loves the power of pushing Joiya into a cycle of worry and fear that never ends. OCD loves that! She waltzes in and turns the cycle into an obsession. And, the best part, OCD turns the fear into these visions of ways to kill yourself as an out to all the suffering from mood changes and anxiety.

Don't you love how I can manipulate Joiya's thoughts and feelings just from changing up some neurotransmitters? And summoning up Anxiety and OCD is brilliant! They are mental illnesses in their own right, but I, Bipolar, have the power to make them worse! And once they're in effect, they enhance my ability to destabilize mood. A vicious circle.

Joiya has no power when I'm around. So back off, support system! You can't convince her otherwise.

Joiya wrote *I Am Joiya's Bipolar* on 14 July 2013<sup>28</sup>, roughly three years after her “descent into darkness” as she put it in her very first blog post (see previously). This piece is interesting, as Joiya is assuming and writing from an imagined other—her bipolar-personified in a simile almost playfully as Aladdin's genie. She seems to write as this imagined other being in a close relationship to her wider sociocultural environment, not naming specifics but describing the role of triggers in its ability to “spiral” Joiya into embodied subjective senses that can activate either pole dangerously. It is also, perhaps, another embodied-conceptual metaphor (Becvar & Hollan, 2010) in which Joiya structured her relationship to bipolar by making it its own sort of agent within her. Here also, while Joiya tended to interestingly distribute bipolar beyond her body (via embodied-conceptual metaphor), in this blog post she stuffs it back inside her head, reducing it to a genie with “cosmic powers” that inhabits the small space of her “neurotransmitters and brain connections” in an interesting twist of the fantastical with the scientific.

In this section, I highlight *moments of consequentiality* around Joiya's coming to understand various features of her bipolar—particularly, mania. Mania is an important feature

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<sup>28</sup> This is the second version of this text Joiya wrote, noting it was “funny...er.” Over two days she wrote and posted multiple versions, as well as one titled, *I Am Joiya's Anxiety*.

because, by her accounts, manic activity affected major life decisions, as well as the experience of her faith.

Joiya's trajectory of *perezhivanie* and *becoming* around mania is exceptionally complex, particularly because simply understanding one's own tendencies does not necessarily ward them off. In fact, even though Joiya, at times, knew she was manic and was directly writing through mania to seek a way out of behavior that could become dangerous, she often acknowledged pining *for* mania. It was a comfortable family of subjective configurations for her, one directly related to her faith and her work in the church that she used to cherish and thrive with in her past.

The first blog post (written on 26 May 2011) to deal directly with mania was titled (fittingly) *Mania, O, Mania*, and it takes up the several realizations Joiya had as she worked over (Blunden, 2016) her experiences of mania. "I'm coming to terms with mania," she wrote, acknowledging that she first dealt with the "depression side" of bipolar:

I've begun exploring the past, beginning with last summer, moving backwards to college years and seminary year. And I found mania. Phases of mania that have affected all the major decisions I've made, and even what I've experienced as faith.

Joiya followed this passage with the image in Figure 9.



**Figure 9.** *Emoticon face from blog post Mania, O, Mania.*

She wrote to herself, "Deep breath. Don't panic." Joiya utilized multiple semiotics across her blog, and particularly here she used this image in intra-action with the text she produced. It may, in fact, stand in for her affect that she attempts (directively) to calm, writing "Deep breath. Don't

panic.” Also in this post, resonant with issues she was taking up in *Memories* (see previously), Joiya’s struggles with identity continue as she questioned again who she is: “It seems that somewhere underneath the mania that has influenced the decisions I made while feeling Good (i.e., manic) is someone I don’t know. Because all the decisions that I thought shaped me into who I am, I made while manic<sup>29</sup>.” Joiya reached back into her history to begin remediating her activity across decades of her life as resulting from her manic, elevated mood pole. She equated feeling “Good” (and decisions made with that feeling) with mania, and she equated the “wall of fatigue” (see previously, *A Sudden Diagnosis*) of her summers and vacations as the opposing pole, depression. Her change of academic major (as described previously) to focus on religious studies, her pursuit of graduate school and seminary, and her “sense of call to ministry,” even *marriage*, were all intra-actions resulting from “fits of mania,” she reported.

Her tracing of mania did not end with her professional becoming, but also with her faith. As she noted in our first session, she “lost faith probably because of the bipolar.” Recall also her saying of her deeply religious experiences in the dialogic animation of *Triggered: Church Diaries*, “I’m like ‘they were manic, these were not real.’ ... just realizing that the spiritual experiences were manic, coming to an acceptance of that...led to becoming an atheist.” Joiya’s (be)coming to understand her bipolar, depression, mania, her becoming a pastor, and coming to and from faith, are deeply related and only artificially separable. Thus, while I take up Joiya’s becoming an atheist in a later section, it is useful to discuss here that it wasn’t just major life decisions that Joiya was engaging while manic, but her faith altogether. She wrote of this,

My faith is not what I thought either. I’ve articulated...a continuing sense of God’s presence that feels something like a shadow behind me whispering, nudging, comforting.

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<sup>29</sup> Later I show a sort of “unity” Joiya reached with her different “minds,” “voices,” as what she called “Bipolar Me.”

That feeling in my center is what I've relied upon when making big decisions. I'm coming to terms with the fact that other people describe euphoria and grandiose thoughts with the same kinds of words that I use to describe God's presence. A key part of my faith may in fact be a symptom of mania.

Joiya questioned what's left of her when mania is medicated away. And in this post, she wasn't sure. I argue that in this blog post, Joiya used writing as directive activity to marshal subjective senses of her disrupted lifeworld in the re-making of a subjective configuration around her understanding of religious experience as a symptom of her bipolar. She came to have a sense of her professional becoming related to ministry as hinged on mania. She came also to have a sense that her deeply embodied experiences of the divine, of the holy spirit, were, too, hinged on mania. This again is evidence that while her diagnosis was relatively new, her symptoms were dispersed across longer ontogenetic timescales, bringing to resonance also the "qualitatively different" characteristics of Joiya's experiences when she felt as though the "holy spirit was descending on [her] and then filling [her] up" (see previous section *Becoming a Pastor*)—at the age of nine.

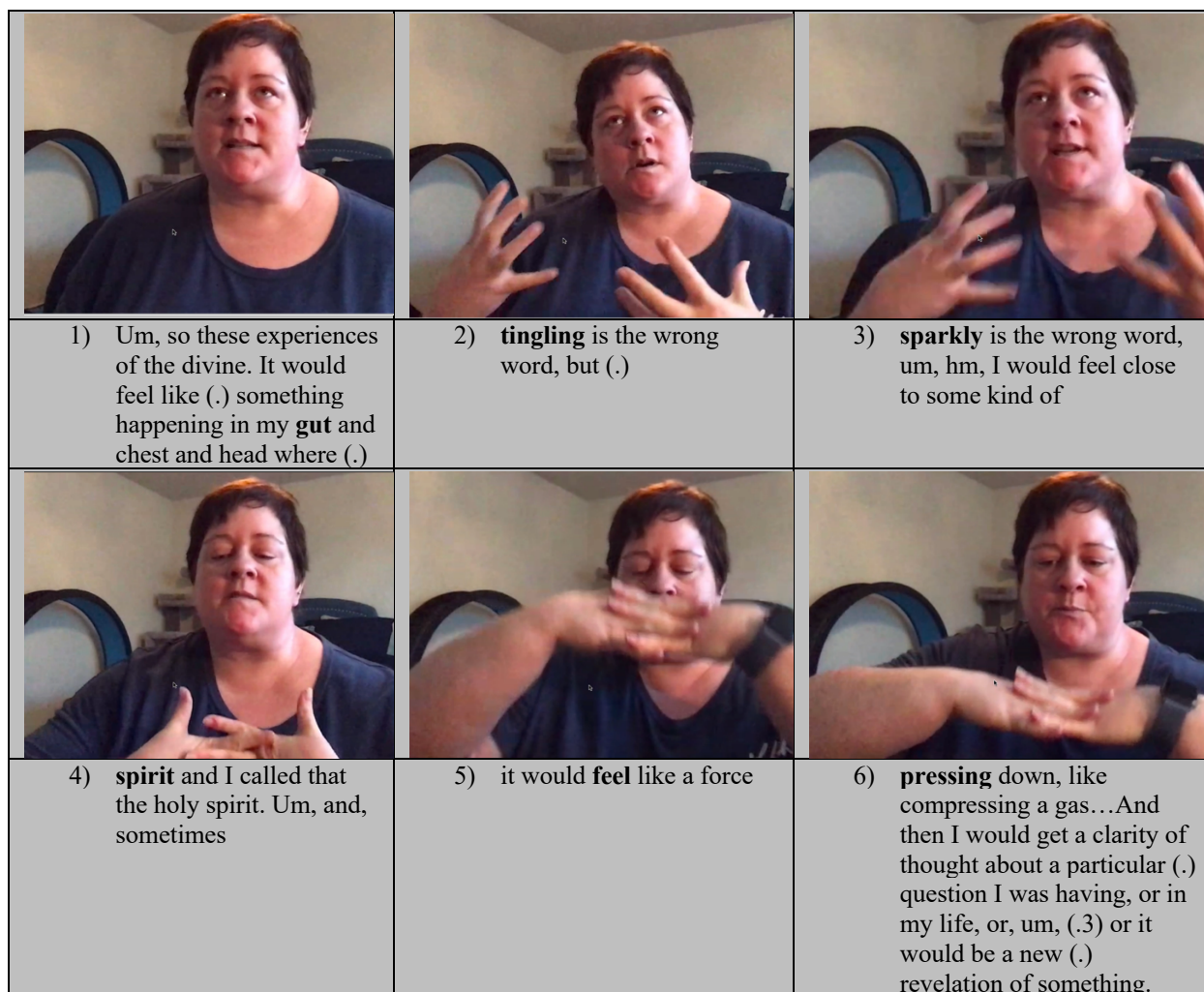
In a post seven months later (titled *Advent 3: Rejoice*, 14 December 2011) Joiya was struggling still with the above realization, and with losing the experiences around mania:

I think I'm still searching for the kind of spiritual experiences I used to have, the kind that mimicked or led to mania. I would have a sense of deep peace that settled in my center (even feeling it in lungs, stomach and gut). Sometimes I'd get goosebumps, but I would get a tingling that I could often feel up my spine. Mentally I would feel a closeness to the Divine Spirit, and a deep understanding of Jesus' message. When these experiences led to mania, I'd feel a special call to do something radical to follow the Spirit/Jesus, such as

start a new program at church, become a monk, change my spiritual habits, go out in the community and recruit others into church. None of these are bad acts... But when they come all at the same time...Nicht gut!

“Not good!” Joiya wrote, and it is curious that others (as I show Joiya pointing out below) did not call to question some of her actions. Joiya does interesting work in this post by describing a multifaceted set of subjective senses that accompanied the spiritual experiences she was missing: feelings of peace in her center that she experienced in deeply embodied ways, goosebumps, tingling that she could locate in her spine, as well as things she described as mental experiences of being close to the/a divine spirit. While as I have noted it is hard to infer subjective senses from text-artifacts, I argue that they can be read here in the emotional-symbolic and embodied units that Joiya described.

In our fourth co-research session, I asked Joiya to describe what she felt in times of manic euphoria. Her talk corroborated what she had written in *Advent 3: Rejoice* eight years earlier (see Figure 8). Just before panel 1 in Figure 10 (below), Joiya took a few seconds to gather her thoughts. She began talking (in panel 1) with her eyes fixed forward beyond the camera, clearly (to me) in thought of how to develop an intersubjective sense of what mania felt like. In panel 2, she continued staring beyond, but brought her hands up, open-palmed, and made one back-and-forth motion toward her camera as she said “tingling.” Contrary to the post from 2011, here she noted that “tingly” doesn’t quite match the feeling. She held the open-palmed gestured in place, and in panel 3 while saying “sparkly” she made two circular hand motions. As she continued (into panel 4) she clasped her hands together on uttering the word “close” which is reflected in panel 4 at her uttering of “spirit” (I screen-captured spirit because it was a clearer image than I could capture when she uttered “close”).



**Figure 10.** *A force pressing down.*

As she continued saying “it would” (panel 5) she brought her clasped hands up to the level of her nose/mouth. On uttering “force” she dropped her clasped hands down just below her chin, and then in panel 6, she performed one up and down motion as she uttered “pressing down.” Joiya brought her dialogic histories with mania/euphoria to the present in a situated *perezhivanie*, and she managed indexical grounds of imprecise word meanings and subjective senses as she attempted to develop an intersubjective sense of experiences typical of her mania. She does utilize the past tense (“it would feel”) because, as of right now, she no longer experiences euphoria in the ways described.

While Joiya described mania, particularly euphoria, as feeling “Good,” she noted that these manic experiences would often impel her to do things that she wouldn’t have otherwise, or that they would cause her to develop and take on too many activities that overwhelmed her. Joiya came to realize that her mania, across her life, followed cyclical patterns, and that certain times of the year (Holy Week in the church, and the entirety of the Christmas season) were her most active times of extreme “psychotic” mania. During those times when she was pastoring, she buried the mania in her zealous work for the church and for her congregation as she tried to facilitate the same spiritual experiences that she had in her members. Next, I describe some of Joiya’s experiences with what she has described as “Christmas delusion.”

*Christmas delusion.* On 22 December 2012, Joiya began a post titled *End of the Year Hospital Visit – No!:*

It’s the week before Christmas and all through the house,  
the bipolar is stirring, ready to douse  
all of the progress, all of the strength  
gained through hard work  
and too many hospitalizations.

Like clockwork across her lifespan come Joiya’s “Christmas delusions:” “Yes, it’s that time of year when my illness is triggered just by breathing in the air that there is a holiday.” At the time of drafting this post, Joiya had been writing in her blog for 19 months. She noted here that “I’ve moved past being highly triggered by memories of planning, leading, singing worship during Advent and Christmas...it doesn’t cause debilitating pain anymore.” Nonetheless, she noted that, with her therapist, she discovered “anticipatory anxiety” of the Christmas season that can begin as early as just after Thanksgiving. As she wrote (as her Bipolar) in *I Am Joiya’s Bipolar*,

anxiety destabilizes her mood: “What’s funny is that all I have to do is adjust the mood. When I destabilize her mood, Joiya isn’t able to make rational decisions as easily. That’s when it gets fun!” Thus, it is exceptionally difficult for Joiya to manage her triggers and I infer the subjective senses and subjective configurations (or *clashes* between configurations, perhaps) during Christmastime. In the rest of the blog post, Joiya described the sorts of mania she experienced across the Christmas season. She wrote:

For approximately 30 years, I’ve associated this time with manic experiences of magic, mystery and mysticism. Nothing to do with Santa and children’s magic. Primarily it was religious mysticism in touch with mystery...And, as most bipolar persons say, I Miss those Manic experiences. They felt good. I felt connected to the world in a deep way and able to see things that other people could not. I felt like there was meaning in life...I miss the experiences deeply, especially because they were a part of how I experienced my spirituality.

Each subsequent year of the blog, Joiya either wrote about the struggle with her Christmas delusion or did not write at all because she was struggling with it. For instance, three years later on 29 November 2015 she wrote the post *Religious Euphoria and Mania* in which she noted that it was time to “ban all contact” with church and all things religious in preparation for her Christmas delusion. She made this effort because in 2014 she experienced an *entire month* of mania and delusion, not just a few days. To that end, she would not participate in anything related to Advent or Christmas. She wrote a more detailed description, also, of exactly what form her delusion takes:

It is common for bipolar mania to be religious in nature. Mine happens to take the form of a heightened sense of spiritual and physical unity with all of the world – people,

animals, nature. That's the euphoria part. The delusion is that somehow I personally – not Mary – am bringing salvation into the world by bringing Christ into the world, and I have a mission to help everyone experience the mystical unity with Christ and with all of the world in order to make the world a more peaceful place. This experience is long ingrained into my experience of Christmas, and I don't know that it will ever go away.

Resonant with her first description, Joiya described her Christmas delusion as “long ingrained,” typical of her experiences around the holidays ever since she was nine years old, no doubt carrying deep historical intensities. She went on to note that she thought her experiences totally normal, that at points across her life she thought that *everyone* (all Christians) experienced those sorts of euphoria at Christmastime.

