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MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

CONSTRUCTING THE ALCOHOL BLACKOUT
AN (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE COLLAGE

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INTRODUCTION - "I Don't Call it Blacking Out, I Call it Time Travel"¹

This is for all those who wake up the following morning asking themselves questions like 'How did I get home?' 'Where am I?' 'Where did I get this bruise?' 'Where are my clothes?' 'Who is next to me?' 'Why am I in jail?' or simply 'WHAT HAPPENED LAST NIGHT?'(...) This is for all those people who need half a dozen of your closest friends (who usually blacked out with you) to piece the full night's events together and even then, some things are just lost forever. But it's ok, if you don't remember, it doesn't count...right? ("Sometimes I blackout," n.d.)²

Most research conducted on blackouts during the past 50 years has involved surveys, interviews and direct observation of middle-aged, primarily male alcoholics, many of whom were hospitalized. Researchers have largely ignored the occurrence of blackouts among young social drinkers, so the idea that blackouts are an unlikely consequence of heavy drinking in non- alcoholics has remained deeply entrenched in both the scientific and popular cultures. (White, p.189, 2003)

It is commonly argued in the alcohol research literature that young people are being seduced into a culture of normalized excessive drinking, whilst simultaneously being pathologized as disordered or disorderly 'binge drinkers.' (Measham & Brian, 2005 paraphrased in Griffin et. al 2009, p.458)

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR, 2000) lists the alcohol "blackout" as a symptom of intoxication, a state of anterograde amnesia in which long-term and procedural memory stay "relatively intact" - enabling the drinker to walk, talk and engage in other complex behaviours - while short-term memory is rendered temporarily deficient (Sadock & Sadock, 2008, p.98; White, Jamieson-Drake & Swartzwelder, 2002; White, 2004).³ In other words, the alcohol disrupts brain functioning in such a way that intoxicated individuals "do not forget what happened, they never form any memories of it" (Sweeney, 2004, back matter). Still, they attempt to "piece" the experience back together, relying heavily on the stories and memories of others.

¹ Name of *Facebook* group devoted to the exchange of blackout narratives: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?v=wall&ref=search&gid=2229540527>, 1,241 members.

² Group: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2209130419&ref=search&sid=583310227.4165875449..1>.

³ Amnesia is anterograde "meaning that alcohol impairs the ability to form new memories while intoxicated, but does not erase memories that were formed prior to becoming intoxicated" (White, 2004).

Narrative representations of this experience can be seen in films,⁴ comics (www.blackout-drunk.com) and within user-created groups on *Facebook*, the widely popular social networking site, where there are thousands of posts, pictures and members collectively attempting to remember “what happened?” Indeed, studies have found blackouts to be a much more common occurrence among young social drinkers than previously thought - usually as a result of drinking too much, too fast (White, 2003). Researchers are now referring to a “new culture of intoxication” (Measham & Brian, 2005; Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral & Szmigin, 2009; Wells, Graham & Purcell, 2009) in which drinking to get drunk is a “central” and “normal part of many young people’s social lives” (Griffin et al., 2009, pp.457-458).⁵ This normative culture is most evident in the “passing out stories”⁶ of young adults (Griffin et al., 2009) and those “classic stories at breakfast the morning after” (see Appendix A), often exchanged through a self-deprecating discourse as a source of entertainment and amusement.

Inversely, the experience has been constituted as a source of serious personal and societal concern. Researchers studying blackouts agree it is “a dangerous state” in which drinkers are at “high risk of doing harm” to themselves or others (White, 2004). Accounts of alcohol-induced amnesia have been heard in courtrooms,⁷ emergency rooms and therapy rooms where the state continues to hold its long-standing association with alcoholism. Descriptions of “carved out” memories (Zailckas, 2005, p.xii) from heavy-drinking young adults can be read in numerous

⁴ *Dude, Where’s My Car?* (2000); *The Hangover* (2009), Golden Globe Winner - Best Comedy, 2010.

⁵ To quote Nahoum-Grappe (2008): “Here, the concept of *culture* is neither “ethnicized,” nor defined by geographically delineated cultural areas. In modern societies, one can observe a growing extension of Western lifestyles elsewhere: Patterns of consumption, clothing styles, and means of transportation are becoming more and more homogenous worldwide (p.38).

⁶ This term, as used by Griffin and colleagues (2009), denotes stories which describe instances of passing out and blacking out (p.457). Blacking out, however, should not to be confused with “passing out,” where a person falls asleep or loses consciousness from excessive drinking. Passing out usually follows blacking out.

⁷ See *R v. Daviault*, 1994 - a Supreme Court of Canada decision regarding self-induced intoxication akin to “automatism” as a defense. <http://csc.lexum.umontreal.ca/en/1994/1994scr3-63/1994scr3-63.pdf>

contemporary memoirs of abuse and addiction such as Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood (Zailckas, 2005)⁸ and From Binge to Blackout: A Mother and Son Struggle with Teen Drinking (Volkman and Volkman, 2006).⁹ In addition, two popularized analyses of the phenomenon - The Alcohol Blackout. Walking, Talking, Unconscious and Lethal (Sweeney, 2004) and Cries From the Abyss: Alcohol Blackouts Revealed (Sweeney, 2008) - can be purchased on the internet, commiserating and stigmatizing the amnesic drinker as both a “victim” and a “bloody menace” (Sweeney, 2004).¹⁰ Indeed, concerns regarding the risky drinking practices of young adults and their costs to public health, safety and order are mounting in Canada and around the world. Numerous strategies are being developed to raise awareness, reduce harms and minimize the stigma of “problematic” alcohol use¹¹ in hopes of supporting a “culture of moderation,” rather than intoxication, for youth and young adults (National Alcohol Strategy [NAS], 2007, p. 1).¹² Researchers and policy makers call for more “intense and thorough investigations of young people’s drinking experiences” (Wells et al., 2009, p.8) aimed at assessing motives, meanings and functions of intoxication, both positive and negative (Eisenbach-Stangl & Thom, 2009) as well as “the nature, extent and consequences” of specific practices (Wells et al., 2009, p.8).

Despite the seeming prevalence of blackouts and their potentially serious consequences to self and society, there exists a modest scholarly literature on the subject. Studies provide useful

⁸ Spent ten weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List and is being made into a movie.

⁹ Won the IPPY Award for Outstanding Book of 2005. See also Blackout Girl: Growing Up and Drying Out in America (Storm, 2008).

¹⁰ For more on these books see <http://www.alcoholblackout.com/index.html>.

¹¹ These were listed as top priorities at the Second Forum on the National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances in Toronto on May 29 and 30, 2008. To view the report visit http://www.nationalframework-cadrenational.ca/images/uploads/file/SecondForumReport_en.pdf.

¹² Alcohol-related harms cost Canadian society an estimated 14.6 billion dollars in 2002. Recommendations for Canada’s first-ever National Alcohol Strategy (NAS) were put forth in 2007. The report can be viewed at this website: http://www.nationalframework-cadrenational.ca/uploads/files/FINAL_NAS_EN_April3_07.pdf. Other countries developing strategies include Australia, New Zealand, England, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden and the USA.

information on neuro-cognitive processes, predicative factors and experiential characteristics but limited insights into emotional reactions and their subsequent influence on drinking habits (see White 2003). Similarly, blackout narratives, with their ubiquitous presence at the breakfast table and contemporary culture at large, have been virtually ignored by academia (Griffin et al., 2009).¹³ From my perspective as a female scholar investigating blackouts and a drinker who experiences them, I propose that we take these narratives seriously.

Chase (2003) explains that "[t]aking narrative seriously means directing our attention to [the] process of embodiment, to what narrators accomplish as they tell their stories, and how the accomplishment is culturally shaped" (p. 274). Connecting the personal to the social and cultural in this way is a practice known in academia as *autoethnography* (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Ellis, one of its primary practitioners, understands the importance of stories, arguing they "are essential to human understanding" and "should be both a subject and a method of social science research" (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p.129). Inspired by its various practitioners, I too used storytelling to provide affected drinkers with an open forum for the articulation of a prevalent and under-researched phenomenon. In the process, significant insights into my own experiences as well as into the attitudes, emotions and negotiations surrounding excessive drinking practices became apparent.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to challenge and build on the blackout literature and popular discourse by moving beyond the experiential "what happened?" to address the phenomenological, discursive and hermeneutical. What is it like to not remember? How do we

¹³ Drinking narratives in general, have received very little academic attention (Griffin et al., 2009).

feel about it? How do we talk about it? And why do we continue to drink ourselves past the point of recollection? I sat down with twenty-three young adults who have experienced blackouts to explore these questions and better understand how these drinkers construct and make sense of their amnesia in their own terms. The collected stories speak to the nature of the state and to other scientific findings but also encompass the “life of feeling” (Eisner, 2008, p.7) implicated in the experience. Furthermore, they depict how “problem” drinkers negotiate between the “seductive,” romanticized and normalized practices of excessive drinking and the “pathologized” identity of the “alcoholic,” “addict,” and “binge drinker” insinuated in popular, diagnostic and governmental discourse. In doing so, the paper constructs multiple portraits of the contemporary “binge” drinker and shows how personal narratives and collaborative memory-making work to protect self-concepts and shape patterns of rationalization that serve to either deny or normalize excessive drinking habits. By engaging with blackout narratives, I sought to demonstrate the role they play in the maintenance of ambivalent attitudes towards the drinking practices of bodies detached from their actions and drinkers out of their minds.

The present paper also serves to contextualize the collected narratives by further highlighting influences, explaining motivations and elaborating on the objectives, processes and contributions of a narrative auto/ethnographic approach to researching alcohol-induced amnesia. Adopting what Ellis and Bochner (2000) call the “autoethnographer’s gaze” I will take the reader through the research process in four parts. First, I will “look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects” of the blackout experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.739). Using available research literature, media and popular internet vehicles, I draw attention to the way blackouts have been represented in scholarly, health and popular discourse,

further situating the phenomenon within the “new culture of intoxication.” Second, I “look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.739). Drawing on various ethnomethodological texts and Butler-Kisber’s approach to collage (2008), I assume my position as an ambivalent drinker, situate the project within the “new” ethnographic tradition and reveal my “impulse” to write (Engel, 1999, p.113). Third, I describe the process of recruiting participants, designing interview guides and analyzing data. To underline found themes, I extract and interpret interview segments, drawing on Skowronski and Walker’s writings on autobiographical remembering (2004), Martinic and Measham’s concept of “extreme” drinking (2008), and Smith and Watson’s (2001) life narrative “tool kit.” Finally, I summarize findings and address the paper’s contribution to academic and personal understandings of alcohol-induced amnesia.

BLACKOUTS - A METHODOLOGICAL AND DIAGNOSTIC REVIEW

The early literature on blackouts, while focusing primarily on the experiences of male alcoholics, is still regarded as most influential for its contributions. Namely, researchers identified two types of blackout - *fragmentary* and *en bloc* - and determined a rapid increase in blood alcohol level (BAC) to be a key predictor in the onset of amnesia. *Fragmentary* blackouts (partial amnesia), the more common type (Goodwin, Crane & Guze, 1969b; Goodwin, 1971; Hartzler & Fromme, 2003; White, Signer, Kraus & Swartzwelder, 2004) are characterized by fragments of missing memory for intoxicated experience, only to be recovered after an individual is cued or reminded of the events that occurred. *En bloc* blackouts, however, are distinguished by

an inability to remember any details from significant and lengthy periods of intoxication, even when cued or prompted (total amnesia).¹⁴ Individuals experiencing these more severe blackouts can usually point to the specific instance they stopped remembering, signifying an abrupt onset. It is important to note that although individuals cannot form new memories in a blackout state, they are able to keep information active, for up to a couple of minutes, in short-term storage.¹⁵ This allows them to carry on conversations and interact with others, sometimes in a seemingly normal fashion (Ryback, 1970; Ryback, 1971). For this reason, it might be difficult to tell if someone is in a blackout. Furthermore, studies have found that heavy drinking alone “seemed insufficient” to produce one (Goodwin et al., 1969a, p.195). Rather, it was the speed of consumption (“gulping drinks”) and drinking on an empty stomach (i.e. a *rapid* increase in BAC levels) that foreshadowed amnesia (see also Perry et al., 2006). This finding gave researchers reason to believe that blackouts may not be unique to alcoholics after all and could potentially occur in anyone who happened to drink too much, too quickly (Goodwin, Crane & Guze, 1969a; b; Ryback, 1970).¹⁶

It wasn't until nearly thirty years later, however, that researchers focused on “non-alcoholic,” “social,” “heavy-drinking,” and “college” populations of students and young adults. They found that blackouts were not uncommon among these populations, were not necessarily indicative or predictive of alcoholism (see Anthenelli, Klein, Tsuang, Smith & Schuckit, 1994; Jennison &

¹⁴ For further and more complex distinctions between memory processes involved in *fragmentary* and *en bloc* blackouts see Hartzler, 2003 and Hartzler & Fromme, 2003.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of alcohol's effect on the brain and memory refer to White (2003).

¹⁶ Goodwin and colleagues (1969a), interviewed 100 hospitalized alcoholics - 36 reported *never* experiencing a blackout. “Although blackouts almost always were associated with heavy drinking, this alone seemed insufficient to produce one. On many other occasions, subjects said they had drunk as much or more without memory loss” (p.195). Of note also, to the present study, is Goodwin and colleagues use of structured interviewing and encouragement towards subjects to “ask questions and provide as much detail as possible about their experiences” (White et al., 2004, p.206).

Johnson, 1994) and that women were especially susceptible (Buelow & Koeppel, 1995; Buelow & Harbin, 1996; Hartzler, 2003; Hartzler & Fromme, 2003; White et al., 2002; White et al., 2004). For example, in a 2001 survey of 772 undergraduates of an American university, of those who drank alcohol, 51% reported experiencing at least one blackout in their lifetime. Also, students reported finding out from others that they had engaged in numerous risky and unremembered behaviours such as damaging property, driving and unprotected sex (White et al., 2002; 2004). Other findings by White and colleagues indicate the onset of a blackout to be the self-reported result of roughly nine drinks for females and roughly fourteen drinks for males, with males reporting drinking over a “significantly longer period of time” (White et al., 2004, p. 216). For various physiological reasons, women have been found to be more susceptible to blacking out and milder forms of memory loss; however very little research has studied the female blackout (Mumenthaler et al., 1999 in White et al., 2002; 2004). Little, in general, is known about the descriptive, experiential and phenomenological dimensions of blackouts, as experienced by young adult drinkers (Schulenberg et al., 1996 in Hartzler & Fromme, 2003; White et al., 2004).

Although there seems to be strong indication that blackouts can result from occasional heavy drinking in non-alcoholic populations, the state continues to be characterized as a symptom of dependence, rather than intoxication¹⁷ (see Appendix B), with findings supporting this link.¹⁸ For

¹⁷ For example, Ross and Shirley (1997) write: “Problem drinking indicators which have been used include consumption (such as drinking one or more ounces of ethanol a day, drinking five or more drinks at least once a month), problematic consequences of drinking (such as driving while intoxicated) and symptoms of alcohol dependence (such as blackouts)” (p.185). In her 2002 book, *DSM-IV-TR in action*, Dziegielewska writes that “[w]hile anyone who drinks too much will pass out, only an alcoholic blacks out (Maxmen & Ward, 1995)” (p.196).

¹⁸ Nelson and colleagues (2004) found that “[i]n both women and men, having had a blackout was significantly associated with a lifetime diagnosis of alcohol dependence and similar stronger associations were seen with having 3 or more blackouts in a year” (p.259). A study by Hasin and colleagues (1997) found that blackouts, alongside 5 other variables (alcohol consumption, help seeking, suicidal behavior, physical or sexual attack/abuse while intoxicated, neglect of nutrition and family history of alcoholism) were significantly associated with dependence among heavy drinkers in a community sample.

example, in White and colleagues' 2004 study, a diagnostic measure (AUDIT) was used to assess alcohol use disorders in the sample, with 64% scoring at "a threshold predictive of a formal diagnosis of alcohol abuse or dependence" (p.218). Other studies have found that subjects who reported experiencing blackouts and other alcohol-related problems did not report them when surveyed later in life (Anthenelli et al., 1994; Jennison & Johnson, 1994). Generally, researchers consider blackouts, by themselves, to be poor predictors of alcoholism. Alongside other signs of abuse, however, blackouts could signify dependence and should be, in any case, taken as "warning signs" of hazardous and "problem" drinking (White et al., 2004, p.218). Questions screening for blackouts appear on some of the oldest and most widely used alcohol dependence and abuse assessment tools,¹⁹ as well as informal self-tests such as the Alcoholics Anonymous quiz "Is A.A For You?"²⁰ Dr. Kevin J. Drab, a licensed counselor who specializes in addiction, notes that "[w]hile blackouts cannot be considered criteria for directly diagnosing alcoholism, the individual's reactions to them can provide considerable support for concluding they are alcoholic." If an individual continues to drink, despite dangerous consequences and personal concerns as a result of blacking out, Drab would consider this "a strong indication that the individual may be caught up in an addictive process." The reaction of a "normal social drinker," he argues, would be to cut down or stop drinking altogether (para.8, n.d).²¹

¹⁹ These include: the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) developed by the World Health Organization, which focuses on preliminary signs of mild dependence and is 94% accurate; the TWEAK and RAPS4 Tests in which the A's stand for Amnesia, used in emergency situations; the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (MAST) and the Alcohol Dependence Scale (ADS) among others. See <http://www.utexas.edu/research/cswr/nida/instrumentListing.html> for links to these instruments.

²⁰ Question #11 asks: "Do you have 'blackouts'?" A "blackout" is when we have been drinking for hours or days which we cannot remember. When we came to A.A., we found out that this is a pretty sure sign of alcoholic drinking. See <http://www.aa.org/lang/en/subpage.cfm?page=71>

²¹ DSM-IV-TR (2000): "Once a pattern of compulsive use develops, individuals with Dependence may devote substantial periods of time to obtaining and consuming alcoholic beverages. These individuals often continue to use alcohol despite evidence of adverse psychological or physical consequences (e.g., depression, blackouts, liver disease, or other sequelae)" (p.213 as cited in Drab, para.9, n.d).

The aforementioned blackout literature on young adults does assess reactions to alcohol-induced amnesia, in terms of psychological consequences, subjective evaluations, and effects of blackouts on alcohol-related beliefs and drinking habits. Its measures, however, are limited. For example, Buelow and Koeppel (1995) administered an "Impact of Event Scale" to measure how stressful blackout episodes were in terms of "intrusiveness of an event into consciousness" and "avoidance" of the event through dismissal (p.14). They found that blackouts, compared to other stressful events, caused a "moderate" level of stress characterized less by avoidance of the event and more by intrusive thoughts. Also "men experienced significantly more drinking, more blackouts, more risk-taking, and more stressful impact as a result of these behaviours" (p.17). In their survey questionnaire, White and colleagues (2004) asked respondents to provide a narrative in response to open-ended questions, such as "What's the last thing you remember?" "What happened during the blackout?" and "How did you feel about having had the blackout?" Although questions were open-ended, a "limited range of answers" was given, and at times cued (e.g "did it scare you, did you feel indifferent?"), allowing for data to be classified into small categories (pp.220-222). Reactions were described as "varied" with more females reporting "feeling scared by their last blackout experience" (p.216).²² Finally, Hartzler and Fromme (2003) used a Likert scale (1=bad, 2=slightly bad, 3=neutral, 4=slightly good, 5=good) and found that *en-bloc* blackouts were "regarded quite negatively" whereas evaluations of *fragmentary* blackouts were "less negative, perhaps reflecting a level of reassurance accorded by partial memory recovery for intoxicated experience" (p.549, see also Hartzler, 2003).

²² Alongside "fear," other feelings that have been associated with the realization of blacking out include "dread" and "apprehension" (White et al., 2004, p.219). Those who reported feeling scared "were more likely than others to report a change in drinking habits after the event" (p.220).

Interestingly, a number of studies have found that heavier drinkers, who are more likely to experience blackouts and other negative consequences, foresee greater *positive* effects from drinking than do lighter drinkers (Buelow & Harbin, 1996; Hartzler, 2003; Leigh & Lee, 2008). For example, in a study of 123 college students, those experiencing blackouts “had significantly higher positive alcohol effect expectancies than those without blackouts” (Buelow & Harbin, 1996, p.25). Addressing these findings in his dissertation,²³ Hartzler (2003) speculates that amnestic experiences - which undermine “one’s ability to integrate episodic details into meaningful event-sequences” (p.38)²⁴ - “may limit recognition or understanding of the negative consequences of one’s behavior,” thus influencing the likelihood of future blackouts (p.36). Similarly, Goldman (1999) regards expectancies as “potentially malleable” cognitive processes which “involve memory templates of previous experiences that guide future behavior.” For Goldman, a “model” of expectancy which provides insight into consumption needs to include “unique” concepts such as “images, memories of sensorimotor and affective experiences, specific behavior patterns, and verbal representations of these concepts,” since all are influential in decisions regarding “the onset and pattern of drinking.”²⁵ Without or with limited memory for some of these “biological and environmental characteristics,” heavy amnestic drinkers may be less able to take certain “memory representations” into account when deciding when and how much to drink (p.196). As such, Hartzler underlines the importance of paying attention to the other varied sources which might influence effect expectancies - “the recall of specific drinking

²³ “Blackouts: The etiology of alcohol-induced amnestic episodes and their effect on alcohol-related beliefs.”

²⁴ See also Bowden, Crews, Bates, Fals-Stewart & Ambrose (2001).

²⁵ See also Gray, 1990; Robinson & Berridge, 1993; Schultz et al., 1997; Wise, 1988.

episodes, semantic knowledge of alcohol, vicarious experience related via others or culturally-sanctioned beliefs" (2003, p.39).

