

## SnapCHAT: The Genre of the Vanishing Memoir

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Through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), Karlie Rodríguez analyzes the ways in which the online platform Snapchat is used as a medium for life writing. Rodríguez also unpacks the ways in which the snaps she creates are fun yet meaningful.

I'm in my office with my phone in my hand, arm raised, phone angled downward, slightly tilted to the left, as I try to capture my face at its best angle, as well as the books on my shelf. You know, so I look decent and scholarly all in one take. Prior to this, I played with the lights to make sure the lighting in the room was perfect (though if it isn't, I can always just use a B&W filter), I fixed my hair to look passionately disheveled (you know, to give the impression that I'm doing academia right), and turned the computer monitor off so that the screen would not reflect on my glasses. I snap a shot. Frown. OK—black and white it is. Time to upload to My Story!

If you are a Snapchat user, like me, you might as well call yourself a memoirist! In fact, so much of our online life is about preserving our existence. While we definitely use social media as a way to stay connected, we also use it to represent and preserve our human experience. What is interesting about Snapchat is the way in which we use this medium to record our lives despite having very little control over the way in which our narratives will be received, socialized, and ultimately discarded and stored somewhere in the vast void we call “the web.” Or, if you

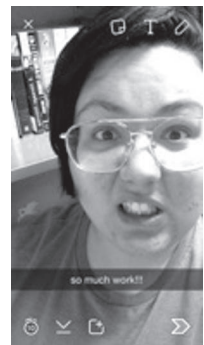


Figure 1: Here's me, looking “passionately disheveled” and “scholarly.” The caption reads “so much work!!!”

have friends like mine, in their cellphone's camera roll. Regardless, we take on the great endeavor of planning out the perfect snap and hope that whoever receives it will react in the way we expect them to (in the case of the above snap, I want my friends to both laugh and empathize with my misery), and then let the memory die.

Prior to discovering cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), I never thought to analyze the way in which I engage in the constant production of literacies on a daily basis. I also never thought Snapchat could be considered a literate activity. After all, Snapchat is fun! That's when I realized that not all literacies have to be frumpy and technical to be valid. In fact, as literate humans, we produce writing every day. In order for writing to be meaningful, it needs to be purposeful. But, if we are taking the time to preserve our thoughts (by writing things down on a paper, or as a Facebook status, or even a snap), then those literacies are already more important than we give them credit for. That's when I realized that Snapchat is a much more important platform than I originally thought. More than just an app that allows me to stay connected with my friends and family by sharing silly pictures of my daily endeavors with them, Snapchat inspires me to think about those significant moments of my day that I wish to preserve and share. Sure, those moments are often random! But we all know that we carefully plan those snaps! Because we want them to mean something! We want them to have a purpose! We are . . . *memoiring*. Understanding CHAT allowed me to find true meaning in an activity that I thought to be relatively inconsequential. In turn, I have decided to roll with the idea that Snapchat, particularly the feature of My Story, is a vanishing memoir and further unpack the ways in which this is useful to me. And maybe it will be useful to you, too!

### **First Things First: What Is Snapchat?**

Like Facebook and Instagram, Snapchat is a social media platform where users are able to share pictures, videos, and texts, commonly referred to as snaps, to a controlled network of friends. However, and unlike the aforementioned outlets, Snapchat has no ambition for perpetuity—quite the opposite! The main, and perhaps most exciting, feature of Snapchat is its vanishing content. While this might seem pointless to some people, it is in fact thrilling for others.

When co-founders Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy started working together, they weren't exactly trying to create a smartphone app for trading pictures. However, after realizing that there was a market for people who often foolishly and regrettably shared dumb pictures on their smartphones, they created Picaboo (see Figure 2 below), an app that “aimed to solve that problem with self-destructing snaps, Mission Impossible style” (qtd. in Dredge).

Picaboo launched in 2011 for iPhone users exclusively, and was later “rebranded as Snapchat, expanded to Android, and added video, as well as the ability to scribble messages on photos before sending them” (qtd. in Dredge). This is when the app truly took off (See Figure 3).

By 2012, the app had become a hit. Up until this point, vanishing content aside, Snapchat had been pretty similar to other social media websites and apps: a platform to share captioned pictures with friends. But in 2014, Snapchat introduced My Story—by far the coolest feature (at least in my opinion).



Figure 2: This is Picaboo’s logo, which can still be found on their website.



Figure 3: This is Snapchat’s current logo, which can be found on the website and the smartphone app.