The following year (2016), Joiya did not write at all from late November through mid-January due to the extremity of her struggles with her Christmas mania and delusion. It is useful to note here that Joiya had stopped believing and was an agnostic/atheist by this point, but she still experienced the Christmas delusion. She noted in a blog post on 15 January 2017 that,

The major reason I haven't written in a while is that I have struggled with my Christmas delusion (that I am bringing Jesus to the world and have a special mission to bring unity or hope or joy to the world). Fortunately it only showed up a week ahead of Christmas Eve. I was on Haldol<sup>30</sup> to keep me in this plane of existence, but I did experience psychosis from time to time when I was not in touch with reality.

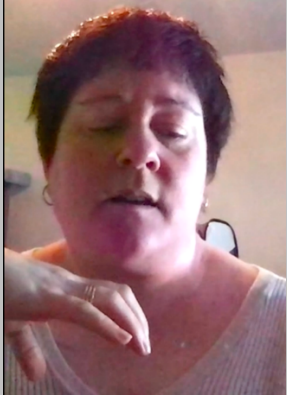

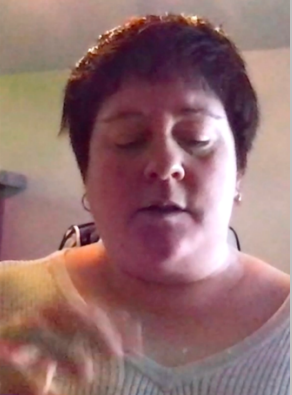
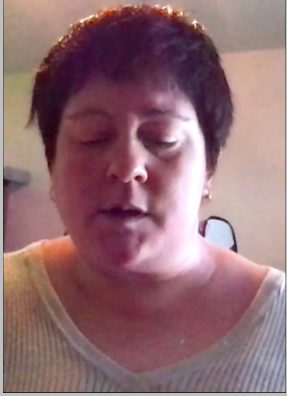


Luckily for Joiya, in 2018, after years of trial-and-error with her therapists, she was able to better manage her delusion through carefully structuring her life to not encounter many of her triggers, and through pre-emptive medication. The same followed for the first year during which I knew

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<sup>30</sup> An antipsychotic medication often used to treat schizophrenia.

Joiya, 2019. She did, however, during those two years, experience the anticipatory anxiety, and then a general heightened anxiety across the season, both of which are not good for her shifting poles.

To end this section, I shift to video-recorded data collected from our co-research. In our first session in on 25 March 2019, Joiya corroborated (prior to my reading—or even knowing about—her blog) what she noted in 2012, 2015, 2017, and 2018. I would say that Joiya seemed more tense during this segment than at others during the co-research session, and that tension can be seen in her tightened facial expressions across each panel of Figure 10. Joiya began by oscillating between looking at the camera and looking, again, to the “beyond.” In so doing, she was managing the indexical grounds of there-and-then with the here-and-now, perhaps similar to her “going back into that feeling” shown in Figure 8. As she uttered “intense” in panel 1, she brought her hand up, held open but relaxed, and shook her pinky toward the camera a few times. In panel 2, as she was saying “and even when I was” she brought her fingertips to the side of her face/temple area, and gently shook her chin back-and-forth as she spoke. In panel 3, Joiya removed her hand from her face and brought it back to the open-relaxed gesture, and when uttering “chosen...into the world” she lifted and dropped her hand to emphasize or punctuate each word. In this same panel, as she uttered “not to bring about,” she fixed her eyes forward and beyond and shook her head gently back-and-forth. In panel 4, she looked downward, as shown, and during the words “peace,” “joy,” and “unity” she gently nodded downward, again in emphasis or punctuation. In panel 5, as she uttered “but I’ve had it”

		
<p>1) Um (.), every year since I could remember, so probably back to about nine years-old, um, at Christmas time, um, especially on Christmas eve, um, I get a really <b>intense</b> feeling of closeness to God.</p>	<p>2) And even when I was a liberal Christian, presbyterian, um, you know, liberal in the sense of like believe in <b>evolution</b>, believe other religions are, um, just as good,</p>	<p>3) um, (.1) I would get the sense that I was chosen by God in some way to bring about <b>Jesus</b> Christ coming into the world. Not like giving birth to him, but in some way to, um, (.1) and not bring about a second coming, or maybe, maybe it was a second coming, I don't know.</p>
		
<p>4) Somehow, I was supposed to bring peace or joy or <b>unity</b>, or, (.1) um, something, and I had a special mission</p>	<p>5) and this is the delusion that I (.) um, I think there's only been one year that I haven't had it (.) in the last eight since I was diagnosed. But I've had it since I was nine years-old, every <b>year</b>.</p>	<p>6) One year I had it the whole month of December. Usually it's only a couple days, right around Christmas. And then once Christmas is over it's gone. And my doctors have, um, (.1) named it <b>mania</b> (.) because there's a delusion, so...and until I knew I had bipolar, I looked forward to that, and I would try to create religious experiences for other people to have that kind of experience.</p>

**Figure 11.** *A really intense closeness to God.*

all the way through to uttering “every year” she kept her eyes closed and shook her head, with a mildly pained expression on her face (eyebrows raised, and a slightly tightened expression), invoking the *acrossness* of the pain as she embodies it again here through her pained facial expression. In panel 6, starting from “one year” all the way through “gone” she looked directly to the camera, and shook her head. As she came to the word “mania,” she tilted her head to the right side as a sort of half-shrug, and then a fuller shrug at “because there’s a delusion.”

These segments of data centered on Christmas delusion are consequential in their own right<sup>31</sup>. I argue that tracing resonances (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) across the blog and her talk in co-research yielded a *deepening* of data through multiple exposures to her descriptions of Christmas delusions, and an *enrichment* of the data through coupling it with the analysis of her embodied intra-actions. It also showcases the ways in which stories, feelings, etc., travel and change across time. In the blog post from 2012, Joiya was writing for the first time about the precarity of Christmas *time*, the whole season, post-diagnosis. She used writing directly to describe and manage her struggle with the season, and to manage the feelings of loss. She missed mania and the experiences it brought, the deeper meanings she felt, and sense of purpose around her delusion (capitalizing “I Miss those Manic experiences”). Crucially, also, in the post she noted for the first time that she no longer felt debilitating pain for her memories of her former life as a pastor. The segments and general descriptions of 2015-2018 show that Joiya managed her Christmas delusion across a trajectory of *perezhivanie*, and *sense* making, *becoming*, in part, through writing directly, in conjunction, of course, with help from her therapists on medication management, and with environment-selecting-and-structuring practices (Prior &

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<sup>31</sup> It is not difficult to imagine how tricky it must be for Joiya to avoid the pervasive Christmas-related imagery as people decorate their homes, as stores capitalize on the season, as businesses generate Christmas advertisements played on television and radio, as pop-up ads on the internet, and so much more.

Shipka, 2003) on her part (banning contact with anything of a religious nature). While, again, I take up loss of faith in a later section, it is interesting that, somewhere between 2011 and 2012, Joiya lost faith, but still experienced Christmas delusions around being integral to bringing Jesus back into the world.

In the co-research segment collected seven years after her first written post about Christmas delusion, Joiya corroborated the mania and elaborated on the delusion, but seemed to affectively distance herself slightly from the ways she wrote confidently about religious experience *as* mania in the blog (in which she remediated her religious experiences as manic) and how she talked about mania with me in this first and then subsequent meetings. She did this by noting that her *doctors* “named it mania because there’s a delusion” (whereas before she putatively claimed ownership of the insight). It seemed she was holding, in our first meeting, indexical grounds of meaning (Christmas delusion as mania) as more open for interpretation<sup>32</sup>. Across that utterance she shrugged which might express doubt or indifference. Nonetheless, I argue that these segments of data are consequential moments of writing and of talk situated on a complex dialogic chain of moments. They reach backward and forward dialogically across Joiya’s lifespan in textured ways to make sense of her *becoming* around mania and Christmas delusion. The blog posts do this work by remediating her past 30 years of Christmas experiences of magic and mysticism *as* mania. She describes how she, in 2012, missed the subjective senses generated out of her euphoria and mania at Christmastime. There is some insight, here, into the key ways in which subjective senses are *distributed*, not just “in a person,” as Joiya found it increasingly necessary to cut ties with environments that could serve as triggers for subjective

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<sup>32</sup> She did later, across meetings, note more strongly her religious experiences (like the Christmas delusion) *as* symptoms of mania. So, I’m not sure how to interpret, or whether I even should interpret, her “distance” above as distance at all. I note particularly her talk in Figure 8 around *Triggered: Church Diaries* as a more assertive description of religious experience as mania.

senses not grounded in the reality she wanted to maintain post-diagnosis. The co-research session demonstrates the *acrossness* of her Christmas delusion and her subjective sense around it through her feeling of closeness to the divine, and through her embodied pain intensity via the tense, pained facial expression across the panels, and the way she shook her head while shrugging, perhaps indifferently or apprehensively, about her delusions.

***Figured others: two minds, healthy voice/disease voice, bipolar brain.*** After diagnosis, Joiya still became manic cyclically as well as by trigger, but the mania took on a disparate quality. She said in our first session:

it's almost like (.) I'm just putting this together right now for your, for your ears. (hh) Um, the religious experiences that I used to have so constantly, which sped up in frequency as I got older, um, have turned into suicidal ideation...I (.2) have visions of ways that I'm hurting myself.

Her euphoric highs became backgrounded, likely due to various medications, but her doctors could not *and still have not* figured out a way to help Joiya get rid of suicidal ideation. She discussed suicide/suicidal ideation in her blog as much as or more than any other topic. Out of 360 posts, 160 deal with suicide in some way (the overwhelming majority of those 160 are descriptions of her suicidal thoughts). I argue that this is because she was using writing, *directively*, for her life, directing her conscious attention toward her suicidal ideations, to make sense of and move past them, and to regulate her potentially dangerous behavior. Just like other tools in place (keeping her therapist and warm-and-hotlines on speed dial, writing and leaving encouraging post-it notes on her mirror, seeking social situations so that she was not alone, etc.), writing was an activity that helped Joiya to talk through her selves and to stay alive. But she was also negotiating unwanted subjective senses around suicidal ideation, experiencing them as what

she has variously described “two minds,” (see previously), as “bipolar brain,” as “disease voice,” and as just “the disease,” attributing varied sorts of agency/agentive potential to the symptoms of her bipolar that can emerge in intra-action. In ways, it often seemed like Joiya was fighting a battle of subjective configurations, with various subjective senses warring and vying for either her life or her death.

On 19 August 2012, Joiya wrote *Thoughts on What Makes Suicide an Option in a Broken Brain*. Twelve days before this post, Joiya had accepted and started her first job post-diagnosis, working part-time with a social justice non-profit focusing on youth counseling. Save for the stresses that are typical of beginning a new job, Joiya was in a good and reflective place, and she was able to start thinking about what exactly it was that made suicide even possible. Having read a Jodi Picoult book that dealt with neonaticide, Joiya was struck by descriptions of the infant becoming an object, rather than a person, to be necessary for anyone to commit such an act. She wrote:

I’m thinking, then, that when my bipolar brain decides that suicide or self-harm are good ideas to end relentless and DARK pain, that I have turned my own body, my own self, my own soul into an object, an other. I view it from the outside, rather than the inside. I turn my view so that I see any part of who I am as a third party with whom I have no connection. I lose connection to my own self. I experienced that Very Deeply this past January. I viewed myself above myself, barely looking through my own eyes. Inside it felt terrible and dark and disorienting and like walking through a tunnel towards death. Not pretty. But that was my reality.

By my read, this is another embodied-conceptual metaphor, one in which Joiya describes the process of creating a *figured other*, where Joiya splits off<sup>33</sup> from her self to view her self as an object/other and making it possible to destroy that object. Like Holland et al.'s (1998) notion of figured worlds, one facet of which is to “distribute ‘us’...by relating actors to landscapes of action (as personae) and spreading our senses of self across many different fields of activity” (p. 41), Joiya, over numerous points in our co-research data, drew figured others by seeming to distribute agency, and often full-blown personalities, to her mental illness as well as projections of those into her wider lived-in lifeworld. In short, she attributes personhood to her “Mind 2,” her “disease brain,” and/or “disease voice,” subjective configurations built of their own suite of subjective senses which may encourage Joiya to perform dangerous actions. Thus, Joiya’s insight here is striking, as is her juggling of indexical grounds of meaning. It seems here, that Joiya is likely of “Mind 1” (see previously, introductory section) describing “Mind 2” as seemingly a separate embodied-conceptual figured other. Also interesting indexically is that she still recognizes it *as* her, noting that when her bipolar brain triggers suicidal ideation, “*I have turned my own body, my own self, my own soul into an object, an other.*”

For several years after diagnosis, then, Joiya’s directive activities (around writing, but also spread across several practices, see below) needed to shift to focusing the lion’s share of her energy on the dance of voices she experienced, telling her to “[move] forward toward a whole life” (see previously, *Sisyphus Sends Me to the Hospital*, introduction) and telling her to kill herself. Over the years, Joiya produced several disparate accounts of suicidal ideations. In multiple co-research sessions, she came to point to many of these as “disease talking” or “disease voice” or her “bipolar brain” as foregrounded

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<sup>33</sup> I initially thought “partitions herself” but thought that might signal unfortunate brain-as-computer metaphors, like partitioning a hard-drive.

In October of 2015, Joiya was hospitalized for over two weeks, her 29<sup>th</sup> hospitalization in five years. Different about this time, however, was that, despite the orders of her psychiatrists and therapists that she stay in a residential program to become well:

we heard that a Vice President where I would do residential had ruled that they would not send the “Opt Out of Medicare” letter to my secondary insurance so that the secondary insurance would pay at the in-network prices that they were contracted to abide by. No. Supposedly they had tried that before and not been paid. Therefore, I would have to be a self-pay client and possibly get a loan for a considerable amount of money. I’m guessing \$25,000 is a conservative number. So, with some coaching from the staff at the hospital where I was staying, and the wisdom of family and friends, I have devised a detailed, hour-by-hour, month-long home version of a residential experience. All the skill-building and expressive therapy (workbooks, books, art and music supplies), minus staff and supportive environment.<sup>34</sup>

Joiya needed ways to continue progress on her becoming well, as well as to deal with the imminent suicidal ideations that come when “Mind 2” is foregrounded and at play with not ideal subjective senses. This pushed Joiya to utilize a suite of tools she had learned in other therapy programs, as well as to develop new ones—all of which she documented on her blog. She utilized cognitive behavioral therapy related exercises and workbooks. She also utilized “thought diffusion,” a *directive* analytical approach to thoughts—recognizing them but then “letting them move on”—to deal with her obsessions of suicidal ideations as they came to her. She wrote “In a nutshell...you Defuse from unhelpful thoughts and feelings, to Accept reality and take

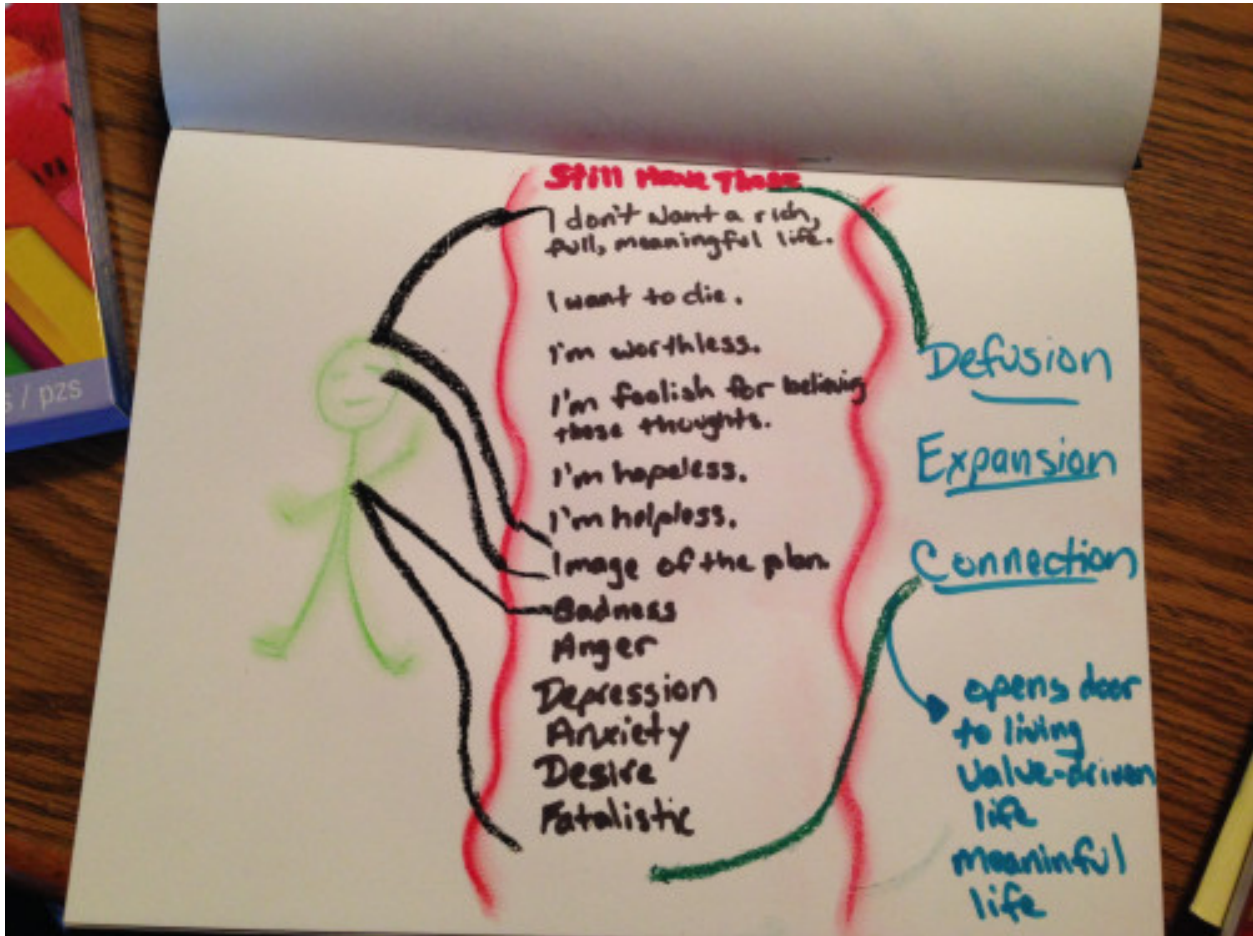
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<sup>34</sup> As a researcher, but more importantly, as Joiya’s friend, when I read and reread these sections of the blog across which she had to manage fighting with our abhorrent health care system, they made—and make— me exceptionally angry, as I’m sure this snippet will my readers, too.