Given the ambivalent survey findings regarding the emotional aftermath of amnesia, and the important implications of memory, affective experiences and culture on drinking behaviours and beliefs, one might argue that better measures are needed to assess the impact blackouts have on the emotions and drinking habits of young adults, male and female. The often categorical nature in which responses are sought on survey questionnaires, to some extent, force participants to make quantitative judgements about experiences at the expense of more informative and complex descriptive narration's. Take, for example, this opening passage from Zailckas' memoir (2005), in which she describes her amnesia:

I won't remember the chair that wheels me down the hospital's hall, or the white cot I am lain on, or the tube that coasts through my esophagus like a snake into a crawl space. Yet I will retain these lost hours...This is the first of many forgotten injuries that will imprint me just the same... It's strange the way the mind remembers forgetting. The fact of the blackout won't slip away like the events that took place inside of it. Instead of receding into my life's story, the lost hours will stand out. Something else will move in to fill in the holes: dread and denial that thickens with time like emotional scar tissue. In the absence of memory, the night will be even more memorable. The blackout will stay with me, causing chronic psychic pain, a persistent, subconscious thrumming. (p.xii)

The passage speaks to a more complex relationship between Buelow and Koeppl's notions of "avoidance" and "intrusiveness of [the blackout] into consciousness" (1995, p.14). Zailckas might dismiss or deny her blackouts, to toughen up and continue drinking, but she characterizes her amnesia as simultaneously having a lasting emotional effect that even she may not always be fully aware of. Zailckas contributes a phenomenology of amnesia that provides insight into the thought processes underlying her continued drinking, blackouts, and injuries. "When I surface [from the blackout]," she writes, "its events and the shame of them will be gone from my head" (p.xi), perhaps making it easier for her to carry on with her habits. She later describes the

advantage of being “spared the emotional effort it takes to repress whatever happened [in the blackout]” (p.217), instead feeling an “almost electrical” and attention consuming “mental interference,” attributable to the sole fact of her non-remembrance (p.219). She plays with notions of absence and presence, of the blackout’s tendency to “cut away” and “leave a mark” (p.xi), underlining the ambivalent emotional nature and impact of the experience: “there are two parts of the mind that constrain memory after nights like this,” she writes, “one that wants to dig it up and another that wants to push it deeper down” (p.75). Clearly the source of repeated and “adverse psychological [and] physical consequences” (DSM-IV-TR, 2000, p.213), Zailckas’ blackouts do not deter her from drinking. “Still,” she writes on the page following the description of her hospitalization, “I am not an alcoholic.”²⁶

In summary, the majority of studies on alcohol-induced amnesia tend to focus on blackout characteristics and predictors, with a limited assessment of its psychological consequences. Privileging intoxication in this way, notes Sulkunen, comes “at the expense of ‘understandability of human action’” (2002, p.254). While the blackout literature sheds a much-needed scientific and psychological understanding on how we “get to that point,” there is, I believe, a need to move past it and into the aftermath, where the experience is discursively negotiated by its experiencing subjects and where future habits are shaped. Zailckas’ memoir is useful as it captures “the hair-raising drunk-alogue that so many college kids go through without becoming full-fledged drunks” (Mary Karr as cited in Zailckas, 2005, front matter). Such narrative reports should be viewed not as more “true” or accurate than traditional survey methods, but rather as

²⁶ Zailckas distinguishes her practices of drinking “for the purposes of getting drunk or medicating moods” from “alcoholism” by attributing them to less threatening but equally convoluted terms like “abuse” and “binge.” Zailckas equates “alcoholism” with family history, genetics and physical withdrawal - the factors contributing to what “addiction counsellors call ‘a disease’” (p.xiv).

more detailed, comprehensive and as a result, informative and relatable. As Cohen and colleagues (2005) point out, “a number of investigators have concluded that narrative reports are a useful supplement, or even substitute, for more structured assessments” (p.345). Narrative, as a “mode of knowing” and communication, allows members of the affected population to be accountable for personal experiences in their own terms and is considered, by its proponents, to be more reflective, constructive, and performative of social life. Researchers in the positivist paradigm are aware of the limitations of a structured approach: Buelow and Koeppel (1995) call for “research on alcohol-induced amnesia that focuses on a wider range of measures of emotional consequences” (p.18) - an appeal my project aims to satisfy.

BLACKOUTS AND THE CULTURE OF INTOXICATION - WHAT'S “NEW?”

Drinking a fourth drink dictates that a certain kind of evening is about to unfold: namely, one in which you will be drunk. Because nobody stops at four drinks. Four is to inebriation what the St. Louis arch is to the West: It's the gateway drink, the point of no return. A fourth empty glass or bottle or mason jar set on the bar or table or broken in the hobo fire in front of you is your announcement to the rest of the world that, at some point in the next twelve to twenty-four hours, you will be left trying very hard to remember or even harder to forget.

There's no shame in that, of course. But there is shame — a great and insidious shame, a shame that won't be washed off by a thousand iodine showers — in denying what it is you're up to. Sack up. None of this, “One more and I'll call it a night” blah-blah. Nobody's fooling anybody here. Especially after you've settled into old number four. You're a [wo]man for whom sobriety is no longer an option.

But a brave new world has opened up for you, a great blinding universe of magic and possibility. You're a [wo]man who might start confusing nouns with verbs. You're a [wo]man who might fall off of [her] bar stool. You're a [wo]man who might sleep on the floor in [her] clothes. (Jones, 2009, p. 66)²⁷

The “intensity” of drinking practices, expressions of “drunkenness” and, I would argue, subsequent emotional reactions are “largely defined by the culture within which [they occur] and that culture's views on drinking” and intoxicated behaviours (Martinic & Measham, 2008, p.8). It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at how blackouts operate and are perceived within

²⁷ Read more: <http://www.esquire.com/features/drinking/one-more-drink-0609#ixzz0lxpR07U0>.

what researchers are calling the “new culture of intoxication.” Following Measham and Brain (2005), Wells and colleagues (2009) define this culture as one in which “young people drink and use other drugs with the strategic and hedonistic goal of achieving drunkenness and other altered states of consciousness” (p.5). Traditionally, such heavy drinking practices have been referred to as “binge drinking.” However, the term is considered problematic in the research community due to a lack of consensus around definition and measurement.²⁸ To sidestep this debate, Martinic and Measham (2008) suggest a new construct - “extreme drinking” - which focuses not so much on measures of quantity and frequency (i.e 5 drinks per occasion) but rather on cultural and social contexts, underlying motivations, processes, and outcomes both negative *and* positive (p. 8).²⁹ Within this framework, blackouts can be viewed from the drinkers’ perspective - as those usually negative outcomes of “extreme,” but nevertheless pleasurable, drinking practices.

Because “new” practices are gradually becoming homogenized across Western Europe, North America, Britain and Australasia (Room, 2005 in Griffin et al., 2009), it will be useful to consider relevant European studies in the Canadian context. Primarily, I look to Eisenbach-Stangl and Thom’s (2009) policy brief, which draws on research-informed discussions from a workshop on intoxication and intoxicated behaviours in Europe. The authors contemplate what

²⁸ Clinical definitions differ from quantitative and conversational understandings, which are even further confused by varying cultural interpretations. Western epidemiology, social sciences and media define binge drinking as 5 or more drinks for men and 4 or more for women, per occasion. The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) specifies a BAC of 0.08 grams percent or above, which is equivalent to the 5/4 definition, if drinks are consumed within 2 hours. Definitions in other countries range from two bottles of wine (Sweden) to eight units (UK) in one session, which can stretch over the course of the day (ICAP Blue Book Module: “Binge” Drinking, n.d.). In contrast, clinical definitions of binge drinking specify *multi-day* use in which intoxication takes priority over routine tasks (Schuckit, 1998).

²⁹ In a study by White and colleagues (2006) “extreme” drinking is quantified as double and triple the standard definitions of binge - upwards of 10 drinks/session for males and 8 drinks/session for females. As Martinic and Measham (2008) point out, defining bingeing and intoxication in terms of quantity, frequency and corresponding symptoms is difficult, since alcohol can effect individuals differently depending on the drinkers experience, alcohol tolerance, gender and physical proportions. However, for a “typical” person, blackouts are “likely” to occur at BAC levels of 3.0-3.9 (see Appendix D). For more on “extreme drinking” see Appendix E.

differentiates the practices of the contemporary "youthful" culture from the more traditional patterns of older generations: increased visibility and acceptance of drinking among young adults and females; the emergence of new drinks and venues; intensified governmental concern over alcohol-related harms; and rapid social change, to list a few. Such factors have undoubtedly contributed to an emotionally ambivalent drinking culture characterized simultaneously by a wider tolerance and increased problematization of "drinking to get drunk."

A "CULTURE OF YOUTH"

A narrative - a 'myth,' as Barthes would say - of the 'extreme' is continually evolving in youth culture, itself full of variations and contradictions. The 'extreme' is the face of excess pushed further still, the symbol and proof of 'wild youth' attained. The adjective extreme implies an urgency and an abyss, a rise in intensity that seems linked to excessive behaviour, mostly nocturnal and more typically characteristic of youth than advanced age. The 'extreme' becomes almost a style, that of youth freed from its shackles and defining itself through its favourite activity: to 'go out!' at night (Nahoum-Grappe, 2008, p.44)

In writing about the "peculiarities of youth," Nahoum-Grappe draws attention to "their thirst for 'freedom(s),' both singular and plural, sexual and romantic, freedom from submission to parental restraints, freedom in choosing identity and lifestyle, and freedom to choose how to spend the night" (2008, p.46). Yet, in Canada and other countries, youth and young adults - or adolescents - are considered "vulnerable" populations when it comes to alcohol use. Early intervention and prevention efforts are at the top of health agendas worldwide. Studies show age of initiation is an important factor: "[t]he earlier youth start drinking, the more likely they are to consume more on a typical occasion and drink heavily on a monthly and weekly basis" (NAS, 2007, p.8).³⁰ According to the Canadian Addiction Survey (2004), alcohol use among young adults has been on the rise since 1994 (Adlaf, Begin & Sawka, 2005 in Health Canada, 2008), with heavy and frequent drinking usually peaking in the early twenties (Tjepkema, 2004). The

³⁰ According to Statistics Canada, "heavy drinking refers to having consumed five or more drinks per occasion, at least 12 times a year" (2008, para.1). See <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2010001/article/11103-eng.htm>

proportion of young people drinking heavily on a monthly and weekly basis is almost double that of adults. Furthermore, young people tend to drink twice as much per occasion (NAS, 2007, p.8).

It is safe to say that for many young people, drunkenness “is no longer a deviant act, associated with shame and guilt” (Eisenbach-Stangl & Thom, 2009, p.5) or “a marginal phenomenon to be found among subcultures of poor or troubled youth” (Wells et al., 2009, p.5). On the contrary, getting intoxicated is a visibly “mainstream phenomenon” that transcends social class, geography and gender (Järvinen & Room, 2007 as cited in Wells et al., 2009 p. 5). Although there are significantly more male heavy and dependent drinkers in Canada (NAS, 2007; Tjepkema, 2004), reported female heavy drinking among those aged 20-34 has seen a more significant increase over the past decade (Statistics Canada, 2010).³¹ In the UK, Eisenbach-Stangl and Thom note that young adult women “behave much more equal to young men in regard to drinking and intoxication” (2009, p.8). Zailckas echoes this sentiment in her memoir Smashed, writing that hers “are ordinary experiences among girls and young women in both the United States and abroad.”

Despite the relatively recent findings that young people drink at levels well beyond the standard definitions of “binge” (White, Kraus & Swartzwelder, 2006), and that blackouts among this population are “increasingly common,” the extent and implications of such drinking have yet to be understood (p.1006). For example, relatively few studies have examined the neurotoxic effects of repeated “binge” drinking on the highly plastic and developing adolescent brain (Monti et al., 2001 in Monti et al., 2005). Not only is the maturing brain more vulnerable to alcohol induced damage than the adult brain (Crews et al., 2000 in Monti et al., 2005), studies suggest

³¹ Heavy drinking, by age group and sex (Percent). See <http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/l01/cst01/health79b-eng.htm>

such damage may be permanent, affecting brain structure, impulsivity, goal setting and other cognitive functions (Crews & Nixon, 2005 in Monti et al., 2005). Evidence also suggests (Hartzler & Fromme, 2003) that heavy alcohol use in early adolescence damages the brain in a way that might predispose individuals to future memory impairments, including blackouts. While it is known that the adolescent hippocampus (the brain's memory center) is "particularly vulnerable," for obvious ethical and legal reasons, no comparative studies looking at adolescent versus adult brain sensitivity to blackouts have been carried out (White & Swartzwelder, 2005 in Monti et al., 2005, p. 214).³² As such, the neurobiological consequences of repeated blackouts to the adolescent brain are unknown. What has been recognized, however, is the female susceptibility to blackouts, in part due to metabolic factors such as "body weight, proportion of body fat, and levels of key enzymes" (White, 2003 p.190). More generally, studies have shown females to be more susceptible to alcohol-related brain injury (Hommer et al., 2001), neurocognitive deficits (Moss et al., 1994) (in Monti et al., 2005) and health problems, with a tendency "to experience symptoms of dependence more quickly" than males (Poole & Dell, 2005 in Health Canada, 2008, p.16). Given these effects, and the possibility that heavy drinking among females and vulnerable young adults continues to intensify, researching and understanding the practices of this "youthful" culture is of utmost importance.³³

³² Acheson and colleagues (1998) "found that people in their early 20's are more vulnerable to alcohol-induced memory impairments than those in their late 20's" (White & Swartzwelder, 2005 in Monti et al., 2005, p.215).

³³ For a more detailed discussion of the effects of binge drinking on the adolescent brain and implications for permanent damage, neurocognitive deficits, emotional reactivity and memory impairments see Monti and colleagues (2005).

A “COMMERCIALIZED” CONSUMER CULTURE

Indeed, in the late modern consumer culture...“insatiable desire is now not only normal but essential for the continuance of the socio-economic order...a central feature of [the night-time economy], therefore, is the production of subjects who are constantly on the look out for new commodities and alternative experiences” (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007 as cited in Measham, 2008, p.19).

Addictive Fridays - Ladies Always Free Before Midnight - \$125 Bottles All Night! ³⁴

It has been argued that the alcohol industry in the UK has restructured itself to endorse “intensified alcohol consumption” among young people (Howard & Hobbs, 2007 in Griffin et al., 2009, p.470).³⁵ In the European literature, the “new” culture is observed to be the “commercialized successor of the rave culture,” which saw thousands of youth leave city-center bars for remote venues, electronic music and designer drugs (Eisenbach-Stangl & Thom, 2009, p. 7; Measham & Brian, 2005 in Griffin et al., 2009). Similarly in Canada, the rave scene gained a dedicated following with parties attracting as many as 20,000 (Weir, 2000). To infiltrate club culture and re-attract the young consumers, the alcohol industry reacted by “recommodifying alcohol as a psychoactive product” (Brian et al., 2000 in Griffin et. al., 2009, p.458). As the government cracked down on raves, new drinks specifically targeted at the rave and club crowds emerged on the market (Measham, 2006 in Griffin et al., 2009, p.459). The most notable Canadian example is *Rev*: launched in 2000, the caffeine-infused vodka cooler is still promoted as “easy to hold with zero breakage when you’re out tearing it up on the dancefloor” (“Rev”, 2010). As one journalist writes, the drinks’ brand manager went “out of her way to stay in touch

³⁴ To view flyer: <http://dose.clubzone.com/events/186916/Toronto/Lot-332---Addictive-Fridays.html>

³⁵ “In recent years, certain regulations directed at controlling alcohol availability have been relaxed....between 1993-2004, the number of off-premise alcohol outlets in Canada operated or licensed by government Liquor Control Boards rose [by] 43.8%...originally designed to ensure that social responsibility issues were not subordinated by economic and financial considerations, liquor control boards have gradually moved away from focusing on this original mandate to addressing other consumer priorities.” (NAS, 2007, p.13)

with the *Rev* crowd,” attending club nights to check out what her target market was wearing, reading and listening to (Bordeau, 2005, see also Beauchemin, 2005).³⁶

Another “symptom” of the “new” culture, according to Wells and colleagues (2009), is the increased intensity and ritualization of pre-drinking. Because venues catering to the under 30 crowd (“factories of drunkenness”³⁷) tend to be expensive, crowded, loud and dark with limited seating, getting drunk with a group of friends before the main event serves increasingly significant economic and social functions, providing an enjoyable context within which drinkers can commence and anticipate the evening together. Again, the alcohol industry reacted by offering drink specials and reduced rates, often before midnight. Also, to better accommodate groups of drinkers (and no doubt generate a major profit), an increasing number of higher-end venues have started to offer bottle service. This service allows groups of drinkers to bypass congested walkup bars with self-serve bottles of liquor in private areas stocked with ice, mix and glassware.³⁸ Although usually significantly marked up in price (\$150 - \$500), having a bottle secures exclusive and liberal access to alcohol, no doubt appealing to those “hip young urbanites trying to create an impression for themselves” (Mitchell, para. 2, 2008). Those opposed to bottle service argue it “drastically increases patrons’ incentive to drink intemperately and promotes dangerous levels of drunkenness” (as cited in Milzoff, para.1, 2006).

³⁶ Boudeau’s article is “Rev in da clubs” (<http://www.strategyonline.ca/articles/magazine/20050701/jazwinski.html>). Beauchemin writes that “the generation gap got a little wider” with the introduction of two new caffeinated beers, Molson’s *Kick* and Labatt’s *Shok* (“Beer’s extra buzz” <http://www.madd.ca/english/news/stories/n05may04.htm>). He argues “big brewers know the idea appeals to the party-all-night rave crowd” and raises concerns about “marketing products to kids who want to get drunk.” He notes that while the idea of caffeinated beers is not new, marketing them to a more mainstream, lager-drinking young-adult crowd is. Beauchemin points to *Kick*’s “stylish” aluminum bottle, “[l]ight enough to swig from while swinging on the dance floor” and *Shok*’s can with its “comic-book-noir characters.” Both articles were accessed on Feb.27/2010.

³⁷ See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/theme-bars-exploit-young-binge-drinkers-677831.html>

³⁸ In an article for boozenews.ca (2008), Paul Mitchell contemplates the increasing popularity and success of offering bottle service in Canada: <http://www.boozenews.ca/index.php?itemid=208>. For a brief history of bottle service visit <http://nymag.com/nightlife/features/17308/> and <http://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/22834/>

New, or more “intense” drinks, venues and practices may very well be contributing to the “intensified alcohol consumption” characteristic of the “new” culture and consequently to the increasing prevalence of blackouts among young adults. Because pre-drinking often involves a “rapid consumption of large quantities of alcohol,” Wells and colleagues (2009, p.5) note it significantly increases the risk of blackouts and other consequences. As with pre-drinking, the free-pour feature of bottle service often results in individuals drinking more than intended and losing track of how much was consumed. For example, Wells and colleagues cite two studies in which individuals “reported drinking so much while pre-drinking they passed out or were too intoxicated to go out” (DeJong & DeRicco, 2005; Kellner, 2008 in Wells et al., 2009, p.6). Consequently, to “enhance and extend their nights out” (Parker & Williams, 2003; Brain et al., 2000 in Wells et al., 2009, p.6), young adults may choose to mix alcohol with energy drinks (now a standard practice ³⁹), cocaine and other stimulants. Little is known, however, about the combined effects of such mixtures on intoxication and memory. Although potentially working to increase the drinkers’ ability to “to go all night” (Bourdeau, para.1, 2005), mixing depressants with stimulants may cause individuals to feel less drunk than they really are.⁴⁰ This in turn can contribute to more drinking and as a result increased tolerance, abuse (Ferreira, De Mello, Pompéia & De Souza-Formigoni, 2006) and blackouts.⁴¹

³⁹ “Jagger-bombs” (and “Rev-bombs”) are served and consumed in many bars - a one ounce shot glass of Jagger is dropped into a half-full glass of Redbull (Rev) after which the mixture is chugged at once in its entirety.

⁴⁰ For example, drinkers believe the alcohol-energy drink combination will reduce sleepiness (Ferreira et al., 2006). Limited evidence suggests, however, that such a mix may work to reduce only the *subjective perceptions* of intoxication. This finding may be dose-dependent, with higher doses needed to significantly reduce the depressant effects of alcohol, increasing its stimulant effects (Ferreira et al., 2004 in Ferreira et al., 2006, p.603).

⁴¹ Interestingly, an animal study (Vohra & Hui, 2000) has shown taurine, a specific component found in energy drinks, to be “effective in attenuating the amnesia induced by alcohol” (Ferreira et al., 2006, p.599).

A "MODERATE" CULTURE?

Moving towards a culture of moderation does not imply that a culture of "immoderation" exists in Canada. Rather it signals a new way of thinking by the large majority of the population, a way of making choices about alcohol use based on a clearer understanding of when, when not, and how much to drink, and the appropriate motivations and settings for drinking. It also strives to create a better understanding of the risks involved in drinking...and learning how to minimize these. (NAS, 2007, p.5)

Moderation is idiocy perpetuated by the alcohol industry, which bombards us with warnings about "drinking responsibly" in order to absolve itself from the irresponsibility that alcohol awakens in just about everyone at one time or another. (Zailckas, 2005 p.180)

However standard among drinkers and seemingly encouraged by the alcohol industry, intoxication continues to be viewed "from the mainstream of accepted behavior and social mores" within Western governmental discourse, which "separat[es] and stigmatiz[es] those who engage in it" (Martinic & Measham, 2008, p.261). Distinctions such as "binge," and now "extreme," are often used to elicit a response and change practices to "more acceptable patterns as defined by professionals, policy makers and 'the general public'" (Eisenbach-Stangl & Thom, 2009, p.10). As Griffin and colleagues (2009) point out, within such discourses, "only rational, civilized and above all moderate drinking is constituted as unproblematic, so drinking to intoxication cannot be linked to pleasure or to subjects of moral worth" (p.461). For example, in Canada's first-ever National Alcohol Strategy (NAS), *Reducing Alcohol-Related Harm in Canada: Toward a Culture of Moderation* (2007), intoxication is consistently linked to acute and chronic risks (although blackouts and memory loss are not mentioned) and is itself constituted as a harmful and negative outcome of alcohol use. The report makes recommendations to "minimize the harms related to intoxication" (p.2) and, more generally, to change "knowledge, attitudes and practices" (p.6). Accordingly, one of many proposed strategies is the targeting of "specific high-risk drinking patterns and/or vulnerable populations" (p.1). Recently, a Toronto Public Health campaign (Appendix C) addressed young adult "extreme" drinkers as one such population.