### Wait, So How Is Snapchat Memoir Again?

Before I answer this, it might be a good idea to define what a memoir is. Because memoir falls into the academic field of life writing, I had to do some research in order to provide both a general definition as well as a more contextual one. According to the beloved website, *Wikipedia*, a memoir “is a collection of memories that an individual writes about moments or events, both public or private that took place in the subject’s life.” Another important characteristic of the memoir, as noted in *Wikipedia*, is that “the assertions made in the work are understood to be factual.” This is what Philippe Lejeune, an important scholar in the field of life writing, would deem the “autobiographical pact” (which essentially means that both the autobiographer who is producing the work, as well as the reader who is receiving the work, enter into a kind of contract that establishes that the work in question is an accurate representation of the identity of its author). Lejeune himself defines autobiography as “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (qtd. in Vigso). A memoir focuses on specific events. George Fetherling, another autobiography scholar, maintains that memoir is a narrative that is “more tightly focused, more daring in construction, and (its author hopes) more penetrating” (qtd. in Rak). What this means is that more than just a work of nonfiction, a memoir is a literate activity that is deeply personal and deeply focused. Oftentimes, people confuse memoir with autobiography. However, autobiography is significantly more extensive work—autobiographies encompass entire lives, while memoirs encompass memories. As trustworthy *Wikipedia* would put it, memoirs are about “touchstone events and turning points from the author’s life.” Now that we have gotten the fancy language out of the way, let’s talk about Snapchat.

While some would argue that the pictures shared through Snapchat are hardly “touchstones” or a “turning point” in a person’s life, they must mean something to both the person sending the snap as well to the person bothering to open it. Granted, while regular snaps exchanged between friends often have a conversational feel, My Story has always felt more personal. In fact, the Snapchat team thinks so, too! Right after launching My Story, they shared a post on their website stating that “Snapchat has always been about sharing your point of view” and now, with My Story, what’s represented is “a singular, personal experience.” While the genre has now been appropriated by users and it’s in turn depicted in many different ways, My Story was originally supposed to be about different perspectives of the same event. For example, My Story was launched for the first time at the Electric Daisy Carnival in 2014 and different users were allowed to submit a snap to what they called “Our EDC Story,” creating a collaborative form of storytelling. This in itself is a memoir because as Fetherling puts it, “a memoir can be of one’s self or of other people or of a particular decade—or of a particular place” (qtd. in Rak). The first ever My Story, or rather Our Story, was a collaborative memoir about the Electric Daisy Carnival and the people who went to it. This certainly fits the criteria for memoir based on its definition. While this could also be perceived as a way of reporting, snaps are always about individual and/or collective experiences, which in turn, becomes a kind of life reporting which links beautifully to the goals of memoir. Today, Snapchat memoirs are split into two—the first is a personal experience, and the second is a global experience.

### **My Story: It’s Pretty Much All About Me**

The feature My Story allows the user to compile snaps into a kind of life narrative that will vanish after 24 hours. This means the users can produce content that is personal and significant and share it with their friends for a limited amount of time—in that time, your network of friends can play and replay the story as many times as they want (but only during those 24 hours as snaps disappear at exactly the same time they were added to My Story, only 24 hours later). It is important to note, however, that it seems to be in our nature to subvert genres. What this means is that while the original idea behind Snapchat is to create vanishing content, there are ways around this. For example, my best friend loves to take screenshots of my snaps which he then saves for “later use” (I personally assume he means “blackmail”). This is one of the ways in which the content I create becomes **socialized**. Unfortunately, it is impossible for me to predict how the snaps I create will be received and repurposed—that is, I cannot predict their **trajectory**, how they’ll “move through institutions and spaces and in relationships among different people”

(ISU Writing Program). And this is true of all of the writing I send out into the world. To me, this does not mean I should stop snapping but instead, I have learned to build My Story using snaps I would not mind others saving. Snapchat also preserves all of my snaps into a server (fortunately, my best friend cannot access this server—not even I can).

There are many different ways to structure My Story. I personally use it to record snaps of my adventures as a graduate student (yes, I am obviously using the word “adventure” loosely). Sometimes, when I like the way a particular “snap” has turned out, I save it and share it in other social media platforms. Most commonly, I will repurpose my own “snaps” into a Facebook status. This is a way in which I socialize my own literacies. The main reason I do this is because the majority of my family members are not Snapchat users, and sometimes, I want them to see what I am up to. That said, it can be really tedious (and often impossible) to recreate a picture with exactitude. Furthermore, Snapchat provides a lot of really nice, customizable tools (such as captions, filters, and labels). This kind of multimodal experience can be very convenient because I get to take a picture, include text, and even superimpose a label onto it all in one place. Figure 4 provides an example of what that looks like.

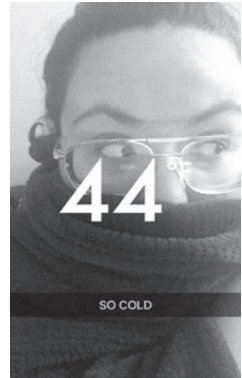


Figure 4: This picture was posted to My Story on 20 November 2015.

It was not actually shared on any other social media platforms.

I find these tools very convenient because they allow me to illustrate what I am thinking and/or feeling without using a lot of language. Had I chosen to share this image on Facebook, it would have saved me time because I would not have needed to write a status alongside it explaining why I am all bundled up. In fact, those tools allowed me to share the picture in this article without having to explain the picture itself.