Committed action based on your Values.” This practice required Joiya to utilize the steps of “defusion” (letting thoughts and obsessions pass on) “expansion” (“making room for thoughts, images and emotions to be there” she wrote) and “connection” (“the observing of self that is always present, never judging, who only notices and sees what is thought about, felt, experienced” she wrote). To deal with several obsessive thoughts that Joiya attributed to mania/suicidal ideation, she decided to draw and record her thoughts about the drawing in a blog post in Figure 12. The following text accompanied the drawing as part of the blog post:

I talked about the art and the thoughts with my therapist...I feel like I've worked my a\$\$ off for years and feel I've made very little progress. Even in the last few months the goals to meet my values of relationships and meaningful work – I added volunteering in more social atmospheres, joined more MeetUp groups and started attending them. And I still ended up suicidal and in the hospital. 4 times in 10 weeks...So, I'm using defusion skills. In some small way I want to not believe myself. I'd like to think I want a meaningful life and I want to live. You'd think I want that with all the effort I'm going to in order to do this DIY residential program. But I'm defeated and can barely stand to live, much less follow my values. I'll keep using skills. But I still don't want to live.

In the drawing in Figure 12, she drew herself as a green figure. Coming from her head in black tendrils are what might be symbolic representations of subjective senses around “I don't want a rich, meaningful life,” “I want to die,” “I'm worthless,” “I'm foolish for believing those thoughts,” “I'm hopeless,” “I'm helpless,” and on its own, putatively from her eye, “Image of the plan.” Coming from her heart in black tendrils are “Sadness,” “Anger,” “Depression,” “Anxiety,” “Desire,” and “Fatalistic.”



**Figure 12.** Joiya's "thought defusion" exercise.

Above these, in red, Joiya wrote "Still have these" and all the features are surrounded on each side by wavy red lines. In blue, on the opposite side of the image representing herself, she wrote in blue, "Defusion," "Expansion," "Connection," and green tendrils connecting those represented psychological practices to the features of her experience outlined in red. There is also an arrow connecting "Connection" to "opens the door to living value-driven life" and just below, "meaningful life." This drawing is a multimodal representation of the bricolage of possible representations of subjective senses she was managing, primarily generated from her figured other "Mind 2." The subjective senses I infer represent a set of the emotional-symbolic, from named feelings around affect, to the cognitive/semiotic packages like "I'm

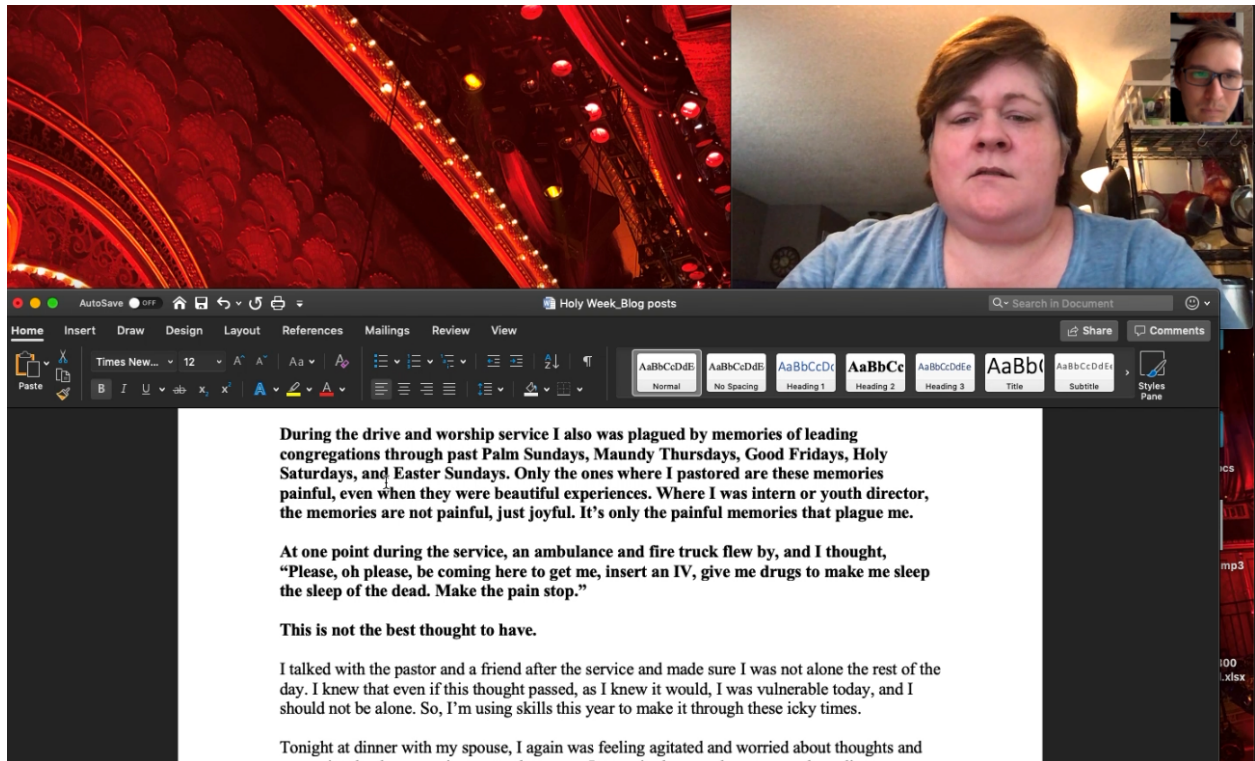
hopeless...helpless...worthless,” etc. These parts of the drawing highlight how subjective senses include but go well beyond the affective, linking feelings to linguistic representations of emotions.

In the epigraph of this chapter del Rio and Álvarez (2007) argued that directive psychological instruments provide affordances for understanding and mastery of one’s interior life. Here, Joiya was utilizing thought defusion, and channeling it through a drawing, to “operate” on her thoughts and feelings. And she was doing it at home, without access to proper healthcare. I hypothesize that all her hard work in mapping a DIY residential program could have been her “Mind 1” or her “healthy voice” in a dialogic interplay with “Mind 2” or “disease voice,” and that through the various psychological directive tools (e.g., defusion) she was attempting to intervene in the onset of subjective senses that might lead her back to the hospital, or worse. In these ways, Joiya was *becoming* her own therapist, and taking on multiple functions usually distributed across a medical staff.

From our second co-research session (23 May 2019) onward, Joiya and I became interested in marking and discussing moments where “disease voice” could be found in her writing—and when it might be coming through in our sessions. In one session focused on tracing together her blog posts about “Holy Week” (leading to Easter), Joiya read aloud a post from 2012 titled *Sunday of Palms*. In that post, she noted that Holy Week had already begun to trigger her, that she was emotionally vulnerable, that she was “plagued by memories” of her former work as a pastor. At this point, Joiya had not begun cutting herself off from religious experiences, even during consequential time periods that tended to trigger shifts in mood. Joiya read portions of this blog aloud (see figure 13 below) and highlighted, particularly, the interplay between her two minds—her disease voice and healthy voice.

As hinted in Figure 13 below, across the reading and thinking-aloud, Joiya was not as animated as she tends to be (often moving her head, and gesturing vibrantly with her hands), but held a more rigid posture. Her face, though (as in Figures 8 and 10 above, particularly), is markedly tense while reading *Sunday of Palms* and thinking aloud about it (see Figure 13 below for contrast). It is almost as if she was straining as she read and talked about the text. I did not ask Joiya about her embodied activity that session, so I can only hypothesize that Joiya, like in the RATAA of *Triggered: Church Diaries*, was feeling residua of the historical intensities of pain she felt and wrote about in that post, the pain she hoped that emergency professionals driving by might come and stop. These residua of pain, I argue, showcase the *acrossness* of the pain she felt in the moment-to-moment intra-activity of our session, as she did the indexical, calibrational work (Silverstein, 1993; Koven, 2016) of reaching backward in time to bring the past to present and relive it in a textured moment of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*. Joiya also notes, interestingly, the interplay between the disease and healthy voices. She notes feeling “just blackness inside,” and that wishing for the ambulance and firetruck to be coming for her were disease voice but that there’s a bit of healthy voice there, too, because she pined for the emergency services to make her pain stop, rather than making and acting on plans to do it herself.

The next example requires two time jumps from the 2012 *Sunday of Palms* post; one to September of 2018 when Joiya wrote the post *Inherent Dignity and Worth* and another to May of 2019 when she performed a RATAA of the post. It was in talking about this post that Joiya first described, to me, her sense of multiple voices. In my first question, when I asked her what prompted her to write the piece, and what her process was like, she said:



**Reads aloud:** At one point during the service, an ambulance and fire truck flew by, and I thought, “Please, oh please, be coming here to get me, insert an IV, give me drugs to make me sleep the sleep of the dead. Make the pain stop.”

**Thinks aloud:** Um, the, that thought is, I would say, **disease** voice. Um, (.2) I think later in a different post, I talk about having just blackness inside...but this is one of those places of darkness, um, just darkness inside when I was, you know, in that service when I had been thinking about death, that Jesus knew that it would end in death. Um, so I'd already been thinking about death and then when they flew by I thought “well, there's a sense of health in it that I'm asking for them to make the pain stop, when I could do it myself.” Um, but at the same time, you know the next line, "This is not the best thought to have," um, I'm aware that, and I was at the time, I was aware after I thought it, that this isn't normal. Something's wrong. I need to talk to somebody. Um, which apparently I did. According to the text

**Reads aloud:** I talked with the pastor and a friend after the service and made sure I was not alone the rest of the day. I knew that even if this thought passed, as I knew it would, I was vulnerable today, and I should not be alone. (.3)

**Thinks aloud:** There's a bit that maybe healthy voice talking against the disease voice, um, reminding me that I did the right thing. I talked to somebody and then (.) um, I made a plan so that I, because I knew I would be vulnerable that I wouldn't be alone. ((clears throat)) um and then

**Figure 13.** RATAA of “Sunday of Palms” captured at “disease” in the think-aloud text below

image.

Yeah, one of the things that I was going to tell you about this piece, um, is that this is about two and a half maybe three weeks before I was hospitalized. So there's a certain amount of, this is a bit of my disease talking, as much as it's trying to figure out my spirituality, um, based on, you know, where I find myself in church these days and that sort of thing. There's also a sense of the voice that we're hearing here is the disease.

The piece is Joiya's—disease voice—response to the recitation of principles of faith at her church that morning. At this point, Joiya was part of a Unitarian Universalist church a place where she could find community and be in a church service—without faith. The first principle, a recognition of “the inherent dignity and worth of every person,” triggered Joiya, as disease voice, to consider her place in the world. One (of five) of her observations is mapped in Figure 14. In the post, Joiya drew on evolutionary science to describe survival instinct, how it's awe-inspiring the way it keeps her “alive when so close to suicide” even “when I can't see a point in going on.” But in the end, she ended up disagreeing—when she wrote the post—about having any inherent dignity and worth, due the fact that her “genes mutated into a living thing that is not fit for the environment.” Interestingly, she noted that while she knew that it was the disease voice writing initially, she sees truth in the way the disease voice described herself. It is also interesting that, whereas in panel 1 she describes herself as “not the disease voice talking” and in panel 6 as “healthy voice,” that she still seems ambivalent about whether she believes she has inherent dignity and worth. “I probably do,” she said, noting it's “probably” healthy voice that was saying that. Notice that in this RATAA, Joiya was in a particularly good place, and the difference in her facial expressions from the figures that came before. Joiya seems far more relaxed, her brow is not furrowed, and she is smiling playfully across panels 2-5 as she notes the overlap between the healthy and disease voices. This is one consequential moment among many across which Joiya

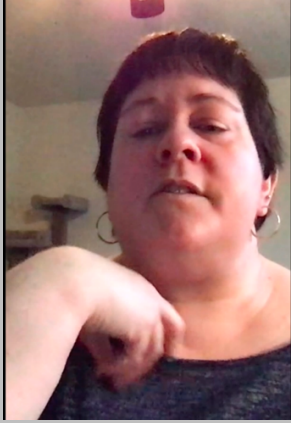
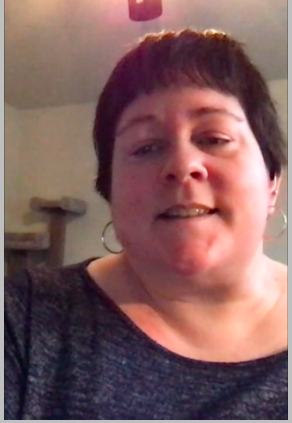



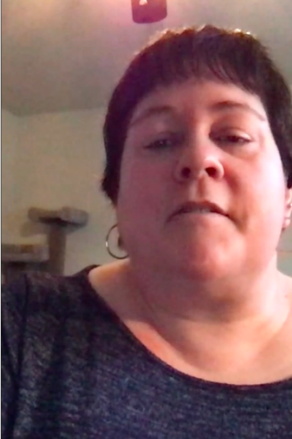
<p><b>Reads aloud:</b></p>	<p>I do not feel I have inherent dignity and worth. I feel like a collection of cells that have gone wrong. I have so many medical problems and bipolar is just the worst one right now. I know you will disagree with me.</p>	
<p><b>Thinks aloud:</b></p>		
		
<p>Um, (.) this is, uh, the <b>disease</b> talking. Um, (.2) but then now that I'm not the disease talking, and I'm reading this,</p>	<p>I'm like, but the <b>reality</b> is that</p>	<p>I am a collection of cells that have <b>gone</b> wrong.</p>
		
<p>I do have that many ridiculous number of medical <b>problems</b>,</p>	<p>and bipolar is just the worst one right now. But it's in treatment, and everything else is in <b>treatment</b>,</p>	<p>and, um, so it's true that I'm a collection of cells, uh; (.3) but I (.) I'm not sure how I feel about that. "I do not feel I have inherent dignity and worth". I probably do. (.1) um, and that's probably, uh, <b>healthy</b> voice talking that says that I do.</p>

Figure 14. Disease voice.

came to see that she is not *just* her illness, but rather that she's all the things she's done and experienced, that both the disease and healthy voices are part of who she is, regardless of whether she felt she had any inherent dignity and worth. I am interpreting this as a sort of integration of her subjective configurations of "healthy voice" and "Mind 2," "disease voice," etc. that she came to, or became-with, *across* long trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming.