Described in the brochure as “drinking more than your body can handle,” this pattern of consumption is associated with risks such as “passing out, memory loss, impaired judgment, blackouts, vomiting, injury and - worst of all - alcohol overdose” (2009, para.5). Acknowledging drinking patterns which go beyond traditional classifications of “binge” is a step forward, however, one has to consider the effectiveness of such messaging among groups of drinkers for whom such risks, apart from overdose, “are as much expected...as intoxication itself and often seen as part of the drinking event” (Eisenbach-Stangl & Thom, 2009, p.6).

“In some social circles, blackouts are not only accepted, they’re expected” (Female, 18)

[I]t seems likely that in adolescence, many alcohol related problems (e.g. blackouts, hangover, vomiting, unplanned sex) are so common that they are viewed as an inevitable part of the drinking experience ... For this reason, it seems that intervention with this population needs to be very sensitive to the culture of the adolescent and young adult, and prevention messages and interventions need to be tailored accordingly. (Monti et al., 2005, p. 217)

Wells and colleagues argue (2009) that policies and prevention plans aimed at promoting moderate drinking in Canada need to be further developed to acknowledge and address the motivations and understandings of young drinkers themselves. “So what is the allure,” ask Griffin and colleagues (2009) “of drinking to (extreme) intoxication on a fairly regular basis for young men and women?” The answer most often cited in the literature is “fun” (Eisenbach-Stangl & Thom, 2009, p.5) Although “extreme” drinking can be unpredictable and negative in outcome, it is also determined in its pursuit of pleasure, viewed foremost as an enjoyable and social process rather than a harmful one (Martinic & Measham, 2008). What differentiates “extreme” from immoderate “pathological drinking is that it is neither unbridled or limitless. Rather, extreme drinking is a form of calculated hedonism (...) [signifying] a desire to achieve a ‘controlled loss of control’” (Measham, 2002 in Martinic & Measham, 2008, p.8). Many young

adults who drink to “extremes” plan their intoxication around factors such as time, place and company (Measham, 2004 in Griffin et al., 2009), with intensity of consumption depending on variations in these factors. In this respect, extreme drinking is not simply about reckless pleasure-seeking, but about “the ability to walk the fine line ... and achieve an acceptable balance between harmful and nonharmful outcomes” (Martinic & Measham, 2008, p.9).

A “MANAGEABLE” CULTURE

The key is to not humiliate yourself irreversibly...We make up for it the next morning by cracking jokes over a basket of bagels and eradicating the evidence with a garden hose. (Zailckas, 2005, p.257)

As Martinic and Measham stress, “extreme drinking *hinges on the ability to manage outcomes* in the face of the possible elements of unpredictability” (2008, p. 8). The possibility of experiencing a blackout is one such unpredictable element. Because the onset is often abrupt, it becomes difficult for susceptible drinkers to forecast which drink will bring on the amnesia. It seems accurate to say, however, that for those with a history of experiencing alcohol-induced amnesia and where heavy intoxication is planned, blackouts have become expected and unsurprising. Still, for the majority, getting to this point of intoxication is a “mysterious process,” a puzzle often left to the devices of storytelling. Of course, having no memory for intoxicated events undoubtedly influences the way affected drinkers feel, think, and talk about their experiences. As one researcher notes, “some of the most interesting effects of alcohol use may appear sometime after consumption – in the discourse of alcohol users when recounting drunken episodes” (Giles, 1999, p.389). Only a handful of studies have focused on such narratives. For example, in a study of US fraternity drinking stories, Workman (2001) distinguished between three types of drinking narratives - the adventure story, the comic story, and the discovery story. Workman found that intoxication was regarded as a “form of risk-taking ... entertainment (for

others) ... and as a means of exploring physical limits” (i.e nakedness, urinating, vomiting, sex) (Griffin et al., 2009, p.461). In an Australian study, Sheehan and Ridge (2001) found that storytelling was used as a sense-making and negotiating tool for female secondary school “binge” drinkers. The authors note that while such drinking was considered risky, “any harm encountered along the way tend[ed] to be filtered through the ‘good story,’ brimming with tales of fun, adventure, bonding, sex, gender transgressions, and relationships” (pp. 347-348 as cited in Griffin, p. 462).

In the only study, to my knowledge, addressing blackout (as well as “passing out”) narratives specifically, Griffin and colleagues (2009) explore the significance ‘ordinary’ young adult drinkers in the UK attribute to their memory loss (p.457). Focusing on female re-tellings, the authors observe that telling a story about another’s blackout or pass out experience was used to dissociate oneself from the “risky” and “humiliating” aspects of the experience which were “implicitly sexualized” (i.e being taken advantage of) (p.464), associated with a loss of control and constituted as “highly undesirable.” Interestingly, when a female participant described herself as being in a “risky” situation similar to the one previously shared (i.e passing out in the bathroom), the narrative is “presented as a funny story ... recounted with laughter as she attempts to normalize her situation and pretend that everything is fine.” While some presented their experiences as “a source of some amusement,”⁴² the authors note that “[y]oung women struggled to manage the spectre of sexual assault, shame and loss of respectable femininity associated with getting very drunk and passing out” (p.469).

⁴² These tended to be the narratives where there was no loss of memory (“I remember the whole thing”) but rather a loss of inhibition and perceived control (“I didn’t have a clue what I was doing”). Here the female storyteller is “able to represent herself as lacking any responsibility for her actions” (p.466).

“Male participants,” however, “did not represent their relationship to ‘extreme drinking’ with the same sense of hesitation or ambivalence” (p.466). Getting drunk, in numerous male accounts, was represented as “a deliberate practice in order to ‘get absolutely annihilated.’” Being unable to remember was not generally regarded as “pleasurable” but rather as “part of a process of determined excess and voluntary engagement with embodied experiences of unpleasantness and disgust.” In the selected interview extract, the narrative breaks suddenly, interrupted by what the authors call “the mysterious space ‘outside the narrative,’” to resume again at the point of returned consciousness or memory, usually when the individual wakes the next day. The authors argue that in the context of these narratives the “somewhat mysterious process” - that is, the blackout - is implicitly regarded as the norm - “impervious to rational analysis or surveillance - by self or others” (p.467). Griffin and colleagues conclude that “passing out stories” are “narratives of remarkable excess in which drinking to the point of loss of consciousness and loss of memory is represented as both relatively normal and as a remarkable event.” These narratives provide the “means of dealing with dilemmas of risk and responsibility, as well as the focus for humor, group solidarity, fun and entertainment (p.470).

AN “ESCAPIST” CULTURE

[A] key position offered by or to the unconscious [blacked out] drunken subjects in these ‘passing out stories’ [blackout narratives] is one of escape: a sort of ‘time out’ from the world of rational civilized individual subjectivity and self-control. These narratives offer a form of surrender to the forces of chaos and hedonism, with all the associated possibilities of physical, sexual and psychological harm that entails. (Griffin et al., 2009, p.471)

Although “fun” with friends may be the most cited reason for drinking to excess, a “closer more qualitatively oriented look...reveals less positive motives.” Rapid social change has increased the competition, workload, and felt uncertainty among young adults about the future,

"inevitably evok[ing] anxieties and stress." Increasingly, young people are finding themselves in a stage of "extended adolescence" - which, for various socioeconomic reasons, means it is taking them longer to grow up.⁴³ "Extreme and visible drinking and intoxication might be one way to express and treat the heightened burden of strain," note Eisenbach-Stangl and Thom (2009, p.6). Furthermore, in a culture that romanticizes the effects of alcohol, it has been argued intoxication is a fashion "that orient[s] the thoughts, feelings (...) actions" and identities of young people (p. 7). One European study has found it is actually those who abstain that "may find themselves socially excluded and at risk of related psycho-social problems" (p.5). Traditional commonalities such as education and work are peripheral to the young adult friendships of today. Instead, bonds tend to be built around "leisure and consumption" (p.8). As Griffin and colleagues (2009) observed, excessive drinking was "central to the cohesiveness, intimacy and care provided by young people's social friendship groups" (p.470).

Considering the sensitive and intense neuropsychological processes, socioeconomic conditions and sociocultural contexts outlined above, much more research needs to be done around young adult perceptions of intoxication, as well as moderation and abstention,⁴⁴ to effectively target "problematic" drinking habits and consequent harms like memory loss.

SWEENEY'S BLACKOUT MENACE - "Walking, Talking, Unconscious and Lethal"

Mild-mannered people become violent. Gentle folks become angry, enraged and vulgar. Ethical persons turn into sexual predators and discriminating women willingly agree to be their partners. Law abiding citizens fight with police, seek to flee, even commit murder and mayhem. (Sweeney, 2008, p.121)

If a person is female and for some bizarre reason likes being beaten up and raped, then she should drink till she blacks out. (Sweeney, 2004, p.64)

⁴³ See http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2004-09-30-extended-adolescence_x.htm

⁴⁴ Eisenbach-Stangl and Thom: "contrary to intoxication abstention is not perceived as incurring associated social problems and is neglected in research and policy" (2009, p.5).

The potential for experiencing alcohol-related harm while in a blackout is an issue taken up, rather dramatically, by Dr. Donal F. Sweeney and collaborating author Robert A. Liston in The Alcohol Blackout: Walking, Talking, Unconscious and Lethal (2004) and follow-up Cries From the Abyss: Alcohol Blackouts Revealed (2008).⁴⁵ In a literary style as sensational as the stories presented within, Sweeney attempts to highlight the seriousness of the condition. He applies various findings from studies on memory and consciousness to blackouts, arguing that without memory formation the drinker is *unconscious*, or rather without higher-order consciousness, awareness or control over what he or she is doing. As a result, the person in a blackout is “unable to think, learn, plan, form intent or consider consequences” (2008, p.5).⁴⁶ Sweeney characterizes such a person as both a “menace” - “capable of any manner of uncharacteristic and bizarre acts” (2008, p.5) - and a “victim” - suddenly attacked by a memory disease that leaves him or her terrified, vulnerable and ashamed (2004, p.39). Furthermore, Sweeney warns that blackouts can happen to anyone and after as little as two beers. In a chapter entitled “Hardly the Town Drunk” (2008, p.12), Sweeney quotes extensively from the letters of a mother, an older lady (“dignified, well-dressed elderly matron,” p.17) and a church pastor - all of whom reported drinking moderately, blacking out and getting into trouble - to argue that the long-standing association between blackouts, heavy drinking and alcoholism must end. The stigma of

⁴⁵ To find out more about these authors visit: <http://www.alcoholblackout.com/authors.html>

⁴⁶ Sweeney (2004) argues that a “drunken, blacked out, unconscious and zombie-like” person is incapable of intentionally committing a crime - they are in state of automatism, acting impulsively and without conscious thought or intent (p.138). For Sweeney the blackout is a mitigating factor and he adopts a rhetoric that relieves drinkers from the feelings of guilt and accountability for their actions while in a blackout. It has been well documented in the literature, however, that most who experience blackouts do so as a result of heavy and rapid consumption which is often associated with the desire to get intoxicated. Cases in which a drinker experiences a blackout after moderate consumption are presumably not as common as Sweeney implies. Furthermore, the academic literature describes the blacked out individual as conscious and capable of engaging in a variety of complex, goal-oriented and voluntary behaviours (White, 2003). As a result, Sweeney’s book is criticized for having flawed logic. People do not just “accidentally come across” knives and impulsively and mindlessly harm another (Sweeney, 2004, p.112).

alcoholism, Sweeney notes, has left many who experience blackouts too ashamed or embarrassed to talk about it: "Most of the people who write are extremely upset. They are shocked by their behavior, especially those experiencing their first blackout. They had no idea such a thing could happen to them" (2004, p.17).

To support his arguments, Sweeney repeatedly draws on whatever stories he can find - mostly news reports of accidents and crimes. In his second book (2008), he quotes extensively from letters and emails sent to him by concerned and affected readers who felt there was nowhere else "to write for help" (p.2). Within these letters are accounts of "physical abuse of loved ones, wild rides and tragic accidents, indiscriminate and unremembered sex, rape, violent crimes [and] even murder" (back matter). Sweeney acknowledges, briefly, that "not everyone reacts violently" (p. 102) and those "who avoid trouble and get home safely" probably write less often (p.121). Interestingly, the majority of the letters Sweeney received were from women. Men, he observes, are "more macho," only writing in when they have found themselves in troublesome situations. "Perhaps that accounts for the extremely bizarre stories they tell," he notes. Yet, Sweeney devotes the pages of his two books to such extreme incidences, often presenting them as though they are the norm: "Most remain docile, appear normal if not rational, reach home safely. Yet many, if not all, as we shall see in the pages to come, are capable of uncharacteristic and unwanted behaviors that are truly destructive, brutish and bizarre" (Sweeney, 2008, p.6).

Unfortunately, Sweeney's sensational portrayals of the blacked out "bloody menace" (back matter, 2004) have inadvertently turned his efforts into a text astoundingly reminiscent of the 1936 moral panic film *Reefer Madness* - enjoyed today as a comedy.⁴⁷ Sweeney tries to highlight

⁴⁷ The film was originally meant as a warning against the "youthful" and "drug-crazed abandon" of "marijuana victims." See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reefer_Madness

the seriousness of the blackout condition, but inadvertently turns it into a joke. His approach (or perhaps that of his collaborating author, Liston), in my opinion, pathologizes and stigmatizes like no other.⁴⁸ As a member of Sweeney's affected audience I found it hard to relate to the scenarios presented within - I could not see myself as the "menace" Sweeney described. Although the exaggerated style, presumptuous claims, drinker stereotypes, and blatant patronizing make it difficult to take Sweeney seriously, his intentions are valid. He raises significant questions surrounding legal responsibility,⁴⁹ provides advice on how to prevent and cope with blackouts, underlines the extent of the consequences and attempts to mobilize the research and medical communities to pay more attention to what he rightfully sees as a "huge, misunderstood and unrecognized problem" (2004, front matter). That his website gets over one thousand hits a day speaks to "the great public concern about blackouts, concern that the medical, addiction, substance abuse and alcohol treatment specialists have yet to realize" (2008, p.1). The majority of those affected by blackouts, however, are not the "naive" drinkers represented in Sweeney's books. Rather than focusing on first-time, bizarre and sensational cases, it may be useful to consider the experiences of heavy drinking young adults who view the blackout as a normative part of drinking. A relational and insiders point of view may serve to better reach such an audience and interrogate what it means to remember in today's "new" culture of intoxication.

Given that the majority of letters Sweeney received are from individuals who have found themselves in bizarre situations, the excerpts included in the book do speak to the negative and

⁴⁸ I started a correspondence with Sweeney, who immediately inquired about the nature of my blackouts after which he insisted that I read his books so that we could have a "more intelligent" conversation about my "alcohol problem" (personal communication, June 16, 2007). When Sweeney wrote that his second book had over one hundred authors, I was surprised to find out I was one of them. Portions of my correspondence had been reprinted, without permission, under the chapter heading *Women in Peril* (2008, p.32).

⁴⁹ For more on alcohol-induced amnesia and the law see Sweeney (1990) and Cunniën (1986).

troubling emotional nature of the blackout experience. Individuals ask Sweeney for help, fearing that something terrible could happen to them if they drank again. They describe feeling disturbed, frightened and humiliated but also relieved to discover they were not “horrible” people but rather were in a state that left them “incapable of making any wise decisions” (2008, p.13). As Sweeney points out, individuals coming out of a blackout “wonder who was this person who said and did those horrid things...It couldn’t have been them” (2008, p.8). Sweeney describes “[n]ot knowing and not being able to find out” as a “private terror” (2004, p.13) so intense, “some stop drinking or severely limit consumption” (p.5). Lastly, he asserts that “nobody talks much about blackouts” (2008, p.2) or even admits to having them: “The shame of being out of control and in a mindless state is boundless. It is something hidden and rarely spoken of” (p.3).

FACEBOOK - “The What The Fuck Happened Last Night Appreciation Society”⁵⁰

Drunken College Girls Immortalize Their Nights on Facebook: The Humiliation Should Be Worse Than the Hangover, But Many Find It Entertaining. (Westmacott, 2008)

Nowhere is the prevalence of blackouts more shamelessly laid out than within user-created groups on *Facebook* - a digital testament of the “new” culture of intoxication that puts Sweeney’s arguments to shame and renders him a representative of the older generation. “The Wet Wakeup” and “The Empty Condom Wrapper” are just two of ten “classic” blackout scenarios listed in the description of the most popular of these blackout-related groups, titled *I Did What? Shut the Fuck Up No I Didn't...I Did? Fuck* (Appendix A). Twenty-four groups go by this name alone, but hundreds more can be joined. Laura Westmacott, the journalist of the above headline, writes about one such group, which has 180,000 members and 5,000 photos (the group limit) “of girls in states of drunken debauchery.” Rather than being embarrassed, these girls seem to be “boasting”

⁵⁰ To visit this *Facebook* group: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2409830856&ref=search>

about their antics as “a way to gain social standing among one's peers” (2008, para.5). The photos posted to these groups display limp and injured bodies passed out on couches and floors, faces decorated with marker and heads bent over toilet seats. The posts to these pages are often competitive in tone as individuals offer up their “best” (i.e worst) stories. Some take it a step further, posting recipes for the “best ways to blackout”; sarcastically and proudly portraying themselves as real “class acts” and professional “blackout artists.” They celebrate and monumentalize their ability to “embrace the lighter side” of blacking out, subscribing to the idea that “the best stories are made when memories are not.”⁵¹

While Sweeney’s books invite only those fearful and bizarre responses, it became obvious the groups on *Facebook* also solicited and favoured a particular type of blackout narrative –similarly framed in humorous and trivializing terms:

This is for all the wild partiers who have the tendency to reach that point in their drinking where they remember the events of the evening and are aware of what’s going on around them... and then quickly consume ridiculous amounts of alcohol to pass that point. Who find that when they are in this state; develop superhuman powers, stellar judgment, balls of steel, unrivaled intelligence, an extreme hatred for clothing, and of course feel the need to tell everyone they know, or don’t know...just how much they mean to them (...) This is for all of those people who need half a dozen of your closest friends (who usually blacked out with you) to piece the full night’s events together and even then, some things are just lost forever. But it’s ok, if you don’t remember it doesn’t count... right? Cheers to you all, it takes several years of dedicated drinking to reach this point and once you are there, well... you pretty much black out all the time...sometimes. (“Sometimes I blackout,” n.d.)⁵²

Embedded in this group description are the characteristics of the new culture. Drinking to the point of blacking out is represented as a re-occurring drinking ritual. More than that, the description implies drinkers are consuming large amounts of alcohol, and “quickly” for the very reason of moving past “that point” of awareness. The effects of being in a state of lost awareness

⁵¹ From the *Facebook* group-site “Blackout Artists,” <http://www.new.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2208669128> “Our Mission is to embrace the lighter or more appropriately darker side of binge drinking and alcohol abuse” (n.d). This group is no longer online.

⁵² Group: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2209130419&ref=search&sid=583310227.4165875449..1>

are idealized and the blackout is constituted as the key to unlocking the “superhuman” within. The description creates an identity for drinkers (“This is for all the wild partiers”), providing them with a sense of inclusion and community and commending them for their “dedicated drinking.” The expressed “need” for similarly affected friends to “piece the night together” underlines the cohesiveness that collective remembering brings to the group and emphasizes the normative character of such practices.

Although the excerpt carries an undertone of uncertainty concerning blacking out (“if you don’t remember it doesn’t count... right?”), the drinkers invited and attracted to post to the group are clearly not those who identify with the “boundless shame” Sweeney refers to in his texts. On the contrary, these are drinkers who possess a certain disregard for incurred and potential harms as well as a sense of pride in the extremities of their behaviour. Within the posts made to the group, the feelings of “fear,” “dread,” and “apprehension” reported in the psychology literature (White et al., 2004, p. 219) are rarely expressed, solicited for expression, or expanded upon. Posts which carried a subtext of uncertainty and worry were often either dismissed by the individual him or herself, or ignored and downplayed by other “members” or contributors to the discourse. That attitudes and emotions expressed in subjective assessments of experience (i.e. anonymous survey and private emails) contradict emotions and attitudes expressed in social contexts, suggests that drinkers who engage in such social discourse may be repressing or downplaying negative emotions and stressful thoughts associated with the experience, perhaps to ease the anxieties of amnesia. Because little attention has been paid to the way in which the experience of blacking out has been expressed or ignored in social discourse, not much is known about the reassurance drinkers might receive from their environment and from collectively

remembering or “piecing-together” drunken experiences with friends. Consequently, little is also known about the impact this social reconstruction has on the way individuals make sense of and feel towards their experience of not remembering. Using narrative, I hope to expose amnesia’s social and emotional aftermath - for both affected participants, and myself.