I don't always take pictures like this. In fact, most of the time I am taking pictures of my surroundings—in large part, because everything is so new to me. You see, I moved to Normal from Puerto Rico (which is a tiny island in the middle of the Caribbean ocean, and hence, very different from the U.S. Midwest). In turn, my grad school life is permeated with not just new educational experiences but also a vast array of cultural ones. Depending on the day, and the story I am trying to construct, and for whom (as sometimes my My Story, though still public to my entire network of friends, evokes a specific audience), I will write my captions in Spanish (or Spanglish—Puerto Rico's unofficial language!). Often, these stories will elicit responses from my friends who do not speak Spanish. For example, when I first got here, I posted a video (which I'd show you a picture of, but it's, well, impossible) of me singing “Verde Luz,” a patriotic song describing the beauty of my little island. It was evocative and sad, and some of my only-English speaking friends responded to it by sending me snaps that looked like Figure 5 below.



Figure 5: This snap was recreated in order to depict a past event.

My favorite part about this exchange is the opportunity for cultural growth, which thankfully, all of my friends seem to get very excited about. While my friends and family in Puerto Rico send messages filled with melancholia and love, my friends in Normal send me messages ridden with curiosity. Either way, it starts a conversation, which makes for an interactive narrative. Sure, the video still vanished 24 hours later, but it produced the desired effect: an exchange between parties related to the events recorded.

These vanishing memoirs are also multimodal memoirs because they exist in pictures, videos, texts, and other kinds of media. Given that so much of our world revolves around multimodalities and multimedia, this is knowledge that we can always transfer into other aspects of our literate lives (just like I have done here).



Figure 6: This is what I see when I look at the Stories page. (Yes, I follow Kylie Jenner. Judge me.)

## Our Story: A Cultural Experience

Snapchat also has these collaborative stories that are situated around the world. Based on the definitions of memoir discussed above, you could say that there is a memoir-ish feel to the storytelling as people all over the world help construct the narrative of a place or an event.

Our Story happens somewhat in real time, and hence, Snapchat categorizes it as a “live” event. Of course, that does not mean that it is in fact live, but rather that people are currently collaborating to make the story possible (meaning they are creating memories that will eventually appear in the story that corresponds to that specific day, event, and geographical location) See Figure 6 for a view of my Stories page.

While these stories don’t spark the same conversation that My Story does (because the “live” stories exist outside of your network of friends), they do spark a kind of cultural awareness about the world and the people who inhabit it. Recently, there was a “live” event on Snapchat depicting farms all over the world. This was a particularly interesting event for me because I had a student who was very passionate about farming and hates it that a lot of people do not seem to understand what it entails to take care of a farm. I, on the other hand, have never really set foot on a farm. Not only was it a learning experience for me, but I couldn’t wait to go tell my student how much I had learned about farming.

A characteristic of the genre of memoir is the interesting and meaningful ways in which the individual captures a space, an action, and/or the self. In this respect, I think Snapchat is not only a great place for self-expression, but it serves as a platform to share culturally significant content—it is a

transnational tool that, in many ways, attempts to connect the world at large, bring communities together, as well as show and embrace diversity.

## **But If They Vanish, What's The Point?**

As the original name suggests, the idea behind Snapchat was to give users a peek into the lives of their friends—that's it. While there is speculation that Snapchat was specifically created for sexting, both Spiegel and Murphy have negated it. That said, they have in fact made it clear that if a person is looking to get raunchy with the pictures they share, Snapchat might be the safest way to do it because of the self-destructing quality of the content. While it is important to be careful with the type of snaps we share, there are certainly ways to make it harder for people to take a screenshot (i.e. send it as a snap instead of including it in your My Story and set the timer for 1-2 seconds to make it harder for others to save the shot). That said, studies show that while students certainly use Snapchat in ways that are NSFW (not safe for work), “60% of respondents used Snapchat primarily to send ‘funny pictures’ while the second most popular type of ‘snap’ is a selfie” (Bosker). Users have reclaimed the space and decided that Snapchat does not necessarily have to be raunchy but can also be a space to share lives and cultures. And while the vanishing quality of Snapchat certainly defies the more immortal intent of a published memoir, it is still a form of storytelling that aims to record memories—even if just for a short time. As far as I am concerned, the brevity of a snap adds an extra layer of meaning because it depicts the impermanence of an instance.

## **SnapCHAT: What I Learn from Analyzing My Activity**

I have to be honest and say that when I first started looking at my snapping as a complex activity, I thought I would lose interest. I didn't. If anything, I enjoy doing it so much more now. The biggest takeaway of this analysis is perhaps realizing that we, as humans, are constantly engaging in literate practices—and even when these practices seem silly, they in fact carry more meaning than we give them credit for. Snapchat allows me to not only create shareable content, but to do so in a way that is creative and multifaceted. Furthermore, using CHAT to understand Snapchat has made me appreciate its cultural and historical relevance, as well as the ways in which I engage in the production of life writing, and the ways that others might perceive and repurpose the content I share (in fact, even the ways in which I perceive and repurpose that content). Even when the content I am creating is less tangible than a published, printed memoir, I am still recording my life in way that allows others to experience what I am experiencing. I don't know about you, but I think that's pretty cool.

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