This long-developing subjective configuration of self took Joiya the greater part of a decade to make. Rather than disease voice or healthy voice, Mind 1 or Mind 2, Joiya realized, as she wrote in a blog post titled *Bipolar Me*, that she's just simply "bipolar me":

I wrote about whether decisions were made by me, or by bipolar, a few days ago here<sup>35</sup>. I was conflicted about my own decision-making over the years, especially by those decisions I now know to be poor ones. Today I came to new insight with the help of a wise one. I decided to let myself off the hook and let decisions made by bipolar moods stand as they are. If I was manic, I was manic, and the decision is from bipolar. There is a "bipolar me" that has been working in the background basically my whole life. As my mood fluctuated – regularly – I made decisions and experienced life with this persona. Bipolar me did crazy things and poor things, and sometimes there was good that came out of it. And sometimes not. But there is a bipolar me that is in ascendancy most of the time. There is no "me" and "bipolar." There is bipolar me.

I choose to end this section on the varied features of Joiya's bipolar (particularly, of mania) with this final segment from the blog because, while Joiya and I did not discuss this piece (yet), it does reflect the Joiya that I know, and the way in which she describes her life, now, with bipolar. This is yet another example of the socially dispersed nature of the development and experience

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<sup>35</sup> The place deictic "here" was once a link to her other blog post, but the blog is now defunct, and all links are broken.

of subjective sense (as least as it might be symbolically represented here), as Joiya notes that she came upon the “bipolar me” insight with the “help of a wise one,” and I imagine the inner-and-outer semiotics of a conversation (online, text-based or vocalized in person) with the “wise one” played a role in shaping Joiya’s sense of “bipolar me.”

While I could only draw out a few examples in this chapter, over complex chains of moments, and complicated trajectories of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*, Joiya utilized writing and other semiotic tools to direct the development of new subjective configurations around her mental states and experience after her “sudden diagnosis.” In the end, she developed an emergent yet integrated sense of “bipolar me,” still fraught with the ebbs and flows of her mood poles, but now she is far more equipped to manage her subjective senses.

In the next, and final sections of this chapter, I draw from Joiya’s blog and our talk to partially trace the ways in which Joiya experienced unbecoming religious and becoming atheist alongside her dealing with her bipolar diagnosis.

### ***Making Sense: Losing Faith***

Joiya’s Christianity, over a complicated trajectory of study in undergraduate, graduate school and seminary, became her own presbyterian sort of liberal Christianity in which she did not necessarily believe that Jesus was divine, nor did she think that the bible was the literal word of her god. Rather, she came to stress the trinity as holy. She also, across her life, chose to “be on the side of love and grace,” believing and enacting values of social justice and equality.

Joiya came away from faith in contiguity with coming to understand her bipolar and feeling the pain of it. The problem with the *record* of this (un)becoming is that, while Joiya could write all that she wanted about her experiences with bipolar on her blog, matters of faith were more difficult. In our seventh session, she noted that the major reason she did not become

more vocal on her blog about becoming an atheist was that she was—is—still ordained through the Chicago presbytery, and on disability through them. She noted:

Um, it wasn't a suddenly I'm bipolar suddenly I don't have faith. It was kind of a how do I integrate bipolar with the rest of me? And my faith had gotten so tied up in my profession as well that if I can't do my profession, do I still have faith? Um, and then here's bipolar that describes my experience so well, um, kind of taking over everything. Um, but I did actively try to find faith again.

An extra veneer of anxiety was thus tacked on to her already fraught lifeworld: what happens if the church finds out she's an atheist?

As pointed out earlier, Joiya's becoming religious was a tale of immersion across her lifespan becomings in the major areas of her life: home, school, youth camps, college, graduate school, seminary, and then as she points out above, her profession as a pastor. So then, in a life so predicated on faith, her tale of becoming an atheist is a tale of detachment, or detaching from, one of the most fundamental families of subjective configurations present of her experiences: those generative of her varied roles with faith. Joiya has described the pain and suffering around her lost profession and life in the church above (see RATAA of *Triggered: Church Diaries*), and that pain was dispersed further across her becoming an atheist. In the remainder of this section, I trace through the blog and Joiya's talk some *moments of consequentiality* that represent her struggle to move away from faith to become an atheist.

In December of 2011 (the first Advent-Christmas time while the blog was operational) Joiya suddenly stopped writing. There are none of the usual clues, or reasons stated outright why Joiya stopped writing, but it can be assumed that she struggled with her Christmas delusion and was likely hospitalized for an indefinite amount of time. Nonetheless, when she came back to

writing, she was taking on the task of cleaning out objects related to her former life as a pastor. She wrote the post *Faking It: A Dangerous Proposition* on 9 March 2012. In it, she described that she was faking it—getting up, getting dressed, acting like things mattered:

These days I'm acting as though I have hope...But I don't feel hopeful. On the contrary, I feel hopeless. Not helpless, at least, but hopeless. Why engage in meaningful activity when I feel miserable to be alive? Physical pain is Not Helping, but the pain is much, much deeper.

And later, she wrote she was

Ready to leave this world and it's constant suffering for a sweet nothingness. Not sure at all I believe in heaven, and I don't believe in a hell. I don't know what happens to us when we die. I hope we just return to the collective unconsciousness and have no more suffering. Just nothingness.

Clearly foregrounded here are representations of subjective senses around Joiya's "disease voice" distributed across her home environment, perhaps triggered by the challenging task of clearing out artifacts—primarily hundreds of books—from seminary and from her life as a pastor. Joiya's writing, here, is incommensurate with the faith she had written about leading up to this post. She had remained until this point, a liberal Christian, still following theologies of heaven<sup>36</sup>. Here she's no longer sure, and I argue that, resonant with her talk in the RATAA of *Triggered: Church Diaries* (see previously, section *Making Sense: Triggers*), this is a link in the dialogic chain of moments where the "the pain that spirituality would cause was so deep" that it became a "huge factor" in her coming to see that there is no god.

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<sup>36</sup> Many liberal denominations do not follow theologies of hell and it is unclear to me from the data whether Joiya did while a Christian (but I might say that it might be like *hell* to feel like an imaginary *man* in the sky was always watching, as Joiya noted about her perception of her god's presence early in life described the chapter).

Joiya mentioned a few more times the purge of her religious artifacts, and on 29 April 2012 (six weeks after *Faking It*) she wrote a post titled *Cycling Down Again. Sigh*, that recounted this pain in even more consequential ways. She was doing laundry and the loss of her former life permeated the experience as she passed by “over and over” 10 boxes of books from her “former life waiting to leave [her] house.” Then she continued,

And then going to church again today, reminded that I have no sense of God working in the world or in my world. I’m trying to believe and every once in a while I get close. All these factors could be contributing to increased stress on my weakened identity, on grief of losing my sense of self and career, on an unknown future. Things that could lead to so much pain that death, an end, seems plausible.

Joiya seems here even further removed from her god. While the ways in which I use *sense* in this work, and how Joiya uses it in this post are different, they share a common rhizome. Joiya shows us what it is like to live with a *sense* for so long—of her god “working in [her] world,” and of belief in general—and what it is like to be cut off from that *sense*. Note, also, how Joiya describes the sense of “God” working in the world as perhaps indexing the dispersed and social nature of *senses*. Moreover, recalling that subjective configurations are bearers of a sense of identity (González Rey et al., 2017) the emotional-symbolic subjective senses around pain for Joiya that still bear historical intensity (as shown in various figures above) seemed at play in activating sorts of crises of identity.

Shortly after writing *Cycling Down Again. Sigh*, Joiya was hospitalized for more than a week. When she returned home, she wrote about some realizations she had while in-patient (*Next Chapter Opening Up*, 13 May 2012). Particularly, her “core has been shaken completely,” that it’s not that she doesn’t believe, but that she doesn’t know what she believes. She then

questioned, “what, if not faith, will keep me afloat during this time...?” She ended the post by recounting the end of the purging of religious artifacts saga:

In other Grief News: Finally the day arrived when a pastor came to pick up the rest of my pastoral library (probably 400 books...). I started feeling anxious the night before, and calmed myself enough to sleep. Then I awoke very early, again feeling very anxious but dressed quickly to help carry the books out. As the appointed hour closed in, tears and anxiety skyrocketed. I had to lock myself in my bedroom as others hauled the books out and away. For the rest of the day the grief consumed me, the emptiness opening into a deep crevasse, ice walls on each side spreading into my heart. I don’t have anything to replace what those books represented – 18 years of investment in one way of life, one life plan, one calling and vocation.

I read this post as resonant with her post, *Memories*, drawn from previously. Her books were semiotic artifacts circulating in her home environment and were crucial links to her becoming—and (un)becoming, here—across timescales (Lemke, 2000). As these were being taken away, indexically, their removal was “ripping” something out of her, creating the embodied-conceptual metaphor of a deep, 18-year-sized crevasse that, at that point, she knew not how to fill. How do moments of literal *subtraction*, then, add up to a life?

Six weeks later, Joiya continued questioning her faith and relationship with her god in *Upcoming Changes or Return to Origins?* Therein, she noted she was “at a loss” in her spiritual life:

I’m not sure of God or how God acts in the world. Lots of ennui. Wish I could benefit from a caring community, but am not able to participate in it unless I return to church form and language that doesn’t feel like my authentic language anymore, and it triggers

deep pain of memories in that structure... I'm also entertaining thoughts of the Divine Feminine, which could be the God I've known all along, but not heard in language within the patriarchal and bureaucratic church. I don't know where I'm heading. Just waiting.

To end this post, she noted that there was "Nothing to grab on to. Just disappearing images in the fog." It seems here that Joiya was experiencing *turbulence* as she moved further away from the discourses and discursive practices of the church, perhaps because her experience of them no longer triggered the euphoria of a deep connection to her god. This seemed to yield representations of subjective senses around ennui.

Joiya dealt with the pain of losing her faith over a few years. The pain, as she has noted, led her to question a whole suite of components of her faith. However, as I noted above, it was largely backgrounded on the blog (her blog is, after all, primarily about her life with bipolar). In fact, for the most part, the points in which Joiya was wrestling with faith came within the first two years of her blog while she was still managing the "turmoil" (see later), the roiling swirl of her mental diagnoses and what those could mean for her faith. When she described faith, it was almost always in conjunction with bipolar. This trend continued in our talks.

In our fourth session (a talk we decided to devote solely to Joiya's "spirituality" as a believer and as a non-believer), Joiya talked at great length about her struggle toward atheism, how it was wrapped up with her mental diagnoses. While *so* much of the talk is interesting, I reproduce here only a segment of it (though a quite large one). Here, I represent Joiya's talk and gestures differently than above; a tabular version, I found to be cumbersome for reading. Rather, I include descriptions of embodied activity in the transcript in brackets and italicized font. I alternate between transcript and images screenshotted from the video-recorded talk, emboldening

words during which the screenshots were captured. Images of talk appear below their representative portions of transcript.

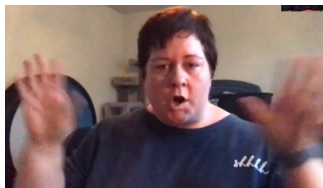
Joiya: I spent a lot of hospitalization and a lot of time between hospitalizations, those first couple years, struggling with my spirituality because, uh, I wasn't having any of those experiences anymore. I wasn't, none of it [*“none of it”: open-palmed, fingers extended slash toward the camera at her chest level with both hands*]. None of the music is making me feel good, or the messages, or the people are, or even the little stuff.

R: Sure

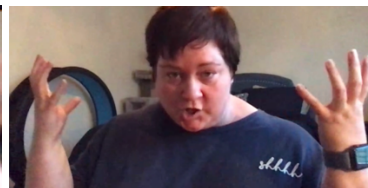
D: **Gone** [*slashes again, same gesture*]. **All of it. Gone** [*another slash motion*]. Medicated away maybe, or, uh, **just gone** [*lifts her hands up, palms open, shrugs shoulders slightly irresolute*]. Um, (.2)



1. “Gone”



2. “All of it. Gone”



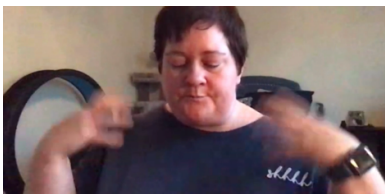
3. “Just Gone”

Ware: That's really interesting

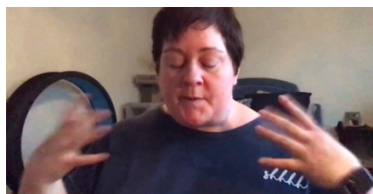
Joiya: Go ahead?

Ware: No, I just said that's really interesting, like,

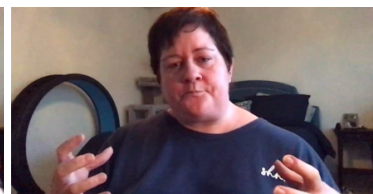
Joiya: Yeah. Um (.1) and the only spiritual experiences I would have would be during that in between period when I was still (.) Christian and I was also struggling in the early years living with the **mental** illness that was, that was primary in my **life** at the time [*between “struggling...time”: nine quick, open-palm circular motions*]. Um, the only spiritual experiences that I would have, uh, were about internal conflict and **turmoil**. [*“internal...turmoil”: a roiling, fluid, circular motion with open hands*]



4. “Mental”



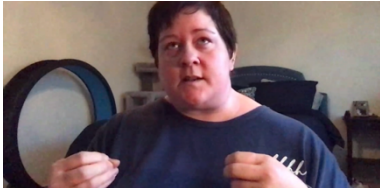
5. “Life”



6. “Turmoil”

Um, sometimes making, trying to make **sense** [*circular motions with hands as pictured*] of, "well if **these** [*“if these”: flips right hand upward, as if holding experiences between her thumb, index and middle digits*] were manic experiences, did I have a **relationship** [*“did...relationship”: puts her right hand down, and makes an open-palmed gesture on*]

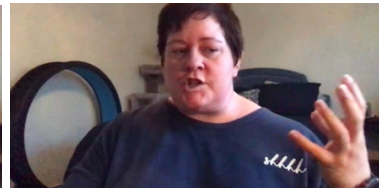
*the opposite side]* with God at all?" um, so it was really probably the early, for me, the early questioning then about what led to atheism.



7. "Sense"



8. "These"



9. "Relationship"

Ware: Sure

Joiya: So even though, becoming [*circular motions like "life" above*], discovering, not really becoming, discovering bipolar, um,

Ware: Hm

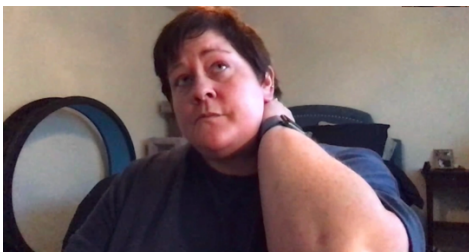
Joiya: Precipitated becoming an atheist. Although it really did was, um, it was only the catalyst because then, the catalyst to further thinking through all the stuff that people talk about, like "oh, well then I read the bible differently." Well, I already read the bible differently, I already read it as a man-made document [*laughs*].

Ware: Yeah, yeah

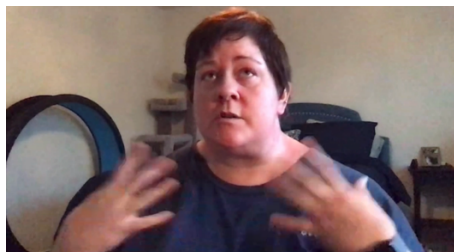
Joiya: [*laughs*] that wasn't a big revelation for me, that was something that happened years and years and years ago, um, probably in college.

Ware: So interesting.