“AMPLIFYING” & “EXPANDING” THROUGH NARRATIVE AND COLLAGE

People organize their personal biographies and understand them through the stories they create to explain and justify their life experiences. When people are asked why they do what they do, they provide narrative explanations, not logical-scientific categorical ones. It is the way individuals understand the lives of others. Experiences are connected to other experiences, and are evaluated in relation to the larger whole. (...) The experience of (re)narrativizing - like the experience of biographical time itself - is open-ended and polysemous, allowing different meanings and systems of meanings to emerge. (Richardson, 1990, p.126)

Narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes; it humanizes time; and it allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions, and to alter the directions of our lives. (Richardson, 1990, p.117)

Scientific studies specifically addressing blackouts have provided useful information on neuro-cognitive processes, predicative factors and experiential characteristics but limited insights into the phenomenology of the experience and its emotional aftermath, especially among young adults. Survey methodologies have revealed that subjects rely heavily on others (usually also intoxicated) (White et al., 2004) to provide details of their blackout experience but fail to assess the social and cultural nature of this exchange and how it might influence attitudes and drinking habits. Chase (2003) maintains that “[u]nderstanding general social processes,” such as intoxication and (not)remembering, “*requires* a focus on their embodiment in actual practices, that is, in actual narratives.” In focusing, we “learn about the kinds of narratives that are possible for certain groups of people and we learn about the cultural world that makes their narratives possible - and problematic - in certain ways” (p.290). Furthermore, narrative expands “traditional

forms of knowledge (knowing *how* knowing *that*)” by letting us know “*what its like*” (Worth, 2005 as cited in Goodall, 2008, p.14).

Despite its “quintessential” role in “the understanding and communication of the sociological,” Richardson (1990) notes that narrative has been marginalized within conventional sociology (p.117) due to the “dinosaurian” belief that art and science are somehow “contradictory and incompatible” (p.661).⁵³ McNiff (2008) writes, however, that art and science are “complementary within the total complex of knowing”: science strives for “replication and constancy of results,” accessing “core principals,” whereas art “amplifies and expands” with “endless variations in style [and] interpretation.” Creative modes of expression highlight those “unique and immeasurable” attributes (pp. 34-35) of experience and as a result may be, not more “truthful,” but better at revealing “the life of feeling” (Eisner, 2008, p.7). As Eisner convincingly argues, “[a]rt helps us connect with personal, subjective emotions, and through such a process, it enables us to discover our own interior landscape” contributing to “an enlargement of human understanding.” (p.11). Rather than focusing on one approach - one perspective - McNiff suggests exploring “similarities and differences” to see how art and science “inform one another” (2008, pp. 34-35).

My paper, then, positions itself within the relativist, constructivist, post-structural/modern and phenomenological schools of thought which view realities and meanings as co-created, experientially based, dependent on context and situation and thus, multiple. Studies which focus on neuro-cognitive processes reveal an organic reality of experience, knowledge of which is useful but which gives us only part of the picture. There are also those images *we* have of

⁵³ Yet, Richardson notes, all social scientific writing depends on narrative devices. Take for example, White’s use of metaphor in his review of the blackout literature: “If recreational drugs were tools, alcohol would be a sledgehammer” (2003, p.186).

ourselves and our experiences – constructed, performed and transformed through the social exchange of personal narratives. In sharing and interpreting stories of memories disappeared, we create “empathetic” and “relational” pathways to *meaning* (Goodall, 2008, p.14). We “piece together” experience with others to make things comprehensible for ourselves and to “come to some shared sense of the event” (Engel, 1999, p.41). Sulkunen (2002) writes:

Human conduct is not only understandable and should be studied as meaningful; it is also understood by agents themselves, and therefore subject to individual choice, strategy and play. We construct images of our practices and environment by classifying, explaining and interpreting; in other words we make them meaningful. The actions of others and of ourselves are guided by such images – not completely and not in full awareness, but nevertheless in a way that “makes sense.” (p.261)⁵⁴

Similarly, Richardson (1999) notes that the “ethnographic genre has been blurred, enlarged, and altered” by practitioners and theorists to encompass a wide range of performative writing and visual tools to enact, embody and present aspects of culture to readers and audiences (p.660). Situating my paper within such ethnographic practice, I was inspired by its various modes and definitions. For example, Goodall’s “new ethnography” aligns itself in definition with Gutkind’s “creative non-fiction,” that is “creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences” (2008, p.9). Engel’s definition of memoir is most evocative of the nature of (not)remembering: “a communication of the images within one person’s mind, not a record of what happened” (1999, p.120). But it is Olney’s description of the term “periautography” which I am most drawn to - “writing about or around the self” - because it gives me more freedom to be exploratory (pp. xv-xvi). Also inspiring, is Richardson’s CAP (creative analytic practice) autoethnography (see Appendix F) which combines writing with analysis and art (1999). As such, alongside collected and excerpted

⁵⁴ Sulkunen (2002) draws on the work of Bourdieu to advocate a constructivist, semiotic and hermeneutical approach to the study of alcohol use.

narrative fragments, I include collage, new journalism and personal “writing-stories” (Richardson, 1999; 2001) to reveal my “vulnerable self.”⁵⁵ I would like to emphasize, however, that rather than following a strict methodological process, the paper is a pilot project for a more creative and journalistic undertaking; it is an exploratory narrative and analytic assemblage, an inquiring combination of personal and collected life narratives, which hopefully “elicits an interpretation of the world by being ‘itself a worldlike object for interpretation’” (Dilliard, 1982 as cited in Denzin, 2001, p.31).

COLLAGE

In collage “a single, coherent notion ‘gives way to relations of juxtaposition and difference’ (Rainey, 1998, p.124) and these fragments ‘work against one another so hard, the mind is sparkled’ (Steinberg, 1972, p.14) into new ways of knowing. The ambiguity present in collage provides a way of expressing the said and the unsaid, and allows for multiple avenues of interpretation and greater accessibility (in Butler-Kisber, 2008, p. 268)

The motivation to use collage as a creative component to the paper lies in the desire to employ an aesthetic that embodies the fragmented experience of the blackout, an aesthetic which constructs the experience through content and through form. In this respect, I view collage as a metaphor and a theory for the collecting and “piecing together” that happens following amnesia. Collage also embodies my paradigmatic viewpoint, opposing the “notion of a single reality or truth by portraying multiple realities” (Butler-Kisber, 2008, p.267), and counteracting “the hegemony and linearity in written texts,” such as those of traditional academic writing.

⁵⁵ According to Richardson (1999): “Writing stories – including text, hypertext, dialogues, drawings, dances, and so forth – are narratives about the contexts in which the ethnography is produced. They situate one’s writing in other parts of one’s life such as disciplinary constraints, academic debates, departmental politics, social movements, community structures, research interests, familial ties, and personal history and longings. They offer critical reflexivity about the writing-self in different contexts as a valuable creative analytical practice. They evoke new questions about the self and subject; they remind us that our work is grounded, contextual and rhizomatic. They evoke deep parts of the self, heal wounds, enhance or even alter one’s sense of identity. They help demystify the ethnographic process for the upcoming generations of ethnographers. And they nest the project ethically... Writing stories bring the danger and poignancy, the ethics and personal responsibility, of ethnographic representation up close and personal” (p. 665).

Butler-Kisber (2008) outlines the various ways in which collage can contribute to qualitative research. Along with other forms of visual art, it allows for a sensory, embodied and non-linear response that “can mediate understanding in new and interesting ways for both the creator and the viewer” (p.265). For example, Karen Scott-Hoy explains that by painting images of her research process she was able to remember and bring to the forefront “experiences buried under [her] conscious reasoning,” which taught her “about the experience and culture [she had] begun to absorb, the people [she had] come to know, and [her]self” (Scott-Hay & Ellis, 2008, p.131). Similarly, using collage, I can attempt to overcome the limits of language, which leave me struggling to communicate the ambivalence I feel towards drinking. In this way, collage is an excellent tool for writers block, helping to elicit the writing process. Butler-Kisber and colleagues (2007) discuss the work of a graduate student who found it useful to make a collage before she began a specific section of writing:

This collage/writing process is a way of mapping subjectivity. The spontaneous and intuitive method of collage draws out more complex notions about experience, disrupting and challenging safer, more traditional textual routes, leading to learning that is both personal and significant” (in Butler-Kisber, 2008, p.272).

Rather than beginning with themes, ideas and concepts, collage “moves from intuitions and feelings.” Image fragments are chosen and placed to give a “sense” of something rather than a literal expression of the idea. As a result, the process ‘honours the unconnected and inexplicable’”(Mullen, 1999 as cited in Butler-Kisber, 2008, p.269). Struggling to put my ambivalence into words, I used collage to help *me* answer the question of how I feel about the experience. From there, I could write stories “that help the audience to find meaning in what they see” (Scott-Hay & Ellis, 2008, p.133). As such, collages can provide a useful visual trail of a thinking or reflective process that is otherwise difficult to make explicit.

“PIECING IT TOGETHER” - A COLLAGE / WRITING STORY

I spent some time looking
through old party pictures,
searching for visual elements
which moved beyond the
obvious and the literal. Cutting
into an image, I select only my
legs, strapped to a pair of neon
yellow stilettos.

OKAY,⁵⁶ WE OPEN WITH
SIRENS, blasting down an empty
unidentified street. It's Sunday night
- no - early Monday morning - when
the ambulance door swings open in
front of Mount Sinai Emergency. As
the wheels hit the ice-covered
pavement, a lifeless twenty-
something female is lurched, reeled,
back into consciousness / Okay, no -
rewind / We open with a bar. A dive
decorated with Christmas lights.

And a charming bartender - a friend - wearing one of those cut up shirts from the eighties. And me. Bourbon and book secured in the ol' rubber arm. Perched on a black vinyl stool. "Shots?" Sudden thoughts of unfinished writing. Of cursors blinking on vacant screens. "Okay," shots. All kinds of shots. Free shots. Chilled shots. Shots doubled and mixed with soda. Then dancing. The crazy kind. Stiletto-strapped feet hit the flashing red tile. Suddenly / Cut to black / We open with hands and feet strapped to a stretcher. Okay, Okay. *Where am I?* Half-interested. Disoriented. Okay, yelling. Faces I can't remember. Faceless faces. White coats - they write: "Patient Refused To Sign." They write: "No health card." / Jump cut / Okay. We open to a pot of boiling soup. I eat. The way drunk people eat. Not feeling the heat. Not tasting the flavour. Okay, I stumble to sleep. The way drunk people sleep. In their jackets and shoes. With no dreams / Okay, we open with a classic scene - Face-down. Fully clothed. Stilettos still strapped - I'm awake. No saliva. No water beside the bed. No will to move. *What happened?* Okay - I notice the hospital bracelet around my wrist.

⁵⁶ The following piece of writing is influenced by a scene from the film *Adaptation* (2002) in which the protagonist, Kaufman, struggles to come up with an opening for a screenplay he is writing. As a way to stimulate the writing process, he frantically screams ideas into a tape recorder. I adopt his panicked voice because it speaks to the difficulties I had when trying to write about a personal blackout experience which ended in the hospital. Writing through the eyes of a screenwriter, I was able to better communicate the disjointed and confusing nature of amnesia.

That recollection is a searching for an 'image' in a corporeal substrate, is proved by the fact that in some persons, when, despite the most strenuous application of thought, they have been unable to recollect, it (...) excites a feeling of discomfort, which, even though they abandon the effort at recollection, persists in them none the less. (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E/2000)

FOR ALL I KNEW, someone had discovered a secret doorway in a low-ceilinged Manhattan office which allowed them to step into my head, take over my body for a couple hours, and leave with all memories of the experience stashed into a briefcase. Or was this the result of some botched procedure designed to erase only those specific painful memories I was better off not knowing? The whole thing felt like a movie with footage missing - only a couple of scenes spared from which to sense the ending. So I lay there. Probing my brain for some sort of impression of an encounter or conversation. With every screaming and dehydrated cell focused, I peered into my past, convinced that if I kept at it long enough, something could be willed to the surface. But all I could see was my own futile attempts at looking. And all I could sense was lost time, uncomfortably wedged between my last memory and present discomfort.⁵⁷

I searched also, through old issues of art magazines, intuitively selecting, cutting, ripping, placing, moving the fragments, sipping my wine, in a way that felt good, in a way that felt fine. Where can the night take me? The streets, the dance floor, somebody's bathroom - moments, all torn out of context the following morning - when I try to think about what, who, when, where those stilettos went, running nowhere now, through the unknown places in my mind's memory. "But being predictable isn't any fun!" I screamed like a child into the night and, again, it knowingly welcomed me into its vastness of possibility - a seductive trap into a fleeting existence, more predictable than I'd like to admit or control. Herein rests both its appealing and repulsive nature.

Though a bout of drunkenness ends with its very opposite, a heavy sleep that erases the evening's memories, opting for the "extreme" often also leads to risk-taking. The extreme is an exploit, a performance, a limit pushed to the point of no return (e.g., Cloarec, 1996). An extreme act will disrupt the peace of mind.
(Nahoum-Grappe, 2008, p.40)

⁵⁷ The ideas expressed in this passage were inspired by, and addressed in, the films *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind* (2004).

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I stared at the collage - the romantic peachy tone of the tub, the woman's legs draped over it with sultry languor, her head in the clouds, sinking deeper and deeper with each exhale. I am reminded of a poem I wrote when I was nineteen, entitled *Still Awake at 6 a.m.*⁵⁹ :

And golden rays let thoughts unwind
 And eyes elated
 Lost, it seems
 Mesmerized midsummer dreams
 Dust swept up by dragging feet
 Aimless, Careless
 Down the street
 Freckles
 Daisies
 Nicotine

And beer-stung breath
 And heat
 And sweat
 And thirst for sips
 And sighing, smiling, sun-kissed lips
 And Time...
 Water, ice, and Lemon-lime
 And nothing tastes as sweet as this
 Hung-over-comfort-blooming-bliss
 Still floating with the sunshine breeze

⁵⁸ The collages were made using personal photographs and images from magazines. Elements were torn, cut, arranged, glued and then scanned into Photoshop where I played with colour schemes and manipulated image characteristics. This was done while enrolled in the Creative Suite 3 course at the Toronto School of Art. As Butler-Kisber writes, reflective collages can "be used in much the same way that reflective comments and/or data excerpts are inserted into text to show rather than just tell" (2008, p.270).

⁵⁹ The poem was published in *The Charlantan*, Carleton University's student paper as part of their Literary and Visual Arts Supplement, Feb. 27, 2003, p.17.

But now, years later, the ominous clouds were rolling in and I was stuck inside. Trapped behind a transparent illusion. Unable to escape escapism. Sprinting at top speeds in the same spot. Stifled by the mechanical nature of *the everyday*. Struggling to maintain the drive to succeed and "get it done." Dreaming of adventure in another culture - be it temporarily, the culture of intoxication.

"Yes?" a voice answers.

"Is this the number for the assessment?"

"Yes. Are you looking for help with an alcohol or drug problem?"

"Actually, I'm a graduate student doing alcohol-related research and I was hoping to speak to an addictions counselor."

"Oh," answered the voice, flat and unimpressed. "Well, this is an assessment used to pair you with one of our treatment programs. Do you want treatment?" The mere thought of wearing a name tag made me want to hang up the phone immediately, if not sooner.

"Actually, I'm just interested in the assessment part."

"Well, we don't just assess problems here. Our assessments are for the purposes of placing you in group treatment." She pauses, clears her throat, and asks again: "Are you interested in group treatment?" I hesitate.

"Uh, sure, why not." I'm a terrible liar.

"Sure?" she persists, her tone skeptical.

"Yeah, sure," I respond, more forcefully this time.

"Before I book any kind of appointment, I think you should talk to my manager about this research you are doing. I would feel more comfortable. These *are* confidential group sessions."

"I'm just looking for some perspective from a professional," I try again, but-

"But this is a service for people who feel they have a problem. I will connect you to my manager."

I stop writing for a second to go have a cigarette. I'm drinking wine from one of those extra-large, super-round, bowl-on-a-stem type glasses and an entire liter is now gone in what seemed like three moderate servings. As I stand on the porch trying to brew up a good sentence, I become aware of how quickly and randomly my mind is distracted. The light in the distance. A piece of litter on the first step. I move my head and my attention breaks, in slow-motion, to reposition itself on the crack in the cement, the bang of the screen door in the wind. I'm standing there, and I can't seem to hold onto, or expand on, a single thought.

A year went by before my appointment. It fell on a gloomy March morning. It was snowing and I had just been told I was "angry at the world." So I dragged my angry self to Queen and Ossington, through the doors of the yellow CAMH building and up the stairs to the fourth floor. Out of character, I was early. The walls were decorated with pictures of flowers in bloom. On a table by the reception area sat a dried up cactus, next to it an old copy of *What's Up?* - Canada's Family Magazine - and a basket of coloured condoms.

The woman behind the desk left me standing there for a moment, as she struggled to finish her cookie. I peered into the waiting area, full of people in bad sweaters and faded winter coats. I watched, in a daze, as one of them got up to remove and hang his, revealing a bright red Molson Export T-shirt. Oh, the irony. It made me smile.

"Justyna Rechberger?"

"Yes?" The receptionist takes me down the hall and into a room lined with computers.

"Are you familiar with the mouse?"

"All too familiar," I respond, laughing loudly as though I'd just said the most hilarious of all things. She informs me I am to answer some questions on the screen about daily living, relationships with others, impulsive behaviours, personal drinking, perceived social support, substance use triggers and willingness to enter treatment. I assure her I know the drill and she leaves me to it.

And I *do* know the drill. As I read, I realize I've seen these questions before. In grade nine, when my whiskey puke sent the class packing to the library and sentenced me to weekly appointments at that pink building on Rideau Street. And again, after my last year of university when I went in willingly, fearing yet another relationship would fall apart because I couldn't keep myself together. Still, those were the days. We used to always joke about being the last ones standing, feeling like champions, as we hobbled up those school steps on Monday, brain-dead and body depleted, just knowing there was no way anybody was having more fun than *us*.

I pull my attention back to the screen in front of me. The questions are repetitive, attempting to get at the same information, but with a different arrangement of words - a widely used form of trickery geared to expose our contradictions:

Yes, sometimes I wonder if I'm an alcoholic.
 Yes, I want to make changes in my drinking.
 Yes, I strongly agree, I am a problem drinker.
 Unsure, if my problems will get worse.
 Undecided, if my problems are serious.
 No, I am not an alcoholic.

Autoethnography refers to the process as well as the product of writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple levels of consciousness. (Ellis in Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008, p.129)

An email from a friend: "I can only tell you to put your head in it so many times. You're a smart girl - but waking up in a hospital ... well, it's worth reflecting on. So again, "Do Something." And by that I mean, write something. You have a very good starting place." (L.Moses, personal communication, March 31, 2008)

But every time I took a seat in front of the computer I felt like that screenwriter from the film

Adaptation (2002) - "fat, bald, sweating" Kaufman - with pages of "false starts" and "wrong approaches." Except I wasn't writing about flowers or adapting a book for some executive in

Hollywood. I was just your average graduate student with a drinking problem and an unexplainable masochistic urge to examine my own vices and present them to others as reading material. Forced now, to sit around on a Saturday night contemplating the events of my own potential brain damage. Couldn't I just laugh it off? When, in the latter half of *Adaptation* (2002), protagonist-screenwriter Kaufman wrote himself into his script, he thought he'd lost it, calling his work "self-indulgent," "narcissistic," and "solipsistic." Stepping into his shoes, I began to think it wasn't my drinking that was "the problem." It was me *writing* about my drinking that gave me the shakes and the pounding headache, that made me want to reach for that cure-all cocktail. Quite frankly, I was content in my stilettos, dancing on a darkened edge, taking my "time-out" from the week on the weekend with everybody else. Pool-hopping and barbecuing. Sitting on full patios with giant umbrellas and super-sized Caesars sweating under the summer sun. I was *more* than okay with it. I was having a great time.

"I just don't know how to position myself in this paper," I confide in a classmate. "I don't want to sound more concerned than I feel but I feel like I should be more concerned than I sound... does that even make any sense?" I feel like I haven't had a proper sleep in weeks.

"You're a hypocrite," she says, without even looking up from the paper she was grading.

As if this didn't occur to me. The plan *was* to take the position of the shameless insider, but when it came time to commit words to paper, the shame somehow crept its way in. As did the anxiety. This never-ending period of self-examination was beginning to take its toll. Suddenly, I craved to be the "objective" "impartial" observer, the fly-on-the-wall documentarian, the journalist reporting on the stories of others. Suddenly, I wanted nothing to do with "the personal" or the "auto" part of ethnography.

In her memoir Zailckas describes needing to write but feeling "far too close... to see it clearly" (2005, p.100). Later, in an interview for *The Spray*, she is asked if writing *Smashed* had been a cathartic experience, one which allowed her to release the anxiety or repressed emotions associated with drinking. While Zailckas is quick to dismiss the viewing of women's writing as

“confessional” or “therapeutic” in relation to “literature,” she notes that the experience has made it easier to talk about past experiences: “Talking, for instance, about a horrifying blackout doesn’t rattle me the way it used to.” Later in the interview, however, Zailckas presents a different interpretation as to the effect writing has had on her perceptions of her own situation:

I’m not convinced I’ve come to terms with old aches as much as I’ve had to numb myself to them for the sake of spreading the book’s message. Ultimately, I think a memoir leaves its author with more terror than comfort, more questions than closure. More than anything, I feel a growing breach between “me” and the “me” on the page. It’s an occupational hazard, I guess. I feel sort of exiled from my own experiences.”

Throughout the process of writing about “the personal,” my ambivalence would grow to impulsively burn and twist my chest into painful knots. Somehow, I found myself downing a bottle of red every time I “sat down to write,” my own hypocrisy bringing tears to my eyes and paralysis to my fingers as they hovered, perpetually, over the keyboard.