Joiya: Yeah. Um, [*places her left hand on the back of her neck, keeps it there for 40 seconds from "yeah. Um...Wanted"*] I already thought of Jesus as not necessarily divine, but, um, wished for more liturgy about the trinity, so I don't know how I figured that out. But that's what I **wanted**. Um, (.10) hm. Um, but yeah, so I was attending a presbyterian congregation while I was experiencing that **turmoil**,

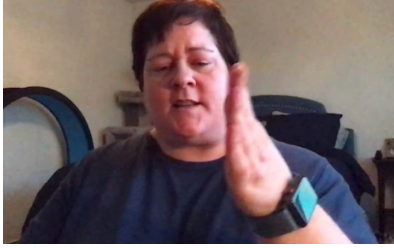


10. "Wanted" (holding hand in place (.40)



11. "Turmoil" (six circular motions)

and I would already be doing lots of, as I **tended** more towards **atheism**, as time progressed [*eight chopping motions from left to right*]



12. “Tended” (chops)



13. “Atheism” (six chops)

all I would do during the service itself would be translating everything to, well "I can say the word God, but I mean this universal [*opens hands outward in an open gesture*] **sense** of, that nobody can make sense of, just mystery [*“just...mystery”*: *rotates gesture inward finger-tips pointed downward, then snaps them outward once across “mystery,” ending with finger-tips upward*]



14. “Sense”



15. “Mystery”

in some way," or, "when we say God I think of it as the **interconnections** [*a few rapid circular motions*] of everything" you know, the whole butterfly wings cause a **hurricane theories**. [*“butterfly...theories”*: *makes wing flapping gestures with hands*]



16. “Interconnections”



17. “hurricane theories”

This entire stretch of talk is interesting (and consequential) in several ways. Joiya began by describing *not* having spiritual experiences anymore. Nothing around her religious life was making her feel the *sense* it used to, nothing made her feel good, and as she described this, she slashed outward with both hands (not pictured) as an embodied intensity which I read as emphatic gesture, perhaps in line dialogically (as a sort of cut) with the ways she described parts

of her as being *ripped* out of her. She performed this slash gesture two more times in images 1 and 2, to emphasize “gone,” and then she said they (the experiences of the spiritual that can be read resonantly [Stornaiuolo et al., 2018] as *manic*) were medicated away. This is important, as, it indexes that once Joiya was medicated, she lost her connection to the spiritual, to the *manic*, to the euphoria of her god’s presence. She shrugged slightly as she pointed her palms upward in an open gesture, and there was a marked strain on her face. As she described her struggle while she was still a Christian and while bipolar was “primary” in her life, she made nine circular motions with her hands partially clutched, palms facing her. I read this as managing indexicalities of her inner-struggle and conflict, her turmoil, and representing it through that embodied activity. I argue that she was experiencing *turbulence*—a sort of continual mixing, remixing, and general oscillations between subjective configurations—as she juggled various subjective senses, losing some (her god’s presence, and a generalized spirituality medicated away), becoming-with and managing new ones toward subjective configurations (recognizing mania across her life *as* her god’s presence, and as a large component of her spirituality). I note that across images 4-6, her face is still markedly tense, strained.

In images 7-9, Joiya managed indexical grounds I read as competing *senses* of meaning, in a marked way, noting that “if these” experiences of her God and of spirituality were manic (and seeming to hold the experiences off to one side in between her fingertips in her right hand) then, on the other hand (with an open-palmed gesture on her other left-handed side) did she even have a relationship with her God at all? It was a painful realization for Joiya to make sense of important spiritual experiences of the divine across her life as symptoms of her mental illness. This was her turmoil. She then noted her key realization—resonant with other stretches of talk and writing showcased across this chapter, e.g., from her first telling me she had bipolar disorder

in our first meeting, from her dialogic animation of *Triggered: Church Diaries*, and more)—that her “becoming...discovering” bipolar “precipitated” her loss of faith and becoming an atheist.

After describing having already read the bible differently (in a more liberal Christian sort of way), she then homed in again on her turmoil. During this stretch (see image 10), Joiya again stared into the “beyond” and placed her hand on her neck in a particular way that I am not sure how to interpret. It could be a sort of bracing gesture, like a strut to support a shock. It could also be a manifestation of holding onto a dialogic sense of pain, though her facial expression appears more pensive in that moment. Nonetheless, she held this posture for 40 seconds, leading up to describing turmoil (again with a circular hand gesture as above), but slightly differently—as attending a presbyterian church while losing faith gradually. This can be seen in images 12-13, where she chopped eight times from left to right to show a sort of succession of coming to atheism; and note that she located atheism on her right side, the side where, in image 8, she indexically held her spiritual experiences as *manic*. Her description of turmoil here is interesting in that she described her activity “translating” the faith-based components of worship to more secular versions: “God” as a “universal sense of mystery” with her hands held upward and open as if to show the expanse of this universal (*subjective*) sense of mystery, and god as the “interconnections of everything” with her hands rotating in circular motions again (as above in image 5 depicting “life”). She ended this segment by gesturally acting out her example of the interconnectedness as the “butterfly effect,” drawing an embodied-representation a butterfly’s wings with her hands performing the flapping motions.

I highlight this chain of moments from our co-research session as consequential because, in it, Joiya showcases several features of what the situated analysis of *perezhivanie* and *becoming* particularly focused on intensities and sense, has to offer. Across the stretch of talk, I

interpret marked moments of indexical, affective, interactional, and historical intensity (Prior et al., unpublished manuscript). Joiya managed various indexical grounds of *sense* and *meaning*, key features of *perezhivanie*, as she described losing her experience of the divine and spiritual and she embodied these indexical grounds in key ways through interactional intensities around punctuation and emphasis (e.g., images 1-3); through affective intensities and marked strained and tense facial expressions (arguably across all images); through representing indexical grounds of meaning gesturally (e.g., images 4-9 and 11-16); and, I argue that in this intra-action Joiya reached backward and forward in textured ways, showcasing historical intensities across the entire intra-action as the histories of her experiences animated the moment-to-moment flow of her talk.

I also highlight the representation and analysis portion of the chain of moments from our co-research as another way of *deepening* and *enriching* data representations. While the transcript portion is long, and the organization of images and text is complex, I argue that it affords a far richer glance into the chain of moments, as does the in-text analysis of the embodied intra-action that follows the extended bit of transcript. It showcases how documented narratives afford the space for readers to become deeply immersed in the data utilized as documentable claims, and perhaps to draw their own contiguous judgements from the data.

This section on Joiya's unbecoming Christian and becoming atheist, just like all prior sections, accounts only for a small fraction of her trajectories of *perezhivanie*, and making and re-making key subjective configurations across broader trajectories of becoming. Joiya noted that when she realized she was an atheist, or "almost there," she stopped writing about faith, spirituality, etc., and while we were unable to pinpoint exactly when she began considering herself an atheist, the writings about faith mostly drop off by the end of 2012. This suggests that

Joiya managed her loss of faith and becoming an atheist across the first two years after her diagnosis in 2010. When Joiya logged into her Clergy Project interface, she traced for us when she applied for and was accepted as a member; she was surprised to find that she joined at the very end of 2011, while she was still a believer of sorts, but was unbecoming religious and becoming atheist.<sup>37</sup> While her *pain* was so intense, so marked (as evidenced in the dialogic reach of intensities across many of the figures above where she is showing markedly pained expressions), Joiya reports of her coming to terms with her faith and how she lost it, “that has almost all resolved” and that “Um, it's less of a rub in my life than it was that first couple of years.”

A lingering question that Joiya and I both had regarding her experiences with bipolar and faith across her life, however, is related to *how* those close to her did not notice or suspect anything strange about her behavior while depressed or while manic. The “psych exam” she took in the final stages of becoming a pastor was not extensive. And it was never questioned before through her adolescent years up through college, graduate school, and seminary. She wrote on 20 July 2018 while reflecting on her experiences in a post titled *Trusting Myself*:

No one saw it and thought I should get treatment. I wasn't in an environment that saw mental illness or sometimes even disbelieved in it entirely. It was a spiritual problem, if recognized as a problem, and all that meant was that a person needed to get right with God, confess sins, and do the right thing. Not a helpful response to a serious mental illness. But I digress.

Joiya elaborated on this further in our seventh co-research session (18 November 2019), noting that the experiences of “awe or rapture,” feeling like she was connected to something “bigger”

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<sup>37</sup> She does not describe very much interaction with The Clergy Project across our body of data, however, and she did not foreground the organization as an integral part of her trajectory away from faith.

than herself, and connected closely with her god, was made possible by the bipolar. It “made that more possible because I was already, my experience of the world was (.) so emotional.”

Joiya noted that “having a faith structure to put those experiences [of bipolar euphoria and mania] in context of something helped.” She continued:

Um, but I struggled so much in seminary to make sense of my religious experiences. and to look back and be able to say those were bipolar. Those were, that was mania, or that was depression speaking, (sighs) um, it both makes sense and it (.) makes me sad that (.) my life could have been totally different, and I wouldn't have gone through such crisis if anyone would have had any insight into, maybe these aren't mystical experiences. Maybe these aren't just talking about God.

Recall that in *Mania, O, Mania* (see above), Joiya wrote that “a key part of my faith may in fact be a symptom of mania.” I read these two segments of data on her coming to understand facets of her faith as mania, and her questioning of *how* no one knew, no one suspected that she might be suffering from undiagnosed issues, as part of a dialogic chain of *sense* making across nearly a decade in which her understanding evolved from realizing aspects of her faith might have been symptoms of her mental illness, to distributing it outward to her social worlds: how could those close to her not have known? I share Joiya’s feeling of sadness as her friend, and from knowing the extent of how much more—beyond what has been covered in this chapter—she has gone through. How was it possible for members of a church to fail to see and provide help for mental illness of one of its own, and to simply totally misunderstand and misinterpret clinical signs of mental illness as those close to Joiya did (recall above Joiya noting that “some people I told about it (.1) called it, like a special gift, like a God moment”)? To be evaluative alongside Joiya, her life *could have been* totally different if only someone close to her would have realized.

## Conclusions

In no way have I come close to representing the complexity of Joiya's story, and her rich trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming, of the intensities of the *perezhivanie* and *sense* that marked her moments of consequentiality as she made and re-made subjective configurations. So many developments that would contribute much to these analyses have been left out, set aside for future projects in which I draw from Joiya's extensive case. Nonetheless, the data shared in this chapter are *signs*, and from them I have constructed new sign values (Valsiner, 2003) commensurate with the goals of this chapter as a documented narrative.

While I draw out more conclusions of both cases next chapter, I say a few broad words here. Theoretically/methodologically, I have built on the work of the previous chapter which focused heavily on Vygotsky's (1987) notion of *word sense* as crucial to the development of persons. Here I situated a broader notion of subjective sense and subjective configuration (González Rey, 2009; González Rey et al., 2017; Flear et al., 2017) as key dimensions of *perezhivanie* and *becoming* as an in-road into the situated analysis of *perezhivanie*. Through this lens, I utilized *dialogic analyses* to showcase how Joiya struggled with the "disintegration" of subjective configurations she experienced across much of her life, and how she *became-with* new subjective senses in intra-action with her drastically disrupted lifeworld, showing in part the social, inner-and-out semiotics of subjective senses, subjective configurations, and by degrees, of *perezhivanie*. In conjunction with those analyses, I showed how Joiya did much of this work by utilizing *writing* as a *directive* psychological instrument that was optimal for *sense* making. Over long periods of writing-to-become, Joiya made sense of what used to be *bearers of senses of identity* (her faith, her profession as a pastor; González Rey et al. 2017) and how she forged new *bearers*, particularly as she came to see herself as made up of figured others ("two minds") and

then as simply “bipolar me” when she claimed agency over all the decisions she made across her life when she was managing figured others. But Joiya also became in other ways; she noted, “part of it is I feel like, instead of being a pastor I've become a mental health advocate.” Her blog certainly attests to this. I argue that Joiya’s *healthy voice*, over long, directive trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming *became* the mental health advocate that she is today. In the concluding chapter, I draw out more conclusions based on what both Alex’s and Joiya’s cases, discussing what they have afforded (and can afford) theoretically and methodologically in tracing trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming *dialogically*.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The research reported here aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What trajectories of semiotic becoming led individuals from belief to nonbelief?
2. What roles have literate activities played in individuals' trajectories of semiotic becoming as they shifted from belief to non-belief?

The case studies of Alex and Joiya begin answering these questions by contributing to understandings of the roles of semiotic/literate activity in trajectories of intra-active semiotic becoming of non-belief. They also contribute to scholarship on *becoming*, broadly, by highlighting that it is never a process of just addition—of moments adding up to a (social) life (Lemke, 2000)—but rather that *becomings* are almost always complex, unsettled, emergent, intra-active, and *dynamically nonlinear*. To these ends, I showcased the advantages of my use of the concept of (*un*)becoming to demonstrate that, along with the addition of consequential moments across a lifespan, there are also moments of change, loss, contradiction, turbulence, and *subtraction*, that also play substantial roles in human (and non-human) becoming. I presented documented narratives (Prior, 1994; Roozen & Erickson, 2017; Ware, 2022) of Alex's and Joiya's dynamically nonlinear trajectories of semiotic (*un*)becoming around religious belief and coming to nonbelief across their lifespans. Of course, there was much more to these cases that I will treat in more detail below.

This research also responds to the call for contributions to the literature on lifespan accounts of literate activity (Dippre, 2019) by tracing literate activity (and semiotic activity broadly) across varied scales. In both Alex's and Joiya's cases, I traced retrospective accounts of broadly semiotic activities (e.g., prayer) from childhood onward. In Alex's case I traced her literate (*un*)becomings with texts she created between 2014 and 2018, and then her intra-actions

with those texts via *dialogic animation* in 2019 and 2020. In Joiya’s case, I drew primarily from the literate activity around her blog, *Suddenly Bipolar*, which she worked on for a decade, drawing on many of her posts—but still not scratching the surface of the rich corpus. I also drew on her intra-active *dialogic animations* with many of those texts. Given that semiotic/literate activities serve *directive* purposes (across both cases, but only foregrounded in Joiya’s case) the activities I detailed had direct consequences on Alex’s and Joiya’s psychological processes. Thus, I argue that tracing lifespan literate activities here was fundamentally entangled with the lifespan development of psychological functions (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003) with a focus on psychological “sense” and *subjective sense* (Vygotsky, 1987; González Rey, et al., 2017) across time. Thus, these cases also contributed to those lines of research, particularly framing the lifespan development of psychological functions (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003) as in intra-action with literate activities.

### **Theoretical-methodological conclusions**

In this section, I first describe the major conclusions from my theoretically grounded methods for conducting the sort of co-research I have written up here. Then I describe each case in turn, elaborating on how particular methods were able to accomplish different, but equally interesting results in both. The theoretical-methodological-case-based conclusions are so entangled that I take them all up in interlaced ways throughout this section.

### ***Dialogic Theories***

A framework for *dialogic tracings of lifespan literate activity and (un)becoming*, one seeking to trace the development of whole persons at varied scales, necessitates a complex framework. My framework is dense but open, meandering transdisciplinarily as a concatenation of deeply related concepts that are uncompromisingly *dialogic semiotic*. In the one I synthesized

here, I moved from dialogic semiotics/literate activity to semiotic becoming to intra-active becoming and (un)becoming to ontology of moments to Vygotskian sense/meaning to subjective sense and configuration to directivity to *perezhivanie*. While these all work together very nicely, I struggled with the *feel* of Chapter 2 as sort of a grocery list of concepts. I am confident that the synthesis I have built is generative, and it is something that, post-dissertation, I will tighten as I refine and prepare it for various sorts of publications. I am particularly happy with my end point of the major theory section—reflexivity of theory—of theory as made and remade, configured and reconfigured, foreground and backgrounded cyclically across recursive, iterative cycles of research and analyses that makes all the complexity of concepts as reference frames (Valsiner, 2007) worthwhile. While I say more about it later, I argue that the ways in which I utilized the theoretical framework certainly *deepened* and *enriched* the cases. In Alex’s case, I find the utilization of reference frames around a lifespan becoming first, and then a tight focus on *word sense* around certainty to have been particularly fruitful in showing reflexivity in my reference frames, and the ways in which documented narratives can shift in focus to allow readers to engage with material in disparate, deeper ways. In Joiya’s case, I argue that the tracing of *subjective sense* and *subjective configuration* across three disparate—but concatenated—threads *deepened* and *enriched* her case, particularly around the ways I drew on multiple texts and textual intra-actions to document claims around her trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming. These interpretive theories are empirically discoverable, and served my work, I argue, in doing what I first saw in Paul Prior and Jodi Shipka’s (2003) work—*theorying* method and *methoding* theory in rich ways.

## ***Dialogic Methods***

Critically, my work here has argued that theory is method is theory is method, cycling ever on and on. This is not a new, as Vygotsky was arguing it nearly a century ago, as Prior and Hengst (2010) point out. Thus, as I developed this project, I was careful to keep both my theory and methods tied together as fundamentally dialogic. To these ends, I refined methodological practices for tracing semiotic/literate activity and semiotic becoming dialogically across the lifespan. I developed flexible, theoretically grounded tools to uncover and keep in play the situated complexity of semiotic becoming across lifespan trajectories.

***Dialogic animation.*** I developed what I describe as *dialogic animation*, which encompasses a few related protocols. Most substantive is the read-aloud-think-aloud animation (RATAA); however, sideshadow animations also played roles in the work. I will not redescribe the protocols at length here, but will say that RATAAs, as I have designed them, offer several affordances. Section 1 (see Figure 1, Chapter 2) can investigate the sorts of issues that typical text-based interviews aim broadly for: goals when/for writing, motivations, contexts of/for writing, and writing processes. Investigating these sorts of issues first, before the RATAA proper, reattunes co-researchers to their text. Section 2 of the RATAA, I argue, facilitates intra-active processes of becoming of co-researcher and artifact through the activity: co-researchers co-become again with their texts. Furthermore, the RATAA is fundamentally aligned with Stornaiuolo et al.'s (2017) *inquiry stance*: the categories co-researchers think aloud about are open-ended allowing for emergence as a fundamental part of the data collection. This, I argue, affords a much deeper sense of the semiotic (un)becomings that have emerged in the intra-activity than typical text-based interviews might allow. As Koven (2014) has encouraged considering how methodological practices may reflect “broadly distributed ideologies and

practices” (p. 501), I argue that my sense of *breaking the interview* emerges nicely as a tool for creating *dialogic openings*: making emergent spaces for co-researchers to engage with the *what else?* and the *what’s changed?* across trajectories of mangled, entangled literate engagements that make trajectories of semiotic becoming *so* fruitful a lens for writing research, both during and *beyond* sessions.

For this work, RATAAs uncovered an exceptional amount of multi-layered, rich data. For instance, Alex’s RATAA of her Word Picture yielded data—and deep explosions of semiosis in the intra-action of the protocol—around her *entire* believing life, and I was able to plot resonances (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) from the RATAA of the Word Picture across the entire lifespan trajectory of her semiotic (un)becoming that I traced in Chapter 3. This is *significant* because the text itself is only 235 words. RATAAs also played a key role in uncovering Alex’s shifting *sense* of certainty/uncertainty, which point to the fact that the protocol is not just useful for tracing lifespan literate activity, but also, again, lifespan development of psychological functions (Valsiner & Connelly, 2003; del Rio & Álvarez, 2007). RATAAs also deeply advanced the co-research Joiya and I undertook together in several ways. Like with Alex, Joiya’s RATAAs helped trace lifespan literate activities, writing processes, and trajectories of becoming in nuanced ways as Joiya intra-acted with her texts. But Joiya’s RATAAs show the embodied consequences of RATAAs, and the promise of *multimodal* analyses (Norris, 2004; Olinger, 2020). That is, not only did they provide key insight into the dialogic histories of becoming, the ways in which meanings have traveled and changed across time, in which psychological processes like subjective sense have traveled and changed across time, etc., but Joiya’s RATAAs, taken together with the video-recorded data, show the need for tracing embodied activity that co-researchers perform through RATAAs. As demonstrated throughout Chapter 4,

in many instances, Joiya's gestures, expressions, etc., shed light on the interactional, indexical, affective, historical intensities that came to the intra-action through the co-becoming of person-activity-artifact through the RATAA.

Sideshadow animations of texts are built around the same aims as RATAAs and share the same sorts of affordances; however, sideshadowing is completed on co-researchers' own time and they afford co-researchers the time to spread their thinking out transcontextually (rather than being completed in a single co-research session as are RATAAs). I did not draw from sideshadowing as much as I intended in this dissertation, but the benefits of the approach are just as significant as RATAAs. For instance, the rich story of Alex's utilizing conversion practices in a sandbox—*at 4 years old*—was originally a sideshadow Alex had simply mentioned in passing. As I noted in Chapter 3, we discussed and pressed on that story several times across our two years (so far) of co-research. I note here that Joiya did not complete sideshadow protocols for the project, preferring the active thinking-aloud processes of the RATAA. This is, in part, because of ECT, as I discussed in Chapter 4, and various medicinal cocktails: Joiya often had lots of trouble reading and making sense of texts. When she could, she read them aloud in her RATAA sessions, but there were two points across our 10 sessions during which I read her texts aloud and she would stop me to react to her texts, drawing from the steps of the RATAA protocol. These are the sorts of flexibilities necessary in methodological approaches and in co-research sessions.

These methodological tools are grounded in the dialogic semiotics that I sketch and that facilitate rich probes for lifespan becoming. I argue also that *dialogic animation* protocols have the potential for use in a variety of research contexts in and beyond writing studies. One reason for this is that I conceive of them as key tools in bringing activities around *genesis* and *disruption* (Vygotsky, 1997; Latour, 2005; Smith and Prior, 2020) to our methodological

practices. I demonstrated this through Alex's case, particularly, by showing how through the genesis of new co-research activities, multiple flows of semiosis were generated (e.g., her likening of her broken relationship with her god to that of her husband and how this realization figured for her years after both had dissolved). But *genesis* and *disruption*, too, are built into the methods themselves as a single, multisided coin: by *disrupting* typical reading practices (i.e., pausing to think aloud, or pausing to write sideshadow elaborations) buried or new senses and meanings come to light through processes of *genesis-as-disruption*. These practices show that constellations of meaning-making become visible through methodological practices that elicit *genesis* and *disruption* (see also Smith and Prior, 2020).

***Dialogic Analyses: Openings, deepenings, enrichment.*** My fundamentally iterative and recursive three-phase analytical procedure (described in Chapter 2) is broadly useful in that it reinforces the necessity of a theoretical and methodological fusion. Theory is crucial to building an interpretive analytic framework, and specific methods aligned with theory for collecting data around and tracking those frameworks need to be flexible (as above with Alex's case with dialogic animation and tracing word sense, and with Joiya's case in tracing multimodal trajectories and intensities around subjective sense, subjective configuration, *perezhivanie*, and becoming).

Dialogic analysis procedures afford the possibilities for finding the intersections between particular cases, theory, and methods that support *dialogic openings*; *deepening* and *enrichment* of threads (the emergent chains of resonance across texts, events, people, activities, etc.); and *acrossness* (how particular stories, practices, and artifacts transform across—but also facilitate—trajectories). I demonstrated these conceptual phenomena through dialogic analyses in both cases. In Alex's case, *dialogic openings*, were facilitated in several key ways—both through

research practices for data collection and through analytical/interpretive procedures. First off, the RATAA of her Word Picture, methodologically, helped me to open up the biographical trajectory she began telling me in our first meeting. It prompted the *what else?* and the *what's changed?* in deeper ways than had our first, more traditional semi-structured interview. That is, we *deepened* and *enriched* that storying of her life she was performing through a *genesis* (Vygotsky, 1997; Smith & Prior, 2020; Ware, 2022) of research practice. The method enriched the subsequent writing and analyses because, for instance, it afforded new stories, particularly around Alex's generational lineage of evangelical Christianity and her becoming pregnant at 17, both of which became exceptionally important for the lifeworld perspective she constructed across her life. I can't say that I would not have had discussions about these things with Alex had we not dialogically animated the Word Picture in our second session, but I can say that it foregrounded them early and then afforded us the opportunity to home in on them across the rest of our co-research sessions in ways that *deepened* and *enriched* our talks and the wider documented narrative constructed in Chapter 3. Dialogic animation also afforded the *deepening*, and *enrichment* of threads *across* texts, talk, and co-research intra-activities regarding her ever-shifting psychological word sense around "certainty." I also enriched the threads traced through Alex's data through the documented narrative practice that utilized her Word Picture in my interpretive/analytical work as a text-topography on which I plotted resonances from across many of our 15 co-research sessions. The story, traced across our 15 co-research sessions, was woven also through the first documented narrative that chronicled our work and served similar functions of deepening and enriching the threads of the documented narrative. I argue also that the interpretive dialogic analysis practices around word sense, particularly drawing from Vygotsky's (1987) work, (i.e., coupling her talk-as-text and texts she'd written about certainty

with notes I had taken on Vygotsky's work in *writing-as-analysis*) opened me to the key insight that I made near the end of the chapter: that she had described her faith and her certainty of it utilizing container metaphors, things she could be *inside* of, and that the *defusion of sense content*, to overturn Vygotsky's phrase, left her in the "cold and open." This is the sort of *enrichment* of stories in documented narratives that makes my dialogic methods, analyses, and writing practices so generative in tracing trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming.

The dialogic analyses with Joiya's case also show the affordances of practices that support *dialogic openings*, *deepening*, and *enrichment* of narratives. While the co-research framework was fundamental to the *dialogic openings* in both focal cases presented here, I highlight it as crucial to Joiya's case, as not only did we forge a co-research relationship of trust that facilitated a level of comfort between us that allowed me to ethically tell Joiya's story here, but our co-research relationship was crucial in Joiya's opening up to the extent that she did with me about her mental illness<sup>38</sup>, as well as about her becoming an atheist given her disability status still supported through her former church.

In Chapter 4, I worked with an already exceptionally rich corpus of several hundred blog posts Joiya had written across a decade. But the sorts of phenomena around semiotic becoming that I have highlighted (e.g., the varied ways in which co-researchers *re-direct dialogic histories* in emergent spaces) would not have been as rich had Joiya and I not dialogically animated posts both she and I chose, and traced threads *together*. Our work in identifying and then tracing what Joiya came to highlight as "disease voice" (also named variously as "Mind 2" and "the disease") was a particular dialogic opening that led to *enriched* analyses of data, and the broader documented narrative that grew out of those analyses. Had Joiya not noted as part of a RATAA

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<sup>38</sup> Granted, Joiya had a blog all about her bipolar, but it's another thing altogether to put that blog under a research microscope.

that the “disease voice [was] talking” we may not have had the affordance of *deepening* our look at her blog to find the ways she was creating figured others in the distribution of her symptoms around bipolar in varied ways in her inner conscious experience and her broader social world.

That Joiya allowed for the use of her visage from the video-record of our data also enriched our documented narrative. The *dialogic openings* afforded by the dialogic animation practices added extra layers in conjunction with analyzing embodied intra-actions (Olinger, 2020). For instance, not only were Joiya’s multi-semiotic utterances illuminating in the ways in which gestures enrich her talk, but the analyses of her embodied intra-actions shed light on the *acrossness* of her *pain*, that affect is, too, dialogic. This finding is showcased across several of the figures in Chapter 4, but I highlight particularly here the ways in which Joiya seemed to feel residua of pain as she was describing how her struggles with pain ultimately led her to becoming an atheist in our work with *Trigger: Church Diaries*. Joiya’s case demonstrated *acrossness*, broadly, too, as the stories she told about her life and the texts she intra-acted with while doing so across trajectories of participation and becoming-with the co-research pointed to the fundamental importance of tracing how stories and artifacts, particularly, register embodied, affective, indexical, and historical intensities that travel and change *across* a lifespan in striking ways. Her blog, then, a decade-long project, and her dialogic animations of sections of it often nearly a decade after writing particular pieces, afforded an invaluable *enrichment* of the *acrossness* characteristic of becoming. Resonance (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017) patterns made acrossness visible in ways that strengthen the argument for trying together theory and method so closely.

***Dialogic analyses: Writing as method.*** Dialogic analyses also foreground researcher *writing practices*. What roles does writing play at all stages of a co-research project? How can

our writing practices facilitate rich theoretical-methodological engagements with data that remain open to the emergent, dialogic nature of the research? To the first question, I argue that *writing researchers* must acknowledge the roles of their writing practices, particularly in their analytical procedures and in the ways in which they write up data. Data are, after all, collections of *signs* that co-researchers re-assemble into artifacts holding *sign values* motivated by their aims, purposes, and goals as co-researchers in conjunction with, as pointed in the preface the Chapter 3, all the co-authorship and chains of writing and response characteristic of the production of academic writing. However, I have demonstrated *writing-as-analysis* procedures as one example of foregrounding the role of writing in methods. To the second question, I have argued and demonstrated in this dissertation a case for *documented narratives* that can shift depending on the reference frame (Valsiner, 2007) that emerges as necessary through the data at hand. I also demonstrated how texts, like Alex's word picture, can become text-topographies onto which points of resonance can be plotted.

Documented narratives are flexible and adaptable to the fact that methodologically tracing trajectories is as complex and nonlinear as the trajectories themselves. Stories do not necessarily unfold sequentially. Researchers need to be flexible in tracing dialogic threads multi-directionally across artifacts, transcripts, etc., often nonlinearly and non-sequentially. The documented claims drawn in both chapters showcase a multi-directional analysis, skipping between and across interview sessions, out of order, but the data, as collections of signs, are re-represented around resonances (Stornaiuolo, et al., 2017) as a documented narratives in both cases. Critical to documented narratives—and to dialogically tracing trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming—is that they are not always about the construction of a linear, biographical progression of moments adding up, but that they can serve to facilitate messier analyses of the

multiple, overlapping moments of consequentiality across lifespan scales through plotting dialogic resonances crucial to the acrossness of *becoming*. Linear trajectories, which are easy to engage with, can surreptitiously sneak in a variety of issues that cloud the fundamentally emergent, historical, indexical, affective, laminated character of the intra-active becoming of all things human and non-human (Barad, 2007). These sorts of ethnographic analyses, though often against the genre expectations of academic publication venues, need to be more widely embraced, as *we do not want to reinscribe the linear*<sup>39</sup>.

## **The Cases**

### *Alex's Case*

My dialogic tracing of Alex's case (drawing on the theoretical-methodological approach to dialogic semiotics) suggests entangled theoretical and methodological conclusions. Theoretically, her case requires asking not only "How do *moments* add up to a life" (p. 273), but "how do moments of change, loss, contradiction, and reconfiguration *seem* to subtract core elements of a life across the lifespan?" For Alex, several richly semiotic moments intra-acted turbulently, helping her unmake and remake a lifeworld perspective. Her individual becoming interlaced with the becoming of literate activities she employed, particularly reading and writing about faith and certainty/uncertainty. When she began to lose faith, she turned to literate activities in hopes that she could prevent her unbecoming-with-faith; she discovered, instead, reading, writing, and talking over texts led her in the opposite direction, toward losing faith and becoming a nonbeliever. Then, in the co-research, Alex's becoming emerged further through intra-action with the text-artifacts through dialogic animations. So how should we assess her

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<sup>39</sup> I am grateful to Bruce Kovanen for helping me articulate this, as well as several other key insights across this work.

writing-to-become activities? From a teleological perspective, they did not achieve her initial goal; however, she now judges the outcome to be quite positive.

Alex's case also sheds light on lifespan semiotic becoming and lifespan development of psychological processes around sense. Dynamically nonlinear processes facilitated both agential addition and loss through intra-action across years of semiotic/literate engagements. Alex pointed out above that "so many intersecting trajectories" across her life contributed to her "deconversion journey" and that "it's not just one isolated thing." Rather, through intra-action with semiotic/literate activities, she slowly transformed core elements of her belief into nonbelief. Her unbecoming-with-faith was a becoming-secular, and the psychological sense of certainty was reconfigured to a becoming-uncertain.

### ***Joiya's Case***

While I glossed the major findings of Alex's case above, I take a slightly different approach to summarizing my work with Joiya, opting to argue more broadly about what her case *did* to my dialogic semiotic approach to tracing lifespan trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming (I provide a similar gloss of Joiya's case in her chapter). Joiya's case was the most difficult academic work I have ever undertaken. As I noted in her chapter, it took me the better part of two years to get a handle on the sorts of documented narratives that I could write in the form of a single chapter. Due to this, I see her chapter as a planning ground for several other possible projects.

Joiya's case was simultaneously fascinating and challenging because I blended numerous approaches and reference frames throughout the chapter as I attempted to create arcs, threads, and trajectories, all lines of becoming that would make sense together and separately. I foregrounded ontogenetic timescales as I traced a short biographical account of her early life

with faith through her becoming a pastor—and the ways in which, early on, symptoms of her bipolar diagnosis (euphoria and mania particularly) might have influenced her spiritual becoming in both professional and private senses. But I also foregrounded ontogenetic scales in slightly disparate ways, telling a documented narrative of various threads of semiotic becoming that were foregrounded as important in the corpus of her blog, but also in talk as they emerged in our co-research sessions.