In *Adaptation* (2002), Kaufman eventually reveals he wrote himself into his script because he was “too timid” to talk to the woman who wrote the book he was supposed to be adapting. I, on the other hand, was very eager to talk to my co-authors, my interview subjects, feeling too anxious to turn on myself. I *wanted* to detail my concrete experience and share what it feels like to do research from an auto/ethnographic perspective but it wasn’t easy. I began to feel “lost and ineffective,” an observation McNiff made about those whose inquiries became “overly personal” or “too complex” (McNiff, 2008, p.33). And so, I *needed* to “let go of my ego trip” (Richardson, 1999, p.667), to step away from my own story, and talk to others about their experiences.

Although my narrative is literally absent from my interpretations of the stories I collected, it is there in my questioning, in the responses of participants and in the very excerpts I selected to include in this paper.

IMPULSE TO WRITE – A STANDARD OF USEFULNESS

[W]hy the compulsion to begin and rebegin, all over again and incessantly, these futile stories of futility, in search of something that though it may be desired cannot even be named? (Olney, 1998, p.2)

My friends see me as this total other person who I don't even know, this completely different person who I don't *even understand*. And I can't even explain it. I just don't know how I get to that point. (Female, 23)

I write [and tell stories] because I want to find out. (Richardson in Ellis, 2004, pp.170-171)

What writing, as well as remembering and telling stories provides, “is hindsight, allowing events to make sense in a way they never can as they unfold” (Engel, 1999 p.126). As Denzin (2006) explains, “in bringing the past into the autobiographical present,” we are able to “create the conditions for re-writing and hence re-experiencing it” (p.423). Following this notion that storytelling and autobiographical remembering are fundamental to knowing and “re-writing” experience, “remaking memory” in this way may not only prove to be beneficial and transformative for myself and participants, it “may provide a new discourse” (Richardson in Ellis, 2004, p.176) “a new version of the past” (Denzin, 2008, p.118). As Richardson (1990) points out, “people make sense of their lives through the stories that are made available to them, and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories....If the available narrative is limiting, destructive, or at odds with the actual life, people’s lives end up being limited and textually disenfranchised (p.129).” Given that drinking, as it is conceived in the “new” culture of intoxication, is central to the social lives of young people, they will seek to understand their experiences through the available, conventional narratives and their stereotypical protagonists - the sexually promiscuous “lush,” the romanticized artist-drunk, the binge-drinking student, the hopeless and haggard alcoholic and the drinker-in-recovery. The twenty-something “problem” drinker who does not identify with stigmatizing labels and who grapples with the hypocrisy of

communicating concerns in a consumer and pleasure-oriented culture in which they willingly take part, and from which they derive enjoyment, may struggle to locate him or herself within such limited narratives.

By soliciting longer and more detailed narrative reactions and descriptions, what will hopefully emerge, is a more comprehensive account of conceptualizations, functions, attitudes and coping-strategies common to the experience of alcohol-induced amnesia. Besides providing opportunity for self-reflection and contributing to the neglected discourse of not-remembering, this exploratory research will serve to better inform our understanding towards the dynamics and emotional aftermath of losing fragments of self, identity, place and time. Individuals may not only get a better sense of “how they get to that point” but why they continue going there.

COLLECTING & ASSEMBLING - RECRUITMENT, INTERVIEWS, ANALYSIS

I discover how talking is a way of thinking and knowing and how important insights emerge from the flow of conversation focused on a particular experience. The process of speaking with another person naturally evokes different perspectives and there is a spontaneity that does not occur when I try to collect my thoughts about something in isolation. (McNiff, 2008, p.36)

Subjects were recruited using purposive (targeting particular group), snowball (participants recruiting new participants) and opportunistic (following new and unexpected leads) sampling methods. Having discovered hundreds of blackout-related user-groups on *Facebook*, I was compelled to use this wealth of material for my project. These popular online groups offered a large corpora of text for analysis, which I considered significant due to its imperviousness to the interviewers influence. There were numerous ethical issues to consider, however, before I could

collect narratives online.⁶⁰ Upon referring to *Facebook's* Terms of Use (<http://www.facebook.com/terms.php>) and Privacy Policy (<http://www.facebook.com/policy.php>) I identified some potential problems with appropriating material, recruiting subjects and collecting data from the site. I was not permitted to use the material unless I obtained permission from each individual whose post I intended to use. Given that these individuals were not in my social network of friends on *Facebook*, my solicitations could be reported as “spamming” in which case I would be risking having my own account with *Facebook* suspended. After corresponding with a customer service representative from *Facebook* (Kieran, personal communication, November 27, 2007), I was given permission to use the social networking site to start my own research group, provided I gave a disclaimer at the top. I envisioned the group to resemble those already-existing on *Facebook*, in which individuals could start discussion topics, post links and photos, as well as provide comments and ask questions. The group could serve not only as a place where stories are submitted but where the research process is engaged - a self-reflexive and interactive journal; a performative, “living text” (Ellis, 2004, p.212). I realized, however, that I would not be able to enable the majority of the features of the group page due to my inability to monitor comments and the lack of anonymity, since members are identifiable through profile pictures. Instead of using *Facebook* to collect narratives, then, I used it alternatively as a recruiting tool, creating a group page which directed people from my social network to a project-related blog from which I would collect narratives instead.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The proposed project attracted some significant attention from the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. It took two protocol re-submissions, a summoned meeting between board members, my supervisor and I, and a total of four months under review before the project was approved. The key issues were informed consent and confidentiality online, conducting interviews in designated areas, my relationship with interview subjects and writing myself into the project - that is, my own self-exposure.

⁶¹ To visit the blog follow this link: www.alcoholblackout.wordpress.com

Initially, I designed the project blog using Blogger (www.blogger.com), however had to re-design it using Wordpress (www.wordpress.com) which, unlike Blogger, allowed for the creation of multiple pages within one blog (see Appendix G). This was a significant feature since the ethics committee took issue with the informed consent and narrative submission guidelines appearing on the same page. In Wordpress, potential respondents had to first read through the informed consent and click “Agree,” before they could navigate to the page of the blog containing the response guide (Appendix I).

Other issues put forth by the committee concerned identification through narrative, recall of traumatic experiences, disclosing of supposed illegal activity and invasion of privacy, since information, once digitized, always resided somewhere. To address these risks, potential respondents were advised to read the Content Policy (www.blogger.com/content.g) which set boundaries on the type of content that could be posted to avoid social and legal harms. When posting, respondents were asked to remain anonymous or provide a pseudonym and respect the privacy of others by refraining from posting or sharing any personally identifiable or private information of any third party. Regarding illegal activities, subjects were advised to post at their own risk, since confidentiality could not be fully promised online. In order to protect myself and my account with Wordpress, all posts were held for moderation in a private inbox until approved and made public to the blog by the researcher. Subjects were informed that submitted stories might be stylized, republished and made publicly available in print or online, however with identifying information removed. Lastly, given the potentially troubling nature of the subject matter, counseling contacts were provided.

I received twelve posts to the blog and 23 participants (10 male, 13 female) were recruited for face-to-face interviewing.⁶² They ranged in age from 18 to 32, with the majority being in their mid-twenties. Roughly half of the interview participants contacted me online and the rest volunteered themselves, or were suggested as “perfect” candidates, when my research casually came up in conversation. Participants identified with inclusion and exclusion criteria listed on the *Facebook* group, project blog and informed consent documents (Appendix H), relating to self-concepts regarding their drinking. Namely, I was looking for participants who had experienced blackouts and who did not consider themselves to be “alcoholic.” They identified rather with the term “social drinker” which I defined as occasional heavy drinking however rarely carried out alone in private settings. It was important criteria were assessed by participants themselves and not anyone else (i.e through diagnostic measures of alcohol dependence), since self-definition of experience was fundamental to the research. This way, I could get a sense of how personal definitions of alcoholism were framed alongside personal experiences with amnesia. At the time of recruitment and interview, participants lived in Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal⁶³ - all large urban centres with substantial “night-time economies” and a wide range of bars and clubs aimed at young adult clientele.⁶⁴

INTERVIEWING

As mentioned previously, my interest lay in accessing the feelings and meanings that subjects ascribed to their blackout experiences - moving beyond the experiential question of “what happened?” to encompass the phenomenological. To prepare for my interviews and design the

⁶² It should be noted that many more approached me to be interviewed after I had finished interviewing.

⁶³ Except for one male participant from the UK who was visiting the country, all participants grew up in Canada. Interviews were carried out on Ryerson, Carleton and Concordia University campuses.

⁶⁴ It is significant to note these cities also had dedicated rave scenes to which a majority of participants belonged.

interview guides (Appendix I, J), I turned to Steinar Kvale's InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing (1996), in which he outlines a "mode of understanding" (p.36) the qualitative interview. Drawing on his techniques and advice, questions were open-ended and chronologically semi-structured around a number of themes: the blackout itself, immediate reactions, processes of remembering, social contexts, communicated attitudes and influence of blacking out on drinking habits. This organization was purposeful, to take the interviewee *through* the blackout experience and its implications, accessing deeper and more reflective meanings as we went along. I began by inviting participants to "describe as precisely as possible" a *specific* blackout experience (p.32), perhaps their "worst," "first" or "last" blackout, urging them to take some time to think about it. This works to trigger a number of events and allows the subject time and choice to offer the story they felt best illustrated their experience (Czarniawaska, 2004). During interviewing, I attempted to take note of ambiguities and contradictions and pay attention to changes in descriptions and interpretations as subjects obtained insights into their own situation (Kvale, 1996, p.34). To access meaning-oriented responses, I tried to rephrase any emotional statements made by the subject or "send messages back" (p.32) so that he or she could (dis)confirm them and elaborate. Once subjects had given their own spontaneous descriptions and thereby indicated what aspects of the phenomenon were pertinent to them, I introduced new topics and dimensions - sometimes curiously, sometimes critically - raising questions about accountability and responsibility, motivations to keep drinking to extremes, harm reduction, justifications, the drinking culture at large, alcoholism and the influence of drinking talk. Interviews lasted around an hour, were audio-recorded and loyally transcribed during the spring, summer and fall of 2008. No alcohol was consumed.

ANALYSIS – INTERPRETATION

What does analysis entail within the context of creative and auto/ethnographic practice? For Scott-Hay, it requires becoming “sensitive to social tones...moods and feelings” and trying on different “personal and cultural lenses” to get varying perspectives (in Ellis & Scott-Hay, 2008, p.131). Smith and Watson (2001) offer an entire “tool kit” of such lenses, with questions focusing on memory, trauma, identity, temporality, coherence, embodiment, agency, self-knowledge and ethics. These lenses, or “reading strategies,” served as useful interpretative tools for looking at my interview data. Because the central aim of my project was to gain a better understanding of the emotional aftermath of the blackout experience, my analysis emphasizes the tones and feelings that seem to permeate individual descriptions, paying close attention to the language, ease and self-reflexivity with which individuals described the “nature, extent and [emotional] consequences” (Wells et al., 2009, p.8) of blacking out. Zooming “inward and outward” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.739), I shift my focus from “what it’s like” to interrogate the role that “piecing it together” with others plays in “dealing with dilemmas of risk and responsibility” (Griffin et al., 2009, p.470) – that is, how is storytelling used to negotiate the experience? Drawing on theories of autobiographical remembering (Skowronski & Walker, 2004), I consider the influence such drinking talk has in fashioning drunken identities and maintaining positive or ambivalent attitudes toward “problematic” drinking habits. Throughout my analysis, I pay attention to “the ways in which culture marks, shapes, and/or constrains” individual descriptions (Chase, 2003, p. 290). More specifically, I look to see how the described events, emotions and negotiations reflect and construct “extreme” drinking (Martinic & Measham, 2008) in the “new” culture of intoxication. Lastly, I keep in mind my goal of building and expanding on the findings from the

psychology literature, noting differences and similarities concerned with predictive factors, state characteristics and emotional aftermath.

“What Happened?” - THE TRADITIONAL BLACKOUT NARRATIVE

I've had so many blackouts actually, thinking about it. I've woken up in countless bathrooms. I've been kicked out of bars without my jacket. I've been banned from places without knowing what I did. Woken up in strange places. Woken up in snowbanks. Had people carry me - strangers - carry me to their house from within a snowbank in the middle of a blizzard. (Female, 26)

The spontaneous stories gathered during interviewing were retrospective descriptions of unremembered intoxicated events based on what participants could remember, what they could infer, and what they were told about their behaviour in a blackout. While I aimed to move beyond the question of “*what happened?*” it was a prominent and pertinent one to the drinker, as it aided him or her in assessing how to feel about the particular experience.

In their tellings, subjects often verbalized how “bad” or remarkable the described events were with regard to severity of the blackout (total vs. partial amnesia), sexualized risks, physical injury, and damage to meaningful relationships. Females, more so than males, told stories of sexual passivity as well as assertiveness, citing behaviours such as unsolicited, unprotected and uninhibited intercourse. Males tended to offer narratives in which they recounted becoming more physically, rather than sexually, daring. They described taking more chances “doing stupid stunts,” getting into fights and being thrown out of bars. Participants, both male and female, recounted numerous other risky behaviours and consequences such as getting injured (i.e. severe bruising, broken bones and teeth), biking and driving drunk, wandering the streets alone, losing belongings, “passing out” in public, being driven home by the police as well as waking up in the

“drunk tank” and other unfamiliar places. When describing some of their more intense experiences, participants often portrayed themselves as vulnerable, helpless and out of control.

Of course, narratives did not simply focus on negative dimensions of experience or associated risks but also centered on the “fun” that was had; the “hilarious,” unpredictable and uncharacteristic nature of behaviours and the process of “piecing it together.” Rather than adopting a serious tone, narratives were often told to entertain and alleviate some of the anxieties associated with amnesia. Male participants compared themselves to animals and superheroes with invincible strength, endurance and climbing capacities. Females recounted, with incredulousness and laughter, their adventures of being “wild on the street.” With and through such storytelling, participants revealed the appeal of drinking to extremes and the ways in which they negotiated and managed the corresponding risks.

The narratives that were “smoothly narrated” (Chase, 2003, p.290) were those experiences which “stood out” in the minds of participants due to the significant severity or hilarity of the intoxicated events - narratives which, as a result, have been told and retold numerous times. Due to their familiarity with certain stories, participants often became very animated in their tellings, eagerly contributing account after account (“this is one of my many stories”) with a sense of pleasure, amazement and pride. For example, the spontaneous story offered by one male subject (24) focused heavily on physical characteristics - he described feeling as though he could not see, vomiting, and passing out in the driveway. His story, however, was told as a “funny” story, complete with “a glorious toilet moment.”

Narrating “what happened” came easiest to participants since such stories tended to follow the traditional and chronological script of a typical night out, often beginning with pre-drinking and

ending with waking up in the morning, disoriented and without memory for portions of the prior evening. Where blackouts were severe and prolonged and where participants found themselves alone and without friends to “fill in the blanks,” stories tended to fall back on this script, with participants simply listing a couple of disjointed instances, “flashes” or “frames” of memory.

I don't know if this is a result of watching too many movies but if you think about how a movie is edited, things get progressively faster when I have blackouts to a point where you remember showing up at a friends house. The more drinks you consume the more time gets compressed in your memory. Two hours turns into five minutes in your mind. Then you're at the bar. Then things start going faster and faster, Then shots. To a point where it doesn't even happen in a sequence anymore. It was a sequence and then it gets faster and then it's just frames. A jump cut or whatever. And then nothing. (Male, 27)

Moving beyond the question of *what happened*, participants struggled to put into words *what it's like* to experience alcohol-induced amnesia, often asking me “How can I describe something I can't remember?” I explained I was not necessarily after the events and feelings that occurred *within* the blackout but rather those concerned with the *aftermath* of not remembering. How did individuals describe, understand and feel about their non-remembrance? Many likened the experience to watching a badly edited movie. However, for the most part, descriptions of what it's like to not remember were underdeveloped. With the exception of those participants who experienced repeated and severe consequences as a result of their blacking out, the emotional aftermath was not a dimension of experience that was easily narrated or spontaneously offered.

Rather, blacking out was often constituted as an inexplicable and “weird” phenomenon within the narrative. Participant descriptions revealed both a lack of knowledge concerning the physiological effects of alcohol on the brain and memory alongside an intense curiosity and self-reflexive fascination with the “mysteriousness” of getting to “that point,” being in that state and,

consequently, finding oneself unable to “will something to the surface.”⁶⁵ When asked, participants offered explanations, extending the notions of selectivity and repression to their blackouts. For example, a female participant (24) wondered if her mind selected to blackout “only the most embarrassing parts.” Others attributed their lack of memory to its meaninglessness - that is, they didn’t remember certain events because they weren’t important and didn’t need to be remembered (i.e the cab ride home). Others still, distinguished their blackouts from selective memory, arguing they found themselves not remembering valued social moments and events they would ordinarily regard as meaningful and worth remembering.

Struggles in narration were also evident in the ambivalent responses and contradictions found in most interviews. Participants tended to use descriptors which signified uncertainty and mixed feelings such as “really kind of,” “almost” and “probably.” For example, when I asked participants if blacking out bothered them, a number of participants responded “yes and no” and many offered responses of a similar equivocal nature. Participants struggled to find words to describe and negotiate their amnesia because, as one male participant (27) succinctly explained “the blackout itself is not a topic [of conversation] but the content of what happens in that timeframe is.” The participant revealed that when conversing with friends, he does not consider “what the blackout means, or what consequences it could have or what would cause it.” As such, to explore these questions, the following analysis focuses on three pertinent themes: dissociation; autobiographical remembering and emotion regulation; and the effects of blacking out on drinking habits.

⁶⁵ As one male participant (25) remarked “Usually any other time when I’m not blacked out I can think of the situation. How does a blacked out person think? That’s the weirdest part about it – it’s like what the fuck? What was I thinking that whole time? Because when people tell you those stories you’re like – wow – I did that? Like that was me?”

MISSING MEMORIES AND DISSOCIATION - "I Just Don't Know How I Get to That Point"

In a dream there's still certain memories and a sequence of events whereas in a blackout you just remember certain parts in no order. I get to a point where I'm just done. I don't remember anything. I continue on. I'm a body in motion but there's no forethought. Or I have fragments of memory. I feel like it's brain damage. (Female, 22)

[T]he more you drink, the less you think about something the more you just do it...I think blacking out is the extreme of that where I guess it gets to the point where you see something and you don't think about it at all, you just react...and that would explain the lack of memory... you're not thinking and so you don't even have a chance to form a memory because it hasn't passed through your mind at all. (Male, 24)

I don't really see it coming until it's too late and then it's already over and you just wonder how it got to that point in the first place. (Female, 25)

Participant descriptions of reaching "that point," the "mysterious space 'outside the narrative'" (Griffin et al., 2009, p.467), largely centered on perceived notions of lost awareness and conscious control over thoughts and actions, although at varying levels of intensity and frequency.⁶⁶ Some assumed to have "some sense" while in a blackout, describing incidents in which they were told they considered consequences, reasoned with friends and took measures to ensure their safe arrival home. These participants often marveled at the *invisibility* of their intoxicated state, noting with awe that their friends could not tell they were in a blackout. On the contrary, participants were informed they "didn't seem *that* drunk" and behaved "normally" or in no way different from their usual drunken selves - "charming" "amusing" and "hilarious."

While some speculated *thinking* they knew what they were doing while in a state of amnesia ("I definitely always think I have it in control," Male, 28), others described a state in which they felt completely dissociated from themselves and their surroundings. One female participant (25),

⁶⁶ Subjects ranged in the frequency with which they experienced blackouts (however both males and females reported drinking at levels way above binge standards). For example, one 18-year-old female participant reported two blackouts, while numerous others reported having "countless" and "many" experiences and stories, having reached the point in their drinking where they blackout every time "it's a party night" (i.e they drink heavily). Numerous participants expressed that quantifying their blackout experiences was difficult: "I can't just sit here and say that, "Yah you know, it happens to me three times a year on this day and that day. I really can't say" (Male, 25).

for example, speculated she was incapable of mentally processing anything that was happening to her or around her while in a blackout. Repeatedly emphasizing her emotional and psychological absence, she perplexingly spoke of herself as becoming a “completely different person.” Comparably, one male participant (24) noted his friends have informed him they “can tell from one moment to the next” when he enters a blackout, that his “voice even changes” and he gets more “aggressive,” “alive” and “animated.” He described coming *out* of a blackout as “being allowed back into [his] body suddenly” - a “frightening” experience which he associated with a total *lack* of control.

When asked about the nature and severity of their blackouts, participants spontaneously distinguished between *en bloc* (total amnesia) and *fragmentary* (partial amnesia) blackouts.⁶⁷ *En bloc* blackouts were commonly described as having “completely no memory whatsoever,” remembering everything until a certain point followed by nothing (“they’re just gone”) and having “no idea” what one was doing. Participant descriptions emphasized the definitiveness, completeness and irretrievableness of their memory loss. *Fragmentary* blackouts were described with less concern. Participants characterized the experience as having “bits and pieces missing but with some general “points of reference.” More females (8/13) than males (4/10) reported experiencing blackouts which were primarily of the *en bloc* variety, a finding consistent with the literature which posits increased female susceptibility.⁶⁸ Also in line with the literature,

⁶⁷ Interestingly, a number of subjects described blackouts which seemed to be a combination of the two – *en bloc* blackouts, interrupted by a couple of “split-second flashes” of memory. Individuals indicated that, unlike *fragmentary* blackouts, the split-second memories did not prompt further recall. Rather, the flashes of memory stood alone, described as being out of context and order. Those describing blackouts with random flashes of memory, speculated these flashes to have been brought on by moments of physical pain, strong emotion and a change of “scene” (i.e breaking a limb, having intercourse, leaving the bar).