These threads were organized as triggers; bipolar mania and figured others; and, in keeping with the original aims and goals of the wider project, her (un)becoming religious and becoming atheist. These threads were *inseparable* from one another, and multiple, overlapping moments of consequentiality across disparate timescales intra-acted in a constant state of turbulence as Joiya struggled to re-make her subjective senses and subjective configurations along complex trajectories of *perezhivanie* and *becoming*. I make arguments for documented narratives as able to keep and manage the complexity of data while drawing out narrative arcs for readers to make sense of, and my approach to writing Joiya's case did just that. The threads became their own sorts of reference frames that afforded analyses able to shift back-and-forth in time, while not obscuring the fact that all the phenomena I describe in Chapter 4 were happening at the same time. The dialogic product, then, is a fundamentally messy, and dynamically nonlinear tracing of Joiya's trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming. Her case pushed the boundaries of my dialogic analytical approaches, helped me forge new techniques of writing-and/as-analysis, and helped me conceiving of more creative, critical ways to represent Joiya's co-research in future projects.

## Conclusions

I first want to acknowledge that the cases I presented in this work are *dialogic products* of long streams of co-becoming. I co-became in various ways through the (co-)research process by participating in so many dialogic histories with committee members, colleagues, and beyond. But most importantly, I co-became alongside co-researchers across more than two years of situated ethnographic work. I state again that this work is a dialogic product of my work, particularly with Lon (see opening vignette), Alex, and Joiya, and they are as much authors of this research as myself, for without them, my work would of course be *defused of sense*.

But I reach outward here, also, to the 17 other co-researchers whose work was not utilized in the dissertation. The nature of this work, dialogically tracing trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming from belief to non-belief of former clergy people, necessitates that there won't be a single "typical" case because the co-researchers all come from very different places, different faiths, and different perspectival alignments. This can be seen in the differences between Alex and Joiya's stories: while they both came from rigidly evangelical backgrounds, and while they both lost faith across their lives, the roads to losing faith were wildly disparate. This is what makes ethnographic work so rewarding. They also both drew on complexes of literate activity along their trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming. To these ends, their cases are representative of the broader cases in the full study.

In all my co-research, there were only two co-researchers that did not foreground writing as important to their overall trajectories of semiotic (un)becoming. That, in itself, is an interesting finding regarding the roles literate activity has in shaping (un)becoming. The catch to this is that I don't buy it from either co-researcher. But those are two of my thinnest cases (to date) in terms of data collection. One, a white, middle-aged male "preacher's kid" who had an

upbringing he equated to “24-hour indoctrination in the Bible,” did not foreground the roles of literate activity in his (un)becoming. But he noted that as an adolescent he was the creator of a Yahoo forum with the sole purpose of “debating unbelievers.” Like Lon, he had several “nagging questions,” for instance: “Why did our ‘loving’ God command so much killing of innocents in the Old Testament? Why did he sanction rape and slavery? Why did he *ever* take a murderous stance against homosexuality, let alone carry it through to the new covenant?” These questions grew out of his engaging with biblical texts. That is to say *through* literate activity. I note here, also, that these questions are drawn from a 5-page autobiography of his believing life that he wrote for the project *before* participating.

The other case I noted was of an elderly woman, formerly a Carmelite nun (Martha, a pseudonym). She did not foreground writing and literate activity in her semiotic (un)becoming, but did describe semiotic practices, cultural architectures for mind and agency (del Rio & Álvarez, 1995; 2007), that she drew on in becoming a nun. Like Alex, *prayer* was foundational in her trajectories to becoming a nun:

Everything started with "place yourself in the presence of God." And to connect with him, um, everything is done through a prayer and we tried to, would try to remember to actually verbalize it mentally, uh, “I’m serving you Christ,” and this is, this is, the whole of your life is to become holy, to become perfect, to, it was mystical kind of a thing...ours was a very mystical, personal (.2) to be united with, with God at all times and to be absorbed completely by him.

But like Alex, Martha’s prayer practices were disrupted. As a nurse in a New York City psychiatric ward in late 1950s/early 1960s, she found herself unable to reconcile why a god would allow patients with mental illness to suffer in the ways she saw:

And these same people, the way they were treated, was, it was pathetic at that time, like I said, the medications were meant to just tranquilize them. So they were either raving, or they were tranquilized. And um, in between the behaviors and some of the um, some of the side effects of the medication that they were on like Thorazine had very terrible neurological effects. Behavioral things. People were licking the walls, and, you know, had these rituals, like before they could talk they had to turn three times to the right and towards the left and stand on their head or whatever. But it was very ritualistic behavior and it was so pathetic (.1). I was, um, I couldn't, I just couldn't grasp what this whole thing about this kind of sickness. I saw, I saw surgical things and I saw deformed babies, and I saw cancer and all that, but this was a whole different thing because in religion (.2) the (.1) person can offer it up, that's the whole offer up your sickness and somehow that atones God, but I believed it at the time. You know, your suffering from cancer makes God feel better, whatever, you know the whole what I'm trying to say, the atonement thing. But these patients could not do that. These patients didn't even know who they were or where they were and, it really knocked me for a loop. (.1) I couldn't reconcile that there was a God watching all this that could help...I would go to the chapel to pray for individual people who were just so (.1) so afflicted. And, um, I actually would, I, I remember this conversation because I picture the Sistine Chapel ceiling, and the (.1) the creator God, touching Adam's finger kind of thing, and I remember trying to bargain with God, saying "you don't have to do anything really sensational. I'm not asking you to grow an amputated limb. But you could just do it so carefully, just take that same finger and put it on the forehead and they can clear up like that." How beautiful would that be? you know?

Over years of these experiences, Martha saw that prayer wasn't working in her world. She gradually lost faith, beginning with the *disruption* (Vygotsky, 1997; Smith and Prior, 2020) of her prayer practices. So, while Martha and I have not had a chance to meet more than twice<sup>40</sup>, her loss of faith was predicated on broadly semiotic reasons like Alex's experiences, and I suspect with more co-research I'll uncover a suite of literate activities that she utilized in facilitating her trajectories of coming away from faith. I have lingered long on those two cases because they were, at first glance, the two outliers who did not foreground literate activity. However, I am willing to bet that literate activities played larger roles in their trajectories than they recognized and to answer that will take my drawing engaging in more dialogic semiotic co-research with them.

Across all other cases, literate activity and writing have been foregrounded in extraordinary ways. In one case, a former pastor's engagements with the natural world through his love of the outdoors in conjunction with his love for reading, writing about, and now teaching romantic authors like Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and particularly, Muir, came away from faith in an entangled complex of literate activity. In another case, a pastor's engagements with her undergraduate and graduate schoolwork, and seminary curricula instigated a troubling sense of the patriarchy as shot through all Christian doctrine. She found herself teaching a class to adolescents and finding that the values she was reinforcing were becoming deeply divergent from her shifting beliefs, and that she was "chillin on top of millennia of oppressive systems." Her becoming an atheist was also primarily facilitated by literate engagements, and she wrote lots of poetry, letters to friends and family, and more as she made the decision to leave her life in

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<sup>40</sup> I spoke to Martha in February of 2022, 2.5 years after our second meeting, and she wants to begin participating in the project again, whenever I am ready for more data collection.

the church behind. A final brief example I will note is a pastor whose deep love of philosophy led him to a deep interest in the origins and working of our universe. He noted:

There was a time that I read about...I know that there was sinking feeling in my stomach when I first read this, and it was about the idea of multiple universes (.) and that was the thing, you know, this whole thing. I think we will talk about the straw that breaks the camel's back. It was exactly that effect. It was exactly that effect. I remember that I had a sinking feeling in the bottom, the bottom of my stomach. And for me, it's like, um, um, faith has always been about being, has always had something to do with being humble like being humble towards the Lord, the maker of the universe like, like we are just nothing, we are just people, that are just, just small, small things in the universe. But then when, as I grew older it got bigger and bigger. I heard more and more about how there were billions of galaxies with billions of stars and galaxies, and it was becoming harder and harder to imagine it was, like, a god who made all this, and as so my whole sense of humility was shifted. But then when, when I heard about multiple universes, I remember, I remember that feeling in the pit of my stomach, like I was like, I thought I'm trying too hard. You know? I'm trying too hard to keep believing. It doesn't make sense. It's not necessary... I've lost my grip on the idea that is necessary for there to be a maker, you know?

A complicated trajectory led him to pursue a PhD in cultural studies, and two years ago he defended his dissertation taking up questions of the historical Jesus, drawing on several disciplines, but, interestingly for our co-research, *Bakhtin* and dialogism. Since, he has published multiple articles across varied disciplines, and is still writing more.

While I only mentioned in brief five of the cases that did not make it into the dissertation, they serve as a window into some of the other co-research that is ongoing, and underscore that semiotic/literate activity is shot through all the cases I am tracing in co-research. I also want to acknowledge that, while I did not write up 17 of my other cases in this dissertation, they are, too, part of the dialogic project that has become, on long trajectories of research, reading, thinking, writing, and being, this dissertation, and they have all shaped my thinking, and sharpened my research practices in invaluable ways. As of February 2022, I have corresponded with all co-researchers who participated in this project, and they have all responded with interest in continuing with data collection and tracing their cases in co-research—so I have my work cut out for me there in the coming years. But I also have a massive data set currently, and a large publication agenda around which I have only just begun seeing the possibilities.

### *An ending*

Taking an intra-active, dialogic semiotic approach to lifespan becoming, which includes the dialogic semiotic methods and analyses used throughout this work, makes it clear that semiotic becomings encompass far more than addition across lives, that they are also fraught with loss and with nonlinear, dynamic, unanticipated pathways of change. Studies of lifespan becoming would benefit from adopting theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches (like dialogic animations and dialogic analyses) that can be used to trace such complex, ongoing change across times/spaces. Critical for such frameworks and approaches are conceptualizations of becoming that destabilize settled ontologies of people, practices, and text-artifacts and support tracing how becomings of persons, literate activities, and text-artifacts (along with a host of other things) emerge through entangled intra-action. The intra-active dialogic semiotics offered here has been critical in tracing these and other case studies in the broader research project as well,

particularly for recognizing richly complex, densely entangled flows of becoming that make lives across ontologies of consequential moments. For researchers, dialogically and iteratively re-engaging with those flows in the here-and-now entails staying open to and pushing *deeper* into the unexpected power and consequences of moments, the tangling and untangling of nonlinear pathways across a lifespan and grappling with *how* to represent those pathways, responsibly, ethically, and complexly.

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## APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

### **Pathways of Becoming: Writing, Reading, Speaking and Thinking Non-Belief**

#### **Possible Online Contact Script**

(Paul Prior, RPI; Ryan Ware, Investigator)

The following script may be used to recruit participants via email or as a post to an online forum.

Hello,

My name is Ryan Ware and I am a PhD student in Writing Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am currently recruiting participants for a research study – to be conducted online over Zoom or a similar video conferencing service – which will likely become part of my final dissertation, tentatively titled “**Pathways of Becoming: Writing, Reading, Speaking and Thinking Non-Belief.**”

The study aims to investigate people's pathways into the identity of a non-believer in the supernatural and the role of language and literacy events and practices in those pathways of becoming a non-believer. I take literacy events and practices in a very broad sense, seeing them as not only reading and writing, but also related speaking, listening, talking to others, participation in social groups (online or in-person), and institutions and organizations.

You will find attached an informed consent form that explains in more detail the goals of the research, and the types of participation that I might ask you to consider. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you might have.

Best,

Ryan Ware

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTS



Ryan Ware, PhD student  
Department of English and Center for Writing Studies  
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### **Pathways of Becoming: Writing, Reading, Speaking and Thinking Non-Belief**

#### **Informed Consent**

**Purpose of the study:** You are invited to participate in a study that aims to investigate people's pathways into the identity of a non-believer in the supernatural and the role of language and literacy events and practices in those pathways of becoming a non-believer. I, Ryan Ware, am a PhD student in Writing Studies, and I am conducting this study as part of my dissertation under the direction of Dr. Paul Prior. As a secular humanist, I am deeply interested in non-belief; as a researcher of writing, literacy practices and language, I am deeply interested in how people become who they are through their everyday practices of reading, writing, talking to others, participation in social groups, institutions and organizations. With these things in mind, I am interested in investigating with you:

- the different pathways through which parts of your identity related to non-belief emerge and become important parts of your life and how you perceive and act in the world;
- the roles that literacy events and practices – taken very broadly as activities rooted in reading, writing, thinking, listening, conversing with others, etc. – play in the development of facets of your identity related to non-belief; and,
- what sorts of institutional factors (any support groups, organizations, etc. in which you participate or have participated) might support or facilitate pathways of identity development around non-belief.

To these ends, I hope you will share with me detailed stories, histories, images, copies of documents that you have written or interacted with, etc. Through discourse and ethnographic analysis, I will aim to trace as fully as possible your pathways the identity of a non-believer. Particularly, I am interested in the roles that literacy events – situations in which people write, read, talk and act – help you *become* who you are and develop important parts of your identity. That said, the overall goals of the research are to construct richer understanding of the links between literacy events and practices and identity development around non-belief as well as to trace pathways that facilitate non-belief through institutions and organizations and map places that help or helped you forge identities as non-believers in varying ways.

**What the study entails:** Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may stop participation at any time. If you agree to participate, we will negotiate what texts and writing practices to

explore and what events and practices you see as related to your pathways into an identity that included non-belief, as well as what we discuss in general. If there are other parts of your life and everyday activities that you find important to the development of your identity as a non-believer (for instance, participation in reading, discussion or other various types of social groups, online forums, etc.), and if you wish to share and discuss these experiences, we may explore those as well. In short, I will ask you to consider the following types of participation:

- *Interviews* – I will ask you to participate in at least one and probably a series of individual interviews (between 30 and 90 minutes) online utilizing a video conferencing software that you're comfortable using. I will ask at the start of each interview for your consent to audio and/or video record it. If we are not near enough geographically to meet in person, I will provide you with a "Waiver of Documentation of Consent" electronically, and will collect your consent by video-or-audio recorded oral consent at the beginning of each interview.
- *Documenting writing and writing practices* – I will also ask to collect and discuss particular texts you've written or are writing. I am thinking about what counts as writing very broadly here, which includes notes on readings, journal writing (if you're comfortable sharing), annotations in texts (religious or otherwise), speeches, posts to online forums, fiction, poetry, essays, etc. To better understand your writing and literacy practices, I may also ask you to represent through drawings or diagrams the chains of events and contexts that have played a role in shaping your writing and thinking; I may also ask that you think-aloud, recording yourself talking through your thinking *as* you write or read a text. I may ask you to do some reflective writing. Should you choose to participate in these varying capacities, we will use them as material for discussion in interview sessions.
- *Documenting institutional or other important activities* – As mentioned above, I am interested in other activities in which you might involve yourself that are in some way related to your identity development as a non-believer, or related to your life as a non-believer professionally or otherwise. Such activities could include participation in formal or informal support groups and meetings that are officially part of such groups, reading or discussion groups, but could also include your participation in other events like conventions, academic (or otherwise) talks or workshops, participation in online forums, etc. We will negotiate what and how we might include such things as part of the research.
- *Focus groups*– If you participate in regular interactions with others in groups focused on non-belief, I might ask for your permission to contact these people for the purpose of a focus group interview to be conducted online via Zoom, or a preferred video conferencing service.

The wide range of options and choices for your participation in this research project is intentional. To understand your stories, your pathways of development, and your practices, I anticipate that there may be complex and idiosyncratic elements of those stories. Given the personal nature of identity development, I also want to ensure that you have choices and control over what you share and how what you share is used. Finally, given that I am interested in constructing rich case studies that relate your histories with writing, literacy, and language as they relate to your life as a non-believer, I hope that you will consider participating periodically over an extended period of time (perhaps a year or longer).

**Publication and Identifiability:** I may use the findings from this project in print or electronic publications (my dissertation, journal articles, books, or book chapters), in conference presentations, in classroom teaching, and in professional development activities. With your permission, I may quote from and/or describe our meetings, your answers to particular questions, or texts you've made available for our discussion. With your specific permission, I may also use still images from or play back sections of video recorded sessions in written, electronic, and oral presentations of the research. It is likely that you could be recognized by people who know you if they hear or read particular pieces of the research.

To limit your identifiability, I can use a pseudonym if you would like me to (and would then ask that you choose a pseudonym that I could use in all drafts and final reports of the research). However, you also have the right to choose to be referred to by your actual name and to assert your authorship of your texts and/or talk. If a text that you make available for the research are published texts, then I would need to use your real name in reports in order to be able to refer to or quote from that text.

Whether you are referred to by pseudonym or not, to protect your privacy, I will store all data in a locked space or on password protected devices and media. I will not share your raw data with anyone save for my director, Dr. Paul Prior. However, there may be occasions when the University of Illinois may need access to records to ensure that university approved procedures and protocols are being followed.

**Your Rights, Benefits, and Concerns:** You may benefit from the project in that you will be actively reflecting on your writing, literacy and language practices, and, perhaps, how these relate broadly to non-belief. However, the primary benefit of this research is to further our understanding of how writing and literacy events relate to stories of becoming – and unbecoming – for people, and how prior contexts and specific histories, language practices, and contexts play a role in your identity development. The research aims to result in practical, methodological and theoretical contributions to the field.

The biggest risk in your participation is the possibility that you might be recognized by others in the research reports. However, the safeguards described above in the section, “Publication and Identifiability” minimize these risks, and **you will have a high level of control over what data you make available and how that data can be used.**

Again, your participation is entirely voluntary. You may stop participating or withdraw at any time after signing this form should you so choose.

**Consent:**

I agree to participate in this study. (Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_)

**Use of my name:** In general, as an author, you have the right to claim authorship or request a pseudonym to be used for this research. If some of the texts you provide are public, I would need to use your real name in order to be able to quote from or refer to them in relation to interview or other data. Considering these options, please check the option you would prefer:

I would like to be identified by my real name in relation to any of the data collected (Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_) **OR** I would prefer to use a pseudonym (Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_).

**Optional – preferred pseudonym (if desired):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent to Use Data:** At the beginning of each interview or meeting, we will negotiate the types of video and/or audio recording we will do, as well as whether I can retain any texts that we might discuss.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (Please Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Sincerely,

Ryan Ware, PhD Student  
207-314-2465  
[rmware2@illinois.edu](mailto:rmware2@illinois.edu)

Paul Prior, Professor  
217-333-3024  
[pprior@illinois.edu](mailto:pprior@illinois.edu)

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me, Ryan Ware (207-314-2465 or [rmware2@illinois.edu](mailto:rmware2@illinois.edu)), or Dr. Paul Prior (217-333-3024; [pprior@illinois.edu](mailto:pprior@illinois.edu)). If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu).



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**Pathways of Becoming: Writing, Reading, Speaking and Thinking Non-Belief**

**Participant Tape Release**

As part of the longitudinal research I agreed to participate in, I \_\_\_\_\_,  
 am agreeing to allow the following video and/or audio tapes to be used for the research project.  
 This video and/or audio tape was made on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ at (give location or  
 format) \_\_\_\_\_. It is an interaction during which (brief description of  
 interaction) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

Specifically, I agree:

- that my verbal comments from this tape may be quoted or paraphrased in publications or oral presentations (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_).
- that the videotaped record of this tape may be excerpted as still photographs in publications or oral presentations (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_) and may be selectively replayed in electronic publications or publications or oral presentations (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_).
- that having provided the researchers with a text I have published, **I may be identified by my real name** in relation to any of data on this tape (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_).

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (Signature **or** oral consent) (date)

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me, Ryan Ware (207-314-2465 or [rmware2@illinois.edu](mailto:rmware2@illinois.edu)), or Dr. Paul Prior (217-333-3024; [pprior@illinois.edu](mailto:pprior@illinois.edu)). If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu).



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**Interview Tape Release**

As part of the longitudinal research I agreed to participate in, I agree that this interview on (give date) \_\_\_\_\_ can be audio- and/or video tape-recorded (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_) and that my comments from this interview may be quoted or paraphrased in publications or oral presentations (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_).

I also agree that the videotaped record of this interview may be excerpted as still photographs in publication or oral presentations (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_) and the audio or videotaped record may be selectively replayed in electronic publications or oral presentations (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_).

If applicable: As part of my general decision, I agree that **I may be identified by my real name** in relation to any of the data I have provided throughout the interview (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_).

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (signature **or** oral consent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (date)

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me, Ryan Ware (207-314-2465 or [rmware2@illinois.edu](mailto:rmware2@illinois.edu)), or Dr. Paul Prior (217-333-3024; [pprior@illinois.edu](mailto:pprior@illinois.edu)). If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu).



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**One-time Participant Release**

Today, during audio- and/or video-taping for a research project, you were included in a segment of the recorded interaction. The researcher is seeking your permission to use that segment for research and analysis and presentations.

**Purpose of the research:** The purpose of this research project is to learn more about the links between writing and reading (and literacy and language practices broadly) and the everyday lives of non-believing clergy or former clergy members.

**What you are agreeing to do:** If you sign this release, you are agreeing to allow the following video and/or audio tapes of you to be used in this research project. The video and/or audio tape interaction was made on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ at (give location) \_\_\_\_\_ . It is an interaction where you and the participant(s) of the study were (brief description of interaction)

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**Participation is voluntary:** Your agreement to have these tapes included in this study is completely voluntary.

**How the results of this research will be used:** The results of this research may be published in journal articles, electronic publications, or books and may be presented in professional conferences or lectures. Although a different name will be used for you, the researcher may quote from or describe the recorded presentations. The research may use still images from videotapes or selectively play sections of the recorded interaction in oral presentations or in electronic publications. Thus, even with a different name, you might be recognized by someone reading or hearing a report of this research.

The researcher will do several things to safeguard your identity during the analysis and presentation of this research, including using a pseudonym for you, labeling the tapes and documents with the pseudonym rather than your real name, and keeping the tapes in a private office when not being used. The recorded tape will not be used for any purposes other than those of this research and it will not be shared with others for other purposes. However, there may be

occasions when the University of Illinois may need access to records to ensure that university approved procedures and protocols are being followed.

**Benefits for you:** You will not receive any payment for your time or contribution to this research project. It is possible that the information obtained through this study will be helpful to the primary participant in this research.

**Consent to participate:** I have read the above information about this research project. I have also had the opportunity to talk to Ryan Ware about this study and to have him answer my questions about how the video tapes will be used.

I am volunteering to participate at the level checked below. I have received a copy of this form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to let the audio and/or video tape of me be used fully as outlined above.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to let the video tape of me be used in analysis, but I do not want transcripts or videotaped segments of me to be used in any research reports. Other segments on the tape can be used as long as my words and face do not appear.

\_\_\_\_\_ Now that I understand the research project, I do not want the video tape with me on it to be used for research. Erase the audio and/or video segments where I was included.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant                      Date                      Signature of Witness                      Date

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me, Ryan Ware (207-314-2465 or [rmware2@illinois.edu](mailto:rmware2@illinois.edu)), or Dr. Paul Prior (217-333-3024; [pprior@illinois.edu](mailto:pprior@illinois.edu)). If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu).



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**Consent to Contact Someone**

As part of the research event I agreed to participate in on (date) \_\_\_\_\_, I, \_\_\_\_\_, discussed the possible participation of my acquaintance, \_\_\_\_\_, and I give my consent for Ryan Ware to contact this person (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_) as a potential participant in the ongoing study.

Potential Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Potential Participant Contact Information: \_\_\_\_\_  
 (email or phone)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (signature or oral consent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (date)

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me, Ryan Ware (207-314-2465 or [rmware2@illinois.edu](mailto:rmware2@illinois.edu)), or Dr. Paul Prior (217-333-3024; [pprior@illinois.edu](mailto:pprior@illinois.edu)). If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu).



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**Pathways of Becoming: Writing, Reading, Speaking and Thinking Non-Belief**

**Participant Text Release**

As part of the longitudinal research I agreed to participate in, I provided Ryan Ware with a copy of \_\_\_\_\_ on (date) \_\_\_\_\_. I agree that unless I have otherwise specified, any texts I have written or documents I have written on and have provided for this research may be quoted, paraphrased, or represented as images in publications or presentations. (Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_).

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (signature **or** oral consent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (date)

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me, Ryan Ware (207-314-2465 or [rmware2@illinois.edu](mailto:rmware2@illinois.edu)), or Dr. Paul Prior (217-333-3024; [pprior@illinois.edu](mailto:pprior@illinois.edu)). If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at [irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu).

## APPENDIX C: IMAGE ANIMATION PROTOCOL

### Image Animation Protocol

**I'll ask that you talk me through the images you sent to me. Here are a few things you might describe as you talk to me about the particular images:**

- What is the history of the image? Why did you take/collect it? Why did it seem relevant to you to send along as part of our work?
- Your feelings you can recall when taking/collecting the image
- Your feelings about the image now
- Meanings you see in, or related to, the image
- Also, *any* peripheral thoughts that come to mind as you view the selected image, even if you're not sure why

**Stop at any point if you need to refresh yourself, collect your thoughts, revisit this list, or ask me any questions.**

## APPENDIX D: SIDESHADOW PROTOCOL

### Sideshow Protocol

The familiar narrative device of “foreshadowing,” in which an inevitable plot-trajectory imposes shadows from the future onto our present is well-embedded in our ways of thinking about stories. Foreshadowing participates in an assumption we would likely question, *i.e.*, that the future is already written, predetermined. As an alternative, I like to think of the concept of “sideshowing,” in which the “shadows” that fall onto a *text* come from the *side*, that is, from other, parallel, presents-not-taken, histories buried, and futures-still-available. As Nancy Welch puts it, “while foreshadowing doubles our sense of time—what is, what will be—sideshowing works to triple, to quadruple. “What is,” and we should add, what *has been*, “and what will be are joined by *what else* this present moment may suggest, *what else* the future could hold” (383, emphasis mine).

For our purposes here, Welch might be read, too, as reminding us that all texts have “**backstories**”—all the decisions, compromises, pleasures, and anguishes about what-to-say and how-to-say it, what to mean and how to mean it, and your feelings about writing and about the content of the text, are unavailable to a reader separated in space and time from your work. **These are the sorts of things I’d like to hear about.**

Texts, contrary to popular belief, never *have* to reach a final iteration. And we certainly get different senses of texts each time we animate them. As a next step in our work together on the complicated questions we are discussing, trajectories we’re unpacking, etc., how would you feel about **sideshowing** some of your writing?

Specifically, I am asking that you use the margins to unpack some of the ways in which you see yourself attempting to **make sense of thoughts and feelings in the text** you wrote, the ways in which you might be trying to **create and/or maintain a particular identity through writing**, but also to account for some of the broader contexts present, if unacknowledged (the “**backstories**”), in this sample of your writing. I am also asking, when you see fit, that you account for what might have changed for you since writing the text initially and as you animate the text now. Do **new meanings** come in from the side? Are **futures** unimagined playing out since your writing of the text?

We can discuss a method and/or the various tools available for writing the sideshadows on your text.

### Referenced:

Welch, Nancy (1998). “Sideshowing Teacher Response,” *College English* 60.4: 374-395.

Adapted from a 2013 assignment created by Dylan B. Dryer, University of Maine

## APPENDIX E: ALEX'S LIST OF BOOKS WITH NARRATION

I sent this email to a childhood friend (and fellow MK who is still a Christian) by email a few years ago because we had been discussing the changes in my belief system and he had asked me to help him understand why I had changed my mind about certain things. At that point, I was not even sure I was an agnostic yet. I just didn't believe everything exactly as I used to. Here is the email I sent to him:

To answer your questions...my beliefs have been shaped over a very long, slow, and painful process....about two to three solid years of purposeful searching, reading, thinking, discussing, evaluating and re-evaluating. In case you're interested, I'm attaching a list of the main books that have influenced me and the people who have been a pivotal part of this process with me.

### Theologically Thought-Provoking Books

\*All the starred books are ones I read and/or discussed with a friend. I have three friends who have been pivotal in sharing this journey through their constant engagement with me about theological issues: 1) an atheist with a philosophy degree—we discuss via email and chat, 2) a former co-worker and devout evangelical Christian who I met with (specifically to discuss spiritual things) for about five hours a week [for 8 initial weeks] and who I continue to meet with every other Sunday for 'church'—we discuss via email, text, and in person, and 3) a Presbyterian pastor I've known for 28 years who has had, besides my parents, the single greatest influence on my spiritual life—we discuss via Voxer, phone, email, and in person. We started theological discussions when we were 12 years old and some of those discussions were the impetus for me deciding to move to Canada (I try not to hold it against him!). Through this process, I have also listened to a lot of podcasts by different pastors and theologians. I share all this with you because I want you to know that I did not suddenly just arbitrarily decide not to believe anymore. It was a grueling process full of a lot of fear, anger, panic and grief. It wasn't flippant or easy. But, after so much intentional, meaningful conversation and thought over several years with key people in my life, my beliefs definitely shifted. I hope that answers your question.

#### **Brian McLaren:**

- A New Kind of Christian\*
- The Story We Find Ourselves In\*
- The Last Word and the Word After That
- Naked Spirituality: A Life With God in 12 Simple Words\*
- Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World\*

#### **Rob Bell:**

- Love Wins

#### **Bishop John Shelby Spong:**

- Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture\*
- Living in Sin: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality\*

- Reclaiming the Bible for a Non-religious World

**N.T. Wright:**

- How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels

**Marcus Borg:**

- Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally\*

**Rachel Held Evans:**

- Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions\*

**Peter Rollins:**

- Insurrection

**Bruce Cavey:**

- The End of Religion

END OF EMAIL TO MY CHILDHOOD FRIEND\*\*\*\*\*

The rest of this document is just a chronological record of books read, etc in case you wanted to know for reference:

In 2015 I read some books that might not have been faith-based or specifically about deconverting, but that nonetheless influenced my pathway towards non-belief:

Man's Search for Meaning—Viktor E. Frankl

The Body Keeps the Score—Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk

Between Worlds: Essays on Culture and Belonging—Marilyn R. Gardner

Socrates Café—Christopher Phillips

The Spinoza Problem—Dr. Irvin D. Yalom

In 2016 I started reading more 'edgy' books that were specifically about deconversion or written by atheists or that opposed the worldview or Christian teachings I had been raised with:

Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists—Dan Barker

Letter to a Christian Nation—Sam Harris

Why I Am An Atheist Who Believes in God—Frank Schaeffer

Unclobber: Rethinking our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality—Colby Martin

Finding God in the Waves: How I Lost my Faith and Found it Again Through Science—Mike McHargue

\*Around this time I also started listening to podcasts—primarily The Thinking Atheist and Everyone's Agnostic.

In 2017/2018 I reduced my reading and increased the voracity with which I ingested podcasts. But, I still read a few books related to the subject of deconversion:

Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving their Religion by Dr. Marlene Winell

How to Be Here by Rob Bell

Nailed: Ten Christian Myths that Show Jesus Never Existed at All by David Fitzgerald

The End of Faith by Sam Harris

Why I Believed by Kenneth W. Daniels

In January of 2017, I joined a local Living Without Religion group that meets once a month to discuss issues of deconversion and to support each other with the loss of faith.

In January of 2018, I joined The Clergy Project, an online support and community for deconverted religious professionals.

In March of 2018, I began counselling with a secular humanist therapist through The Clergy Project via phone, using my pseudonym. We engaged in weekly 'meetings' from March until September to process issues of grief, anger and identity that accompanied my journey from belief to unbelief.

## APPENDIX F: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

In a 2017 course titled *Language, Identity, and Culture*, Michele Koven introduced me to the Jefferson transcription system (Jefferson, 2004) useful for annotating how speech events unfold. I note here that I do not align myself with conversation analysis, but the notational system has proved helpful in recording some of the nuances of interactions.

While the system is a little more comprehensive, I particularly utilize the following conventions as part of my work on the wider project:

- (.) to denote a pause of indeterminate length (see below)
- (.1) to denote a pause of a particular length (see Chapter 4 for examples of pauses up to 30 seconds). The number in parentheses represents the number of seconds the pause lasted (see below)
- [square brackets] to denote overlapping speech, and I align overlapped speech (see below)
- (**inaudible**) to denote inaudible words
- Underline to denote emphasis on particular words
- ^ to denote an upward shift in intonation (see below)
- v to denote a downward shift in intonation
- (h) to denote laughter, often used mid-word (see below)
- = to denote latched speech (see below)
- : to denote elongated words in speech, appearing as close as possible to elongated syllables (see below)

### A Typical Example:

**Joiya:** Um, I think I figured that (.) everybody had that experience until later as an adult I realized that, that was pretty peculiar, um, and some people I told about it (.1) called it, like a special gift, like a God moment, [or::]=

**Ware:** [mhm]

**Joiya:** =something like that. And, um, that most people don't experience that within their faith life at all^=

**Ware:** mhm

**Joiya:** =um, which still surprises me because it happened so often for me.