⁶⁸ Only one female reported *never* experiencing an *en bloc* blackout, compared to three males.

participants who experienced *en bloc* blackouts regarded them as “way worse” than the *fragmentary* variety.

One female participant (22) described experiencing frequent *en bloc* blackouts and identified herself as a “more extreme case than most people,” recounting numerous stories in which she had woken up with “severe bruises all over [her] body.” She narrated with a sense of astonishment, inexplicability and dissociation from her experiences, while simultaneously acknowledging her inability to “keep [her] composure” and maintain an awareness over her “level” of intoxication:

When I’m drinking, if I could knock myself in the head and be like you’re getting wasted you could do without the next drink, you’re good to go – then I’d be fine. But when I’m drinking I feel fine, I’m good, I like drinking, I enjoy alcohol – so I’m constantly buying more drinks, drinking more drinks and then it just hits me like a brick wall and I don’t remember anything.

She went on to reflect on an episode where she fell down the stairs in front of her friends:

When I look back on it – that’s not me. Like I don’t think of myself like that partly because I don’t remember it and partly because that’s not my style (...) My friends see me as this total other person who I don’t even know, you know? It’s weird. My friends probably see me as this completely different person who I don’t even *understand*. Such a strange place to be...and I can’t even explain it. I just don’t know how I get to that point (...) I almost can’t describe it. It’s never a slow a transition... It’s me remembering, having a good time and being in control and then waking up in the morning. Blacked out. There is never that point where I’m aware of myself getting there.

The passage speaks to the powerful link between memory, identity and self-understanding:

because the participant didn’t *remember* getting to “that point” she also expressed not *understanding* how she got there, despite the seeming self-knowledge she possessed regarding her tendency to compulsively over-consume. That her blackouts were the result of heavy drinking was implicit in the narrative. Rather, it was the abruptness, the incoherence between “being fine,” “being in control,” “having a good time” and suddenly “not remembering anything” that was constructed as remarkable and “weird.” The participant clearly dissociated herself from the experience by portraying her blacked out self as someone who she didn’t understand and,

later in her narrative, by constructing her amnesia not as something that *she does* but rather as something that *happens to her*. Because blacking out is “just something that happens,” constructed as abrupt, unpredictable and beyond her conscious control and intention (“I don’t go out to blackout”) she was able to, in a way, remove herself from the responsibility of making changes to her drinking habits. While she communicated a desire to control her blackouts, she simultaneously constructed this desired control as an impossibility (“If I could knock myself in the head...”). She later revealed that her dissociation from the experience, from the person she becomes in a blackout, and from her ability to control it, allowed her to better manage its emotional aftermath:

When I fuck up big time and I’m not the person who I think I am, it’s better that I don’t remember being that person because I don’t want to be that person anyways. Sometimes it’s almost better. If I don’t remember, it didn’t happen. Other people remember but you don’t so it’s stuck in their heads. They’ll see that person that you were and I won’t. I’ll never see that person.

Without memory, the participant could not “see” herself as she appeared to others in a blackout, for which she expressed appreciation. Another female participant (24), similarly positioned herself as “almost happy...grateful,” she couldn’t remember because, without memory, came a sense of “detachment” which mitigated her capacity to feel “really embarrassed.” In perceiving the burden of memory to be in the minds of others, participants were able to disengage themselves from their own experiences and dismiss their blackouts with greater ease: “It’s almost like you can...like you can forget about it because...because the memory is not there.” There was, however, an underlying tone of uncertainty (“it’s almost better” / “I’m almost grateful”) present in the narratives and reflective silences of these participants, as they appeared to be convincing themselves it was, indeed, “nice not to know.”

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REMEMBERING AND EMOTION REGULATION - "Sugar Coat It For Me"

"So, are you the type of person who calls up all their friends to find out what happened?" We're seated comfortably in two chairs, coffees in hand.

"Definitely! definitely!" she cries out, laughing. I pause, thinking back to my own experiences.

"Do you ever find that you almost....don't want to know?" the last part comes out quickly and now we're both cracking up.

"Always!" she exclaims. "But I still try to get *some* information....," she trails off for a moment before continuing. "Sometimes, when I end up *getting* the information and it's just confirming how *horrible* I was acting - *then* I'm just like okay...maybe I *don't* want to know. It's better just to know that you were a fool but not the exact details of your....foolery," she chuckles. "Sugar coat it a bit for me!"

It's only if it gets brought up that I participate in the conversation. Depending on how good of a storyteller the person telling the story back to you is – it kind of creates a memory. So you have other people's memories inside your head. And it could be wrong but I prefer that people tell me the stories in a way that is entertaining. (Male, 23)

As Griffin and colleagues (2009) argue in their study on "passing out stories," storytelling is used as a "means of dealing with dilemmas of risk and responsibility" (p.470). By engaging in narrative construction that subscribes to a humorous or self-deprecating tone, individuals can work to "sugar-coat" the experience and negotiate the negatives of amnesia. Furthermore, since drunkenness leads to a reduced sense of self and reduced access to information in autobiographical memory (Hull et al., 1983 in Giles, 1999, p.388),⁶⁹ individuals may be motivated to engage in such discourse not just to regulate emotions, but to "construct and maintain the self" (Leary, 1995 in Skowronski & Walker, 2004, p.569).

It is important to note, before continuing, that participants were self-reflexive about their abilities to talk about their experiences, questioning the reliability of what they remembered and drawing attention to the nature of the blackout narrative. It was characterized as an investigative account which rested more on the "probable," "assumed," "supposed," and "apparent" than it did on the "[f]actual." Given that, in the context of alcohol-induced amnesia, individuals have little or no memory of intoxicated events, the remembering that occurs following a blackout is always

⁶⁹ "as evidenced by the use of fewer first-person pronouns" (Hull, 1981 in Giles, 1999, p.388).

collective and largely dependent on social interaction with multiple speakers. As such, what is reported is “open, more than usual, to post-event narrative construction” (Giles, 1999, p.389).⁷⁰ As Giles reminds us, “memory is constructed in the present,” and *any* attempt to study or talk about events past, especially events during which participants were intoxicated, “may be an exercise in logical creativity rather than a matter of faithful recall” (Giles, 1999, p.387).⁷¹ In numerous interviews, participants called attention to the constructed nature of their stories, wondering if their recollections were “authentic” or if they were simply creating “plausible scenarios” in their minds. As Smith and Watson (2001) argue, “[p]eople tell stories of their lives through the cultural scripts that are available to them” (p.176). Drawing on Schank and Abelson’s script-theory (1977), Giles (1999) similarly proposes that “‘memories’ are simply logical inferences derived from the usual course of events at a club” (p.393).

Aside from “scripts” and “logical inferences,” the telling of self-narratives was also governed by what Skowronski and Walker (2004) call “conversational norms,” or what Smith and Watson (2001) call “the cultural strictures about self-representation in public” (2001, p.176). For example, Skowronski and Walker (2004) point out that when discussing autobiographical events, the need to “keep it fresh” (interesting, informative) and “keep it relevant” prevails. Discourse participants tend to focus on new information and keep it relevant to a prescribed and agreed-upon tone (i.e humorous, self-deprecating). Furthermore, to keep a listener’s interest, the story needs to get to the point – primary and factual knowledge (i.e what happened?) tends to be

⁷⁰ Perhaps it is this construction that has led White (2004) to conclude that anecdotes “do not make good evidence... no matter how compelling.” Yet, survey studies are subject to the same limitations.

⁷¹ Giles (1999), who in his study recorded interviews of a group of friends discussing past drunken experiences, outlines various uses of forgetting and its role in identity construction. His discourse analysis calls attention to “the way in which accounts of drunken behaviour may contain inconsistencies, or contradictions...when events are (re) constructed (p.390).

privileged over secondary experiential and sensory knowledge (i.e how does it feel to not-remember what happened?). Such “norms” and “strictures,” alongside a limited memory, may operate together at the expense of “honesty” and deeper reflection, potentially inducing “a speaker to alter or embellish the details of a story to make the tale more interesting to a listener” (p.570). In addition, although individuals generally portray themselves more positively than negatively, they may willingly contribute unflattering and embarrassing information because “negative” events are more entertaining for others (pp.564-577).⁷²

Indeed, participants described exaggerating their stupidity for a laugh, noting there was something “inherently funny” about the experience and suggesting that “accuracy” and “truth” may not be as valued, expected or even desired in the context of the blackout narrative. In attempting to explain what was humorous, participants struggled, often referring to the outlandishness of their behaviours. As one female participant (27) put it, “It’s what’s happened. It’s not the blackout that makes it funny.” Another female participant (32) echoed this statement, noting it was the “liquid courage” provided by alcohol that turned the blackout into a comedic episode, allowing drinkers to act in ways they ordinarily wouldn’t.

I think the best stories are the ones that involve complete and utter embarrassment. You know? Blacking out is like karaoke – the best part of it is ego suppression. You could be the most serious person in the world and then you have a blackout story and suddenly you’re not so righteous anymore. (Male, 24)

Having a good blackout story was constituted as way in, “a route to inclusion” (Griffin et al., 2009, p.463) within a group that valued the “extreme.” As Nahoum-Grappe (2008) points out: “What is moral is not ‘extreme’; what is well done is not ‘extreme.’ But what is sudden, unstable,

⁷² Known as *schadenfreude* - “Derived from the German words for *harm* and *pleasure*, it means the joy we sometimes cannot help but experience when we hear about another’s misfortune” (Dictionary, Apple) As one participant (27) also noted “there’s a huge culture industry around making people look like asses and laughing at them... a self-deprecating culture.”

violent and vertiginous is likely to be seen as extreme” (p.43). The humour inherent to blacking out, and the tones of pleasure and excitement that dominated its conversational expression, were bound not just to the extremities of behaviours engaged in, but to the very notions of inclusion, relatedness, collectivity and discovery that one was not alone:

It's funny because you know you've done it before and when you talk about it to other people you're embarrassed but when you tell somebody else your story they're like "oh my god" I did something similar to that and it's just...funny. (Male, 32)

I know a number of people that also blackout regularly and like, you know - recently actually, I was sitting at a bar with some people and it was almost like a competition, like who had done the most ridiculous things while they were blacked out – Oh I did this and I did that and it happens to so many people that it's um...you know, it's nothing ... it's not... it's not surprising... and because it's... because it's so common it doesn't seem like anything to be concerned about. (Female, 24)

Exchanging blackout narratives with similarly affected others was described as “breathing a collective sigh of relief” (Male, 27). Such sharing helped individuals "retain the rosy glow" of intoxication and “remove the sting” associated with amnesia, since listeners could offer support, encouragement and laughter (Skowronski & Walker, 2004, p.575). Indeed, the very *act* of storytelling, and not just the content of stories, was constructed as entertaining, contributing to the “cohesiveness” of the social group (Griffin et al., 2009, p.470). Furthermore, the relatedness felt among individuals in discovering this commonality of experience was constituted as contributing to its acceptability. Listeners were able to offer words of reassurance (“don’t worry, you were hilarious”), consequently providing the drinker with a positive impression of his or her behaviour. For example, when I asked one male participant (25) how he can be sure he had a good time, without remembering it, he responded:

Well, because they told me I did! You know what I mean!? They're like, yah you know you did this and it was fucking hilarious! And then I'm like – Oh nice! I did that? Sweet (...) If someone tells me I did it and then another person tells me I did it and then another person tells me I did it – if there's more than one person saying I did that and it was a good time then I'm down with that, you know? (Male, 25)

Another male participant (27) had this to say:

When you approach the situation in a positive and light-hearted manner, the previous night seems a lot more fun than it probably actually was. In a way it's kind of phony because you talk it up. It's another social aspect - kind of like the night continues on after you've woken up." (Male, 27)

Again, the exchange of blackout narratives was regarded as a social event, an integral part of the drinking process which allowed for the pleasurable, rather than just the negative, aspects of intoxication to linger. Participants self-reflexively emphasized the role such talk played in defining their experiences, however contrived in nature ("phoniness"). Not only did individuals "sugar-coat" the experience and "talk it up," they did so knowingly, with a specific audience in mind. As one female participant revealed (27), she engaged in such storytelling to "downplay the seriousness of it," but only to those who she knew would be sympathetic:

[W]hen I tell people these stories I don't tell them to people who I know are going to be condescending towards me and will make me feel worse. I tell them to people who I know will find them funny because they have or have had a similar lifestyle. The last thing you need is someone being condescending to you because you know, you feel concerned yourself. You're not a complete reckless idiot doing these things. You don't need people condemning you for them. (Female, 27)

Participants emphasized their awareness of the potential harms implicit to blacking out, some getting defensive when discussing their tendency to make light of the situation. "Laughing about it" was not necessarily right or wrong, but rather was regarded as the obvious and natural reaction - "it's just what people do" (Female, 18). Given that affected drinkers have limited or no memory for potentially embarrassing or "bad" elements of experience, it may seem natural for them to laugh, pursue and go along with the "sugar-coated" version of their experience. In doing so, they are more likely to better remember the "good times," consequently maintaining positive effect expectancies and associations towards drinking to extremes:

There's no point in talking about it and seeing yourself as less than you are. So a lot of people are like "Hey, wasn't it a great night?" and they're like "Yes it was." Then we've confirmed that yes it was an awesome night and then we do that again next weekend. (Male, 27)

I would say oh I blacked out and this and this happened and they would laugh and they would say oh that's crazy and they would say oh that happened to me. It was like it wasn't a big deal and you'd think oh it won't happen next time but if it does "oh well." (Female, 26)

As these brief excerpts demonstrate, telling stories in this way has important implications for behaviour. As Skowronski and Walker (2004) convincingly argue, the way in which we talk about events with others changes how we remember them, undoubtedly influencing behaviour when faced with a similar event.

EFFECTS ON DRINKING HABITS - "Walking the Fine Line"

As Martinic and Measham (2008) have noted, extreme drinking "hinges" on the drinkers "ability to walk the fine line...and achieve an acceptable balance between harmful and non-harmful outcomes" (p.9). Given, that what is considered "harmful" can vary subjectively from drinker to drinker, I paid special attention to places in the narrative where participants constructed their experiences as "bad" or problematic and where drinking to extremes was constituted as harmless, pleasurable and "fun." Regarding the specific outcome of amnesia, some participants anticipated not-remembering and regarded it as "evidence of a really good night." For others, blacking out was constituted as unintended and undesirable, but negotiated as an occasional "side effect" of a state which was sought, idealized, and perceived to be worth the risks: intoxication. For others still, blacking out was viewed as an indicator one should "learn to not drink so much the next time," fueling feelings of ambivalence, apprehensiveness and uncertainty about drinking to extremes. The ability "to handle one's drink" thus rests on the drinker's "so-called level of alcohol maturity" and his or her past "life experiences" with alcohol (p.9). Participants, when faced with the possible unpredictability of experiencing amnesia, managed this outcome in ways that were dependent on factors such as the frequency and

intensity with which they experienced blackouts; the perceived control, comfort and safety they felt in specific drinking environments; and the self-knowledge they possessed, and reassurance they received from others, regarding their intoxicated behaviours - to name a few.

The ability to “achieve an acceptable balance” of outcomes is, of course, also dependent on social and cultural views of *what is* acceptable “drunkenness.” Such views undoubtedly influence a drinker’s inclination to either dismiss experiences as normal or, inversely, take steps to alter drinking habits. For those who enjoyed drinking to extremes, however, managing blackouts was constituted as a process of trial and error. Repeatedly, participants ventured towards the “fine line” and tested the boundaries of “good drunk” and “bad drunk,” driven by the “risk-taking, excitement, and...pursuit of pleasure” characteristic of extreme drinking (p.1). Participants revealed that the strangeness, weirdness and unpredictability of blacking out have not overturned or outbalanced their generally positive affections towards alcohol. Indeed, the “element of unpredictability” associated with extreme drinking may very well “be part of its appeal” (p.8).

THE APPEAL OF “EXTREME” INTOXICATION

We wanna go somewhere else. We're not threatened by people anymore. All our insecurities have evaporated. We're in the clouds now. We're wide open. We're spacemen orbiting the earth. The world looks beautiful from here, man. We're nympholeptics, desiring for the unobtainable. We risk sanity for moments of temporary enlightenment. So many ideas. So little memory. The last thought killed by anticipation of the next. We embrace an overwhelming feeling of love. We flow in unison. We're together. I wish this was real. We want a universal level of togetherness, where we're comfortable with everyone. We're in rhythm. Part of a movement. A movement to escape. We wave goodbye. Ultimately, we just want to be happy. Heh...yeah... hang on - what the fuck was I just talking about? (intoxicated protagonist, *Human Traffic*, 1999)⁷³

If we keep going out and doing the same thing then there's obviously got to be some kind of appeal to it. That's so terrible! I don't know how else to describe it but it's true. It's true. We keep going out and doing it. We keep drinking excessively and binge drinking. The same results keep coming from it and we're obviously not doing anything about it so obviously it's pretty damn appealing to us. (Female, 25)

⁷³ View the trailer for this film at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fc0kPAPNahU>

I love being out of the state of my own mind. I love mind expanding, losing control. I don't necessarily like being out of control. I like the way drinking makes me feel. It makes me feel good. (Female, 22)

At the end of the day? I don't know it's just so much fun! I just have so much fun that I could never actually imagine just not doing it. (Female, 22)

Extreme drinking, like extreme sports, “offer[s] a challenge,” is “motivated by the expectation of pleasure,” and is “not without risk” (Martinic & Measham, 2008, p.2). Participants raised numerous immediate consequences such as having a bad hangover, embarrassing oneself, not making it into work and being bruised but in the end constituted these as “acceptable” risks worth taking. Confident in labeling their drinking as “fun,” participants revealed numerous motivations for drinking to extremes, both positive and negative. Although blacking out and “being out of control” were generally constituted as undesired outcomes, drinking to get drunk, and at levels well beyond the standards of “binge,” was regarded as ordinary and normative - as “the plan,” “the intent” and “the point” of drinking (“determined drunkenness”). Martinic and Measham emphasize that extreme drinking, as a *process*, is viewed as a social and enjoyable practice “enabled and encouraged by others, usually friends and peers, who share the experience and the broadly positive attitudes to this pattern of consumption” (p.9). Indeed, within their narratives, participants frequently associated drinking to extremes with social and romantic inclusion, intimacy, comfort, and adventure. Participants expressed that within this particular social atmosphere, where drunkenness is determined, blacking out was “not only accepted, [but] expected”:

I was drinking at 12 and everyone was drinking - and not just drinking but binge drinking - aiming to get as wasted as you can. If ever there was a school party it was standard that someone would be getting their stomach pumped and you think it's just like that everywhere... I took my friends from England to Wales and they come out of the pubs at the end of it and the streets were closed off for traffic and it's just like a swarm of people, like they all left a football stadium or something and they're all drunk. A sea of people and everyone is pissing on the streets. It's crazy. And so anything that happens with that - oh yeah, I wet myself or I got in a fight or I had unprotected sex or I can't remember anything - it's just like aaaaah boys on the piss, what great memories. (Male, 27)

This male participant embedded his drinking in a larger cultural narrative of visible intoxication. Drinking to the point of “getting one’s stomach pumped” was represented as a rite of passage into an adult world, comparable to that of the “school party,” where wetting oneself, getting into a fight, and blacking out were constituted as integral to what it means to be a male drinker in the UK. While the participant seemed amazed by the prominence of drunkenness in the streets of Wales, he also offered the description to argue how seemingly normative and acceptable such extreme intoxication has become. In a culture where “everybody drinks,” not remembering, rather than being a concern, was ironically constituted as “great memory” in itself, an anticipated outcome enabled by, and integral to, the larger spectacle subsuming the streets at night.⁷⁴ The male participant went on to describe the elation he felt in moments of extreme intoxication:

I'd say I get into a hyper-excited state of here and now and I don't care about anything before or afterwards. It's totally living in the moment and having a good time and maybe its because my feet aren't touching the ground that I'm not leaving footprints of memories in my brain. (Male, 27)

For this participant, the pleasure of intoxication was constituted as so intense that it subsumed the mind, and with it, his memory. The pleasure and “appeal” of extreme intoxication, apart from being an enjoyable social practice and rite of passage, was bound then to the notion of abandoning one’s preoccupations and “sense of limits,” losing some degree of control and inhibition, and indulging without worry about yesterday or tomorrow. This “desire to *live for the present*,” writes Nahoum-Grappe, is “typical of youth” and integral to the definition of what it means to be “extreme”: “It denotes the impatience [and] the feeling of urgency for things to happen ‘right now.’” This craving for “instant gratification” undoubtedly influences the quantity and speeds at which young people drink: “the faster one drinks, the faster and more extreme the

⁷⁴ For more on extreme drinking in the UK read: “A History of Intoxication: Changing Attitudes to Drunkenness and Excess in the United Kingdom” by Fiona Measham (Chapter 2 in Martinic & Measham, 2008, pp.13-36)

drunkenness” (2008, p.37). Such attitudes and practices, notes Measham, can be viewed against the “the backdrop” of “an individualistic and consumption-oriented society” and a “work hard/play hard millennial lifestyle” (Measham, 2008, p.29). As one male participant (24) observed, with amused fascination, drinking to extremes is a “reversion to childhood,” enabled by a culture in which “nobody wants to be your parent.” Here, extreme drinkers are “free” to roam their playground in a quest to discover - “How uninhibited can I become?”:

It's kind of interesting to see people without inhibitions – like the whole idea of second and third order desires and your ability to be a free agent. It kind of reverts you to this state where you act on the first thing that comes into your head. You don't have the ability to analyze... when you're plastered you do what immediately comes to mind – oh jumping off that roof sounds like a good idea – it's a lot more nature-wise. You're unable to wrap your head around the ramifications of things. There's no planning out of how this makes you look to the populace. I guess what separates us from animals or whatever is that whenever animals do something they're not concerned about how they appear to their owner whereas a human being does that. I guess when you're drunk you're not too concerned about how you look to other people you just do whatever feels natural. (Male, 24)

In this passage, the male participant emphasized an everyday existence preoccupied with appearances and surveillances, where drunkenness functioned to dismantle such concerns and, again, enabled the drinker to “live in the moment” and act on the first thing that came to mind. That drinking to extremes was constituted as “interesting” and “natural,” and intoxicated drinkers were described as uninhibited and “free,” is a testament to the uncertainty, pressure, boredom and superficiality felt by young people living in a period of “extended adolescence” and “rapid

socioeconomic change" (Measham, 2008, p.29).⁷⁵ Drawing on Elliott & Lemert (2005), Measham (2008) points to a "globalization of emotional insecurities" characterized by a "perceived growing lack of control." Given these conditions, intoxication is repositioned as a venture to reclaim "control over one's individual life." Quoting Hayward and Hobbs (2007), Measham argues:

the seductiveness of binge drinking...is not only linked to the inherent excitement of the alcoholic rush, but also to the more general feelings of self-actualization and self-expression to which it gives rise. It is a means of seizing control, a way of reacting against the 'unidentifiable forces that rob one of individual choice.' (2008, p.30)

Reclamation of control, or coping mechanism? In the narratives of participants, notions of control seemed bound to notions of escape. Participants described strategically using alcohol to avoid feeling socially anxious ("I don't feel comfortable in a big group setting") and uninspired ("I need something to believe in, something creative. I feel like alcohol replaces something I'm not doing."). "Getting drunk" was frequently motivated by the "release" it provided from the pressures of relationships, work and school. What extreme drinking allowed was for participants to behave in ways they never would in "real life" (Female, 23). In a way, this is an embodied "reaction" to the constraints of "real life" - "a temporary and purely theatrical liberation from 'daytime' society and Western 'civilized' lifestyles" (Nahoum-Grappe, 2008, p.42). Drinking to

⁷⁵ Living in a period of "extended adolescence" means delaying, for various socioeconomic reasons, the "onset of key life stage markers and adult responsibilities, such as marriage, mortgage, and parenthood" - this, coinciding with "a rapid expansion of the night-time economy" indicated by the rising numbers of licensed premises (Measham, 2008, p.29). Indeed, many participants associated blacking out with being in their twenties. The early twenties were talked about as a "phase" designated for testing one's limits with alcohol, a time during which such experimentation is generally expected and regarded as acceptable. The youngest female participant (18) viewed the "early twenties" as the peak age for excessive drinking - a time which she described as a "last call" for partying before facing the responsibilities of adulthood. As such, she attributed her blackouts to her age and inexperience. Similarly, another female participant (22) noted she blacked out because "she's just at that age" where she is going to do whatever she wants: "Once I get to a certain age I'm sure it will be over. I just think it's a twenties thing, hopefully." One female participant who was blacking out and in her thirties (32), noted feeling "more embarrassed" since, by this point, she should know her limits. Drinking "like you're in your twenties" made her feel irresponsible: "I mean I'm a woman in my thirties and after years of getting that drunk I know myself. I should be able to discipline myself and that's what I'm trying to do now."

extremes and past the point of recollection can be regarded as both an emotional “form of surrender to the forces of chaos and hedonism” (Griffin et al., 2009, p.471) as well as a strategic and calculated move used to overcome and react against constraints “that stand in the way of creating an *esthetic of communication* that opens the way for all other kinds of excess” (Nahoum-Grappe, 2008, p.44). Measham concludes:

[M]otivations for intoxication are increasingly complex and contradictory for young people growing up in contemporary late modern society, seeking to balance a broader sense of lack of control with the re-exertion of control through the “controlled loss of control” in leisure, driven both by rationality and emotionality in drinking and drunkenness. (2008, p.32)

CALCULATED HEDONISM AND THE DESIRE FOR A “CONTROLLED LOSS OF CONTROL”

I have no phone because I know when I drink I lose everything. If my purse is not wrapped around my waist, if I have to carry it - it's gone. Because I just like to be free. Especially when I'm dancing. Fuck this purse. I forget I own it. I'm just so caught up in the moment and it's just annoying to hold it. So I put it down. Forget I have it and go home. So now I've learned. I put everything in my pockets or I have a purse that goes around me somehow. I know when I go drinking now it's the proper shoes and the coat that I don't mind losing, you know!? (...) But then, why I am I setting it up? Why not just *not* drink to that point rather than preparing myself? (Female, 32)

When Martinic and Measham (2008) describe extreme drinking as “calculated” they do not necessarily mean it is “always planned” but rather emphasize that it can be “accidental” (p.9). The *intention* or reason for drinking, however, is always bound to “some element of hedonism” whether it be “risk-taking or sensation-seeking, or a desire to push the boundaries of consumption beyond usual or acceptable social levels” (p.9). Indeed, while blackouts were implicitly understood, in the narratives of participants, to be the outcome of deliberate and pleasure-driven heavy drinking,⁷⁶ getting drunk to “that point” was often constituted as undesired, accidental or unintentional, by all means a “surrender to the forces of chaos and hedonism” (Griffin et al., 2009, p.471).

⁷⁶ A number of participants described instances in which they blacked out after what they perceived to be a low quantity of alcohol.

When asked, however, to speculate about the ways in which they drank and the possible factors that might influence or increase their chances of experiencing a blackout, participants rightfully identified variables such as speed of consumption, not eating enough, mixing alcohols and substances and drinking hard alcohol straight (doing “shots”).⁷⁷ Their explanations revealed that, in retrospect and upon reflection, they had a good understanding of when, why and how they “got to that point” - indeed, they prepared themselves for it. That participants lost control at some point in their drinking was a facet of intoxication they knowingly and repeatedly entertained. That is, whereas some described “not anticipating” blackouts, others reported “allowing” themselves to “slip” into a manner of drinking which invariably lead to amnesia. They reported “knowing,” at the outset of drinking, that it was “going to be a blackout night.” Anticipated or not, participant descriptions revealed a willingness to engage with risks such as blackouts and a hedonistic pattern of consumption which was, indeed, calculated:

I know where it comes from. I know where it's going to end up for the most part. And I think it's sort of this time period in my life. I guess some might say I might in some sense be in denial but I'm not really denying anything because I know exactly what's going on. I don't feel like I've lost control altogether because I know how I am when in that state...I'm very aware of myself which is kind of why I'm not as distressed about it. I realize it's happening and then it happens and I knew it was going to, I just didn't stop it. (Female, 22)

Inversely, another female participant (25) similarly constituted “getting wasted” as the hedonistic and calculated goal of drinking, however associated the outcome of amnesia with getting “way too drunk.” She emphasized the difficulty of “knowing,” let alone controlling, this particular outcome of extreme intoxication:

⁷⁷ Numerous participants reported that mixing alcohol with marijuana and ecstasy intensified their blackouts, whereas mixing alcohol with cocaine was described as counteracting the sedative effects of alcohol and helping maintain awareness throughout the night. One male participant reported that drugs enabled him to drink larger quantities of alcohol: “You can drink a lot more on drugs and that contributes to blackouts.” Another male participant constituted blacking out as random, noting that it has happened in every situation and with every combination of substances. He does conclude, however that more often than not, if he is taking multiple substances, he will black out.

Most of the time when you drink you don't know how much you've already drank, you don't know how that's going to affect you within half an hour from that point and so you keep drinking because you don't feel that wasted yet. You keep drinking and inevitably you get way too drunk and that's how you blackout. (Female, 25)

A number of participants expressed that, despite their intentions, a “controlled loss of control” was difficult to engineer given the unpredictable onset of amnesia. For these drinkers the line between losing control and being out of control was imperceptible. Still, participants revealed that their hedonism was “bounded,” with consumption depending on factors such as time, company, place (Measham, 2004 in Griffin et al., 2009, p.461) and other “external responsibilities” (Brain et al., 2000 in Leigh & Lee, 2008, p.59). For example, numerous participants pointed to “club,” “party” and “social” atmospheres as contributing to their difficulty in controlling their level of intoxication:

When I'm at a party? That's when it gets crazy because I'm just having so much fun. If I'm at home drinking I can really draw the line any time I feel like it but when I'm out in a social atmosphere I just want to get more drunk and have more fun. (Male, 25)

The club is designed for people to get drunk. (Male, 32)

Drunkenness, in club and bar environments, was constituted not only as determined and desired but destined and devised. In their descriptions, participants emphasized the seductive pull of the party atmosphere, with its various rituals of consumption. For example, “making it for last call” was a ritual which often resulted in a large and rapid consumption of alcohol shortly before licensed establishments closed. As one female participant (26) noted, “I drink more and I drink fast because I get there quite late.” When “last call” was extended (i.e for special events), drinkers described feeling the need to take advantage of the privilege - one male participant recounted having blackouts five nights in a row during a festival which had bars serving until 4

a.m.⁷⁸ Furthermore, those participants who reported working in bars, expressed difficulties resisting alcohol in circumstances where they felt it was part of their job to take a drink with a patron. “You can't really say no,” noted one male participant (32). “Yes you can, but as a deejay [or bartender] you can't really say no to everybody.” Although drinking in such environments was repeatedly and primarily constituted as “fun,” some participants revealed feeling a pressure to “be outgoing” alongside an expectation to “do the same thing every weekend.” Numerous participants emphasized, however, that they “still had control” over their drinking, planning their intoxication around special events, work schedules and other responsibilities.

[T]he more comfortable I am with people the more I will probably black out because I know I am able to. Just because I know they'll take me to my house, I'll go in and I'll go to bed (...) The blackout thing – I feel like it's comfortable. I don't care because I have good friends around me. (Male, 32)

The most significant factor bounding extreme intoxication was the reliability of the drinker's friendship group. Participants described managing their amnesia by drinking in environments and with people they had come to know and trust. As such, they negotiated their blackouts through the perceived safety, trust and comfort they felt while in the company of friends. Described by one female participant as “a self-induced dependency on somebody else,” amnesic intoxication can be testing on relationships. However, as Griffin and colleagues (2009) have noted, strong social bonds are formed around this kind of consumption as friends rely on each other for care and confirmation they “weren't that bad.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Regularly, “last call” at licensed establishments in Ontario is at around 1:45 a.m with no alcohol served past 2 a.m.

⁷⁹ Leigh and Lee (2008) point to U.S study of college students in which a “frequency of extreme consumption was associated with more intimate relationships with same-sex peers (Nezlek, Pilkington, & Bilbro, 1994)” not just during the drinking event but afterwards, “when negative consequences may enhance intimacy” (p.56).

While depending on friends worked to maintain the self and a “controlled loss of control,” Giles (1999) points out that a reliance on others also functions to restrict, rather than maintain, the drunken self. Because individuals have limited or no memory of their behaviour, “drunken identities” (Giles, 1999, p.400) are constructed for them by their friends and become hard to resist or escape, especially when group reactions to such identities are shared and constructed as the norm. “People are frequently accredited with a certain predictability of response,” notes Giles, “and so it is possible that our drunken identities are constrained by the same set of positioning’s as our sober identities” (p.388). One female participant’s (22) narrative speaks to this “predictability of response”:

People look at me and are like “of course you’re drinking tonight”... like people talk about me as if I’m this crazy animal. And I know that I like to go out and have a good time but I don’t see myself as that party animal that they probably see. (Female, 22)

I asked her how she felt about having this reputation, letting her know I too have heard stories about her drinking. In particular, I reminded her of a night out where her friends sent her home in a cab because they found her to be too intoxicated (i.e social group as controlling). The remarkable element of the story, as I recounted it back to her, was her prompt return to the party. She responded forcefully:

I know! I know! It’s so weird I don’t even understand that other side of me. If I was in my right mind – knowing that I was that fucked and my friends are obviously trying to send me home – I wouldn’t stop the cab and get out of the cab, stumble back to the party and say, “What’s up guys? Lets go!” You know? Like, that’s retarded! When I think about it, it’s just like that’s fucking weird man. Like who does that? Who goes back for more when you’ve had enough? (Female, 22)

Although she clearly dissociated herself from the drunken identity constructed for her in the stories of others, the drunken self she described, often with laughter, was one which seemed to adopt the drunken persona others have come to expect. In listening to her narrative, it became clear the participant’s confusion, ambivalence and continued drinking stemmed from the

significant role others played in continually re-constructing her experience. I asked her why she thought she continued drinking to "that point." She answered, first, by saying she was never aware she was drinking herself into a blackout and, second, by revealing she "can get that wasted" because her friends will "still love [her]":

I do this to myself, with people and with friends, and they see me like that, and they're still my friends after. I wake up and they care about me after and we laugh about it and then I'm with them two nights later doing the same thing and having a good time hanging out - which I love to do - and I keep drinking more with my friends and then I blackout. And then they're like "What are you doing? Check yourself!" But they're always still going to be my friends after and I'm comfortable with them and it's like I guess I let myself slip into that point because I guess it's just, you know, a lot of people don't change. A lot of people change after the worst. It has to get as bad as it's gonna get. I feel like maybe - knock on wood, I hope this never happens - but I feel like if one night I wake up and I don't have my friends anymore...I think if I woke up in the morning and all of a sudden my friends hated me, maybe that would move me into something, like a movement, like change. And make me actually understand that it's not normal, not right, not healthy. But I wake up in the morning and these people are understanding and they still respect me. They're still friends with me so it's like I sit down with them and have drinks with them the next night and don't really think about it. (Female, 22)

Receiving negative feedback from friends was constituted as having a significant effect on attitudes towards amnesia. However, when drinkers sensed that support from, and belonging to, the friendship group was unconditional, such feedback tended to have a limited impact on drinking habits. It was only when drinkers sensed a real threat to friendships or romantic relationships that they entertained the idea of change. Inversely, when participants felt friendships were not threatened by drinking to extremes, they regarded the experience as acceptable:

People still like me when I'm at that point. I'm not annoying or getting into trouble (...) If I got myself into more trouble with people or offended people than I would care a lot more. People just say you're hilarious and that was funny. That's the feedback I get usually. It makes it more okay in a way because the only thing I have to regret is the physiological health thing. It's not like I ruined someone else's night. (Male, 25)

For these participants, the pleasures of extreme intoxication were bound to the pains their intoxicated behaviours posed to meaningful relationships. Their desired and actual loss of control was constituted as dependent on the care and judgment of others. As such, friendship groups can

be regarded as significant controlling forces in the drinkers quest for disinhibition, his or her perceptions of harm and consequent emotional assessments of experience.

PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF HARM - "Nothing Bad Happened"

Although one might expect that negative consequences would dissuade young people from drinking to extremes, their acceptance of the inevitability of such consequences suggests some reasons why drinking continues in the face of such outcomes: Positive consequences appear to youths to be more important and frequent; negative outcomes are delayed and infrequently experienced;^[80] and bad effects are often minimized by the drinkers as "not so bad." (Leigh & Lee, 2008, p.61)

Like it doesn't bother me that I'm not creating any memories. I'm like meh, it's not really the end of the world like I don't really care that much. It bothers me what could happen in that situation. I don't want to have to be embarrassed. I don't want to have to be ashamed of myself (...) The only times when it doesn't bother me is when nothing bad happens. If nothing bad happened then I'll brush it off and I don't care. (Female, 25)

Like honestly it's really - it's not a problem. The only problem I have is if I made it someone else's problem. That's the only problem I have with it. If it didn't affect anybody or hurt anybody's life at the time or made them feel bad then like cool, I don't give a fuck. Why am I gonna be all like sad about me getting blackout drunk? It doesn't bother me that I can't remember what I did or said. That doesn't bother me at all. It happened and now I gotta get over it. It doesn't bother me because like probably to me - I had a great fucking time you know? To me, that was probably a great fucking night. (Male, 25)

On a subjective level, the idea of not forming memories, alone, was generally not constructed as a problem by the majority of participants.⁸¹ Although they described their first experiences as "scary" and "shocking," ultimately these did not deter them from drinking.⁸² Despite exposure to and experience with numerous risks, participants tended to conclude they would have "liked to remember" but "didn't really feel that worried about it" because "nothing really horrible ever happened." For example, a female participant (25) recounted numerous experiences where she had put herself at risk such as having unremembered sex, getting kicked out of a cab in a remote

⁸⁰ As Leigh and Lee explain: "Many positive effects of alcohol are immediate, 'feel good' consequences, whereas many negative effects are delayed by minutes (loss of coordination), [hours, (blackouts)], days (loss of job), or years (loss of liver function)...A drinking episode might end badly, but its pleasurable beginnings are more powerful motivators" (Marlatt, 1987; Stacy & Widaman, 1987 in 2008, p.63). Furthermore, in another UK study, young people noted "that only extremely serious consequences would motivate them to cut down their alcohol consumption, but that those consequences 'hardly ever happen' (Richardson & Budd, 2003)" (p.63).

⁸¹ Only one subject explicitly stated having a problem with "the idea of not remembering" (Male, 24).

⁸² Two individuals reported quitting drinking, one reported quitting drinking hard alcohol, due to blacking out.

area at night and accepting a ride from a male stranger who pulled over to see if she needed help. In recounting these experiences, she described them as “really bad.” However, when asked later if she has ever placed herself in a dangerous situation as a result of blacking out she replied “not really.” She retracted this statement by concluding the night she accepted the ride “could have been bad.” Similarly, a male participant (28) identified having unprotected sex and getting into cars with drunk people as dangerous behaviours he has engaged in, however, negotiated his drinking by concluding he hasn’t gotten himself into any “big trouble” as of yet.

Despite similarly asserting that ultimately “nothing really terrible ever happened,” there was a striking gender difference in the way participants described the emotional aftermath and consequences of their unremembered behaviours. Males, more so than females, tended to focus their descriptions on physical, rather than social and emotional, consequences. One male participant (28), for example, noticed experiencing amnesia more often than he used to and wasn’t sure if he should be worried about this being an indicator his brain was “deteriorating.” He described experiencing “unbearable” and worsening hangovers and expressed concern over various other potential physiological and physical outcomes such as developing Alzheimer’s and choking on his own vomit: “It scares me in a way that I think that I could be a candidate for those guys who fall asleep and puke and die. Because I get that drunk and it definitely concerns me, the amount I drink.” The “only thing,” he said, that motivated him to “cut down” on his drinking was how it made him feel the next day “like physically.” The participant revealed, however, that he has gotten so used to his blackouts, “something significant would have to happen” for him to alter his drinking habits - “you know, me losing my job because of it or killing somebody, drunk driving or something.” As Martinic and Measham (2008) observed from their focus group data:

[I]t appears that the events actually leading to changed drinking behaviours were often tragic. Respondents brought up numerous morning-after speeches, where they would vow during a hangover never to drink alcohol again. Unfortunately, the participants generally agreed that this “never-again” vow was quickly forgotten the next time they were in a heavy drinking environment. (p.83)

More preoccupied with “what could have happened,” only female participants reported feeling “lucky” to have made it home safely, emphasizing their vulnerable position:

Anything could have happened and anything could happen to me. When you're that weak and disposable someone could just literally pick you up and take you away and you have no self control, no balance, no stability. People have found me in little corner store holes on Queen Street passed out! And if the wrong person finds me something serious could happen and I'm starting to realize that that can't happen. If I let myself get there, I'll never forgive myself. (Female, 22)

Female concerns tended to be constructed around risks which were sexualized (“I could’ve been taken advantage of”/ “Thank god he turned out to be a nice guy”) and were, of course, relative to the intensity of the blackout and the extent of the damage incurred as a result of the behaviours supposedly engaged in. In the spontaneous stories of female participants, “something bad” was more often regarded as a social, rather than physical or physiological, consequence. That is, doing something socially damaging seemed to be of more concern to participants than the potential consequences of alcohol on the remembering brain and body. For example, one participant (25) emphasized an intrusive concern over how she had presented herself to others while in a blackout, especially those who she was romantically interested in. In recounting an episode where she was supposedly acting inappropriately flirtatious, the participant was hard on herself, constituting her blackout as a missed opportunity for a potentially meaningful relationship. While a significant number of participants transferred the burden of care, responsibility and memory onto others, she internalized blacking out as reflective of her personality, cognitive competence and “true” identity. Rather than dismissing the event, she

described ruminating about it endlessly: "I'll keep going over it in my mind. What they must be thinking, the little tiny fragments of memory I will have, I just keep going over it, all of it."

Similarly, another female participant (29), revealed she was "more concerned about what people may think" and described feeling "more scared" of losing her friends than she was "over what could happen to [her] in that state."

It literally made me sick, you know? For the past three or four years I've been sick! And it's cost me a lot - mentally, physically, emotionally - it's cost me a lot of my relationships. I haven't been able....anyways its cost me a lot (sighs) So it's not worth - it's just not worth it. (Female, 29)

This female participant (29) described symptoms, behaviours and consequences which seemed more severe and intense than those described by other participants. Having blacked out the first time she drank beer at 14, the participant described no longer being able to drink wine, do "shots" or "even drink draft beer." Blackouts, for this participant, often tended to be the outcome of drinking when in a really good or bad mood, in combination with not having had anything to drink all week. In the participant's words, she blacked out because she was "rearing to go." Anticipating drinking in this way, she said, caused her to start drinking earlier and faster. Other contributing factors she mentioned included genetic predisposition, generalized anxiety, and mixing alcohol with prescription medications such as antidepressants and benzodiazepines. When in a blackout, she portrayed herself as being "violent, incomprehensible and with no motor skills," however, mentioned she wasn't entirely sure how she behaved since her friends didn't "like to go into detail."

Although she expressed concerns over her physical and mental health, the participant focused her descriptions of the aftermath on the ostracism she perceived from others, emphasizing that her blackouts "completely affected [her] relationships with people." She recounted incidents

where she had been thrown out of bars, left by her friends and warned by others that if she drank, she would have to do so alone. The resulting embarrassment she felt eventually prevented her from going out to the “pre-party” and the “after-party,” for which she expressed feeling “a certain amount of jealousy”:

I feel like well how come they get to fucking go out and do all this stuff and I have to stay in because I can't control myself? Not that I can't control myself - I can but I have to be so limiting about it and so careful all the time that it takes all the fun out of it. Because all of a sudden I feel like people talk, because everybody talks, and I feel like people talk and they're like "Oh well, there she is, she can't fucking handle herself, all drunk. There she goes again, look at her. There she is on the floor." (Female, 29)

This passage speaks to the significance of collectivity to extreme intoxication. The participant repeatedly emphasized the continued alienation and abandonment she experienced due to her inability to limit herself in a way which she and others found manageable and enjoyable.

“Controlling oneself” is not something she associated with the “fun” of drinking. While she understood that the harsh reaction of others was also one of concern, and admitted it was effective in “bringing the message home,” she wondered if it was truly genuine:

Sometimes I wonder if they just want to make me feel bad. I kind of wish I had some friends that would think it was funny ... it just makes you feel guilty and there's the risk that it causes seclusion and makes you almost want to drink on your own or drink with people who will just understand or drink with someone who gets blackouts too. You almost don't want to drink with those other people because you're embarrassed if it happens...You feel like a social leper, you really do. (Female, 29)

The shame and rejection emphasized by the participant underlines the significant role that telling and hearing stories about drunken selves plays in the social lives of young adults. The participant's “guilt,” “self-loathing,” “self-pity,” “regret” and “depression”- brought forth through the unfavourable drinking narrative - affected her ability to cope with the negatives of her amnesia in a healthy manner. While she described employing various strategies to “limit

herself,”⁸³ she ultimately recognized her struggle to do so and revealed her ambivalence: “I say I have people with me so it’s all right or it’s close to home so it’s all right and it’s not all right, I should be able to -- but I mean what’s the fun in just having two beers?” The participant realized, in hearing herself speak, that by limiting herself to drinking on the weekend she was also conditioning herself to anticipate extreme intoxication as a reward for abstaining during the week: “You tell yourself, this is my night to drink. I’m going out and I’m drinking. Fuck it! If I blackout, I don’t give a fuck.”

[A]fterwards you think about it and you think well...I must not really love myself if I’m doing this to myself (...) You start asking yourself - Who am I? Why would I treat myself this way? You lose a lot of who you are in partying that hard. You forget who you are and often times you are drinking to forget who you are but you just don’t even realize that you’re doing that until after the fact. And even then you say, “Oh no that’s not what I’m doing. I’m just having a good time. Everybody does it.” (Female, 26)

Extreme intoxication that frequently resulted in amnesia, while calculated and driven by hedonistic intent, was regarded by this female participant (26) as “a messy situation that plays with your self-worth.” She recounted thinking, after every blackout, that she would “never drink again,” however admitted, “ultimately, it ended up happening again.” The participant attributed the reoccurrence of her blackouts, not to a lack of concern, but rather to her inability to comprehend the gravity of her behaviour: “It’s not that I didn’t care... It was that the thought of it was almost too much for me to grasp at the time.” In hearing her speak, I couldn’t help but relate to the “scariness” of “thinking about it that much.” Every time I attempted to write about my own blackouts and discern my own attitudes, the apprehension that “something bad” *was* indeed happening gripped me, relentlessly.

⁸³ For example: “eliminating” those “bad influences” who encouraged drinking or drug-taking after intoxication was already achieved; limiting herself to drinking once a week or on weekends; drinking close to home so she could make it there safely; and refraining from drinking until midnight.

FROM INTRUSION TO DISMISSAL

Sometimes not knowing what you did consumes your every thought. A million scenarios run through your head. All you can do is picture yourself acting like a huge unattractive idiot.

"You probably didn't do anything stupid," I reassure my friend, as she wondered what other people were wondering.

"You're probably right," she agreed. "Maybe all this is in my head and I just have to think how next week I will have forgotten about the fact that I don't remember." (Female, 25)

It used to weird me out a lot before when it first started happening. I would be concerned on like how I was acting when I don't remember and I was just like "Was I retarded? How was I?" And then it just started happening so often that it was almost...natural. Like there would be mornings where I would wake up and just be like yah I don't remember what happened last night. And I wouldn't even bother asking. I wasn't that concerned. Like it's just something that I do. I just don't remember what happened last night and that's it. Which is bad. Really bad. (Female, 22)

As mentioned previously, Buelow and Koeppel (1995) were the first to conduct a study specifically looking at the emotional impact of blackouts. Using a scale, they measured how stressful blackout episodes were in terms of "intrusiveness of an event into consciousness" and "avoidance" of the event through dismissal (p.14). They found that blackouts, compared to other stressful events, caused a "moderate" level of stress characterized less by avoidance of the event and more by intrusive thoughts (p.17). In the present study, the emotional impact of blacking out became apparent, not through the use of scales, but *stories* in which participants described their efforts at attempting to remember. Some emphasized a determination and preoccupation with "piecing it together" (i.e intrusion) while others communicated they didn't "even bother asking" (i.e avoidance, dismissal). Often, however, both forces or "voices" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p.174) were present within a speaker's narrative, revealing a tension between wanting to "get the full story" while simultaneously having the information "sugar-coated." As Zailckas wrote in her memoir (2005), there is a part of the post-blackout mind "that wants to dig it up" and a part "that wants to push it deeper down" (p.75). While Buelow and Koeppel's study draws attention to these opposing cognitive forces, it is through storytelling that we begin to understand

the relationship between them. Through storytelling, too, we can take into account the social and cultural factors that enable an emotional aftermath that is conflicted, tense, fluctuating and shifting over time, rather than fixed to a numerical point on a scale.

As far as I'm concerned, it's happened to everybody. You know what, and I'd rather that it's happened to me many of times than not happened to me because the first time it happened to me was very uncomfortable (...) I think it's become so normal that I really don't give a damn about it. I've just come to terms with it like yah that's gonna happen sometimes and I just gotta be careful who I'm with. (Male, 32)

It just happens so frequently I don't regard it as a problem anymore - that's horrible and I'm admitting that. It's terrible! I think it's a problem but I don't think it's as big of a problem that I need to go and make some severe changes in my drinking patterns because of it. It's so normal - think of like half of your friends - it happens to us all the time - even now, even like five years since they started drinking - it still happens to all of us, all the time, we all admit it, we all talk about it. (Female, 25)

Many participants who reported experiencing blackouts for years described a gradual and socially conditioned shift in emotional reactions to amnesia - from intrusion to dismissal. This shift can be attributed to an increased frequency in and perceived commonness of the occurrence of blackouts. Rather than becoming more concerned as their blackouts became more frequent, participants described "making peace" and "coming to terms" with this dimension of their drinking. Initial anxieties faded and blacking out became "almost normal" - an expected part of the drinking event.⁸⁴ This acceptability was in large part related to participant beliefs that blacking out happened "so often" and "to everybody" - a belief constructed and maintained through the exchange of blackout narratives with similarly affected others.

Interestingly, those who described experiencing blackouts less frequently (a few times a year) noted they would view their blackouts as a "problem" if they became more frequent ("If it happened twice a month that would be a problem"). It was the *infrequency* of their blackouts that

⁸⁴ Leigh and Lee point to a number of studies in which negative outcomes, although acknowledged, were "often perceived as inevitable and not reason enough for concern." (See Martinic & Measham, 2008, p.61).

made the experience both acceptable and “interesting.” For example, one female participant (18), who reported only ever experiencing two blackouts, negotiated her experience of unremembered sex by telling herself it *wasn't* a common occurrence: “I wasn't worried. I just realized that I must have had too much to drink and that I should probably not do it again,” she explained. “That was just my way of dealing with it. I rationalized it thinking that's *not* normal.”

As such, an increased frequency in the occurrence of blackouts was constructed as both normalizing and problematizing. In other words, participants who experienced blackouts often revealed they dismissed their amnesia because it seemed “normal”⁸⁵ whereas participants who experienced blackouts infrequently also reported reactions characterized by dismissal, but precisely because they perceived blackouts to be “not normal” and therefore not a concern.

I would really, like *really*, try to piece it together...you know, try to get a whole bunch of different accounts from different people and like, you know, find out exactly where I was and just *really* like *try hard* and focus on it and think but I...it never came back so I think I sort of gave up and... now I just don't really bother. (Female, 24)

I don't know. Sometimes it bothers me but I think now I'm just used to it... I'm used to blacking out and I don't hold onto whatever memories I could have possibly lost whereas in the past I was like “What the fuck happened?” and I'd be trying to get a story out of somebody... Now I probably won't even make a phone call and if I happen to talk to that person again, they'll tell me a story and I'll be like - “Oh.” (Male, 29)

Participants described putting much more effort into remembering and obtaining multiple accounts from others when they first started experiencing blackouts. Their descriptions emphasized the internal struggle, uncertainty and eventual learned helplessness they felt due to the irretrievableness of memories never formed. Because most participants believed the missing memories were simply lost, somewhere to be recovered, they persisted in their strain to

⁸⁵ That drinkers perceive the experience as “normal” is also influenced by the drinkers social group: “If heavy drinkers consume alcohol mostly with other heavy drinkers who are also experiencing negative consequences, they may accept these consequences as normal” (McMahon, Jones & O'Donnell, 1994 in Leigh & Lee, 2008, p.63).

remember the events and described going to great lengths to “piece it together.” When, despite their most substantial efforts, they could not “will something to the surface,” participants “gave up,” eventually learning to dismiss the event in the face of repeated futile attempts. The more common and “normal” participants perceived blacking out to be, the less effort they put forth into finding out “what happened?”

Inversely, participants for whom the experience was novel or infrequent, narrated with a sense of curiosity, emphasizing a desire to find out what had happened and how they had behaved. For example, one male participant (29) who reported blacking out “hundreds of times,” described initially waking up with a feeling of “unknown guilt,” shock and paranoia that he did “something bad.” He remembered always “investigating” to find out what had happened and recalled being known as “the guy who, when he was really drunk, was probably going to give you a call the next morning” apologizing. The participant went on to say “it’s different now” because he has gotten “used to it.” Furthermore, he described feeling as though he had learnt to behave himself while in a blackout, a shift in self-concept which he attributed to information he received from friends: “The only news I got is that I had a great time.”

Those who reported feeling ultimately unconcerned about their blackouts, however, often ended up contradicting this claim at some point in their storytelling. For example, one male participant (32), who reported experiencing frequent *en bloc* blackouts indirectly revealed his concern when asked to consider why he reacts with laughter - “laughing about it makes you not give a damn,” he responded. Similarly, another male participant (23) stated he “didn’t care” only to later revise his assertion by disclosing he “couldn’t care” since doing so would be a “waste of emotion.” What had happened was “already in the past” and therefore could not be changed.

Still, he “wished” he could remember - a statement echoed by numerous participants. While some used this desire to reconsider their drinking habits (“What’s the point if I’m not going to remember any of it anyway?” Female, 24), others constituted remembering as something that could not or probably would not happen in the context of drinking to extreme intoxication.

Consequently, given their inability to change the past, a number of participants perceived there was nothing they could do about blacking out “after the fact,” except to dismiss the event by turning it into a joke:

I laugh about it now, but at the time, right after it’s happened, there’s no laughter - no laughter in that scenario at all. You turn it into a joke because you don’t really have a choice, do you? What else are you going to do with it? You can’t really do too much after the fact. Especially, if you’re dealing with acquaintances. You can’t really apologize and then be like – “Yah, I’m going to AA.” It almost makes you look worse. (Female, 25)

Um... it’s kind of a... it’s kind of a joke. Not a joke but it’s – I don’t know how else to deal with it. Like it’s happened so often that most of my friends that I go out with...like know about it and are sort of used to it I think? They’re not surprised if I’m like “Oh what did I do last night?” or “Did I make out with anyone?” You make a joke of it because... there’s no.... if you were going to take it really seriously and get really concerned about it... then you would sort of have to take responsibility and like change your behaviour, you know? You couldn’t be like “This is such a horrible thing. Yeah, let’s go drink tonight again.” (Female, 24)

For these participants, turning it into a joke was constituted as the only way to deal with their amnesia since the alternative - taking it seriously or “going to A.A” - implied they would have to change the ways in which they drank, the ways in which they felt about their drinking and, ultimately, the ways in which they lived their social lives. By turning it into a joke, participants were able to distance themselves from even entertaining this possibility - change is not a choice. That participants reacted to their amnesia in this way, underlined the significance of extreme intoxication in their social lives. Consequently, the emotional aftermath of alcohol-induced amnesia -with its complex and conflicting progressions from intrusion to avoidance, dismissal

and I would add, trivialization - can be interpreted as having important implications for future drinking habits, both pleasurable and “problematic.”

THE “FINE LINE” - NEGOTIATING ALCOHOLISM

I know people who are physically dependent on being a social drinker. They need to get out every night and they need to be with people and get drunk but they don't drink alone. They become obsessed with being out and social and wasted. People live off that shit but they don't necessarily drink alone and I'm wondering what the line is... are they an alcoholic? (Female, 23)

For numerous participants, the “fine line” was constituted as the imperceptible edge separating remembered intoxication from amnesia. Participants also revealed, as the above excerpt demonstrates, the existence of a “fine line” between what they considered to be social drinking and what they defined as alcoholism. Distinctions between the two centered largely on intentions and environments for drinking. As Leigh and Lee (2008) point out, extreme drinking is “primarily a social phenomenon, typically occurring in public places, such as pubs, bars and nightclubs, and in groups [p.53]...The pleasures of drinking among this age group - whether the drinking occasion is motivated by personal pleasure, stress reduction, or alleviation of boredom - always include other people as part of the drinking situation (Engineer et al., 2003)” (p.58). Indeed, numerous participants adamantly emphasized they would never drink to the point of blacking out alone. That their drinking was carried out with others is precisely what signified their *non*-alcoholism:

[W]hen I drink it's to have fun and to be social and to be with my friends and it's not to hide from the world or because I'm miserable and I need to drown myself in booze. For me that's a huge distinction right there. What is your intention in seeking alcohol? Mine is purely social. (Male, 27)

If you intentionally bring yourself to that point you have issues - that's called alcoholism. (Female, 18)

For these participants, blacking out signified addiction when it was negatively motivated,⁸⁶ arrived at intentionally, or without the company of friends. The underlying argument, held by these and numerous other participants, was the conviction that because their amnesia was social and unintentional, something that “just happened” when they were out drinking with friends, they were exempt from the marker of dependence. As one female participant (18) insisted, getting drunk to the point of not-remembering was generally not a decision “made consciously.” Another female participant (26), however, maintained that “even if you do it just socially,” by going out and getting drunk every (other) night, “you are acting like an addict.”

I'm always itching for the next drink - that's what I would associate with alcoholism and the way that I drink - after the second drink they all go down really really fast. I'm not tasting it for the flavour which is what you should be doing - drinking it for the actual drink - it's just to get it down to feel drunk. Having to be dependent on it just to get through the day is kind of the next step but I don't think I'll ever get there.⁸⁷ (Female, 22)

In recounting their narratives, numerous participants acknowledged they “acted” or “probably sounded” like alcoholics, however, were apprehensive and resistant in identifying with the label. One female participant (22), who reported experiencing frequent *en bloc* blackouts, admitted she was “beginning to understand and accept” she might have a “slight drinking problem.” She did not, however, consider herself to be an “alcoholic” which she conceptualized as one of two types: functional alcoholics who have jobs, families and are “super successful”; and street alcoholics

⁸⁶ For example, a number of participants identified their extreme intoxication to be the result of disturbed and depressed emotions. As one female participant (24) noted, “Usually when I get that drunk, I’m upset about something else in my life.” Another female participant (27) described “drinking like there’s no tomorrow” when she felt emotional and depressed. Leigh and Lee (2008) write: “Drinking to cope...is aimed at managing, minimizing, or eliminating problems or negative emotions” (Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995)...While the majority of studies regard ‘drinking to cope’ in opposition to ‘drinking for sociability’ (e.g. Cooper et al., 1995; Faber, Khavari & Douglas, 1980) there is often a large social component among young adults in drinking to cope. Thus a young person that is troubled by problems may be taken out drinking by peers, creating a context in which alcohol consumption can both relax the drinker and help him or her forget problems in the company of supportive friends” (Coleman & Carter, 2005)” (p.57).

⁸⁷ In a study by MacAskill and colleagues (2001), “[m]ore serious consequences such as addiction or liver damage, while acknowledged, were rationalised away as future risks for ‘other people, not me’ or accepted fatalistically” (p. 19 as cited in Leigh & Lee, 2008, p.62)

who “panhandle money to get a forty of cheap fucking beer.” Her notions of alcoholism rested at opposite ends of a spectrum of cultural stereotype and stigma, allowing her to position her drinking in opposition to the “alcoholics” she described. Similarly, one male participant (27) admitted he definitely had “a problem excessing over the line,” however did not consider himself an alcoholic to the “extreme” that he sees on shows like *Intervention*, where “they gotta slam like half a bottle of wine before they go into a room.” Except for a couple of participants who called attention to the romantic associations between being an alcoholic and being an artist,⁸⁸ most viewed the identity of the alcoholic negatively, associating it with unrestrained consumption patterns such as frequent multi-day binges, daytime and daily drunkenness.

In describing their own alcohol use, participants distinguished between *wanting* to drink and *needing* to drink, differentiating desire from dependence:

I'll have to say I probably do sound like an alcoholic but I'm not an alcoholic. I don't drink before 10 o'clock usually and I only drink on the weekends. I only drink when I deejay too. Any other time I never feel, and I mean *never*, I never have the urge to drink (...) I laugh at it because I *know* I'm *not* an alcoholic. I know I can drink when I want. Sometimes I want to party. I mean that's what alcohol is made for (...) The odd time yes I go overboard... because we're having a party. I will never get like that drinking alone. That's impossible. That's not me. I've never done that and I never will do that. (Male, 32)

Participants emphasized they could go for days without alcohol, if and when they so desired.

When drinking, they wanted “to ‘have a good time,’ which includes drunkenness as a principal objective and inevitable feature of the excursion” (Engineer et al., 2003; MacAskill et al., 2001 in Leigh & Lee, 2008, p.54). While participants perceived having choice and control over *when* they drank, they acknowledged losing track and control over *how much* was consumed when they

⁸⁸ One male participant (24) constituted “being an alcoholic” as “a romantic association that helps [his friends] form an image or an identity for themselves.” “I mean like they're artists and some of the most famous artists that they have looked up to have been alcoholics their whole lives and it's weird because they recognize it as a negative thing ... and yet I feel like they.... they're happy to be associated with that because I mean in some way it's....it's....it's like a masochistic urge or something...like they take pleasure out of their own degeneracy.”

found themselves in party atmospheres. As Nahoum-Grappe (2008) observes, "in some contexts, 'too much' and 'extreme' not only constitute the overstepping of limits, but become an injunction, a temporary norm that takes over for the evening" (p.38). Whether drinking to extremes "takes over," more generally and pervasively, and persists into adult life, is the pertinent question. As Buelow and Harbin (1996) note "the idea that alcohol positives may be offset by negatives at some reasonable point in a person's drinking career may be an unwarranted conclusion..." (p.31).

CONTRIBUTING AND CONCLUDING

Alcohol-induced amnesia, or "blacking out," is a prevalent yet understudied phenomenon in today's ("extreme") drinking culture. The scholarly literature on blackouts is especially limited in addressing the emotional aftermath of the state, in which fragments of experience are "pieced together" and negotiated through collectively constructed narratives. Bound by conversational norms and strictures, such narratives are often exchanged through a trivializing social discourse, critical in "re-writing" how drinkers make sense of, remember, and consequently feel towards their amnesia. Although participants described engaging in numerous risky behaviours, narratives were often recounted with laughter and familiarity. Humour and sympathy were found in the communicated extremities of supposed behaviour, in the act of storytelling and in the collectivity and perceived commonness of the experience. Sharing blackout narratives in this way helped retain the "rosy glow" of intoxication, prolonging the drinking event and providing the drinker with reassurance they he or she was not alone. As such, the exchange of blackout narratives can be regarded as a significant and strategic practice used to regulate emotions and manage the risks and responsibility of drinking to "that point."

While traditional and “scientific” research approaches provide useful information on neuro-cognitive processes, predicative factors and experiential characteristics, its measures tend to ignore the sociocultural contexts that determine drunkenness and regulate its subsequent emotional aftermath. In situating blackouts within the “new” culture of “extreme” intoxication, and drinkers within the period of “extended adolescence,” the present paper acknowledges that drinking to extremes is a “fun” and integral feature in the social lives of young people and addresses the various motives, meanings and consequences implicated in this pattern of consumption, both negative and positive. Furthermore, the paper draws attention to the “insatiable desire,” “instant gratification,” and “intensified alcohol consumption” that is fostered by the late modern nighttime economy and enabled by the new drinks, venues, and serving practices designed to “enhance and extend” the drinkers night out (i.e bottle service, mixing alcohol with energy drinks). Within this socioeconomic and cultural context of “determined drunkenness,” it is not just the drink that is being sold to us, but rather with it “alternative” identities and experiences, attained only through the effects of its consumption. Not surprisingly, within this context, blackouts have come to “not only [be] accepted, but expected.” As “problematic” as it may be from the perspectives of psychology and public health, “extreme” drinking in today’s “new” culture of intoxication *demands* the acceptance of amnesia, implicit in its very definition:

The dream of the “extreme” encapsulates specifically the moment of leaping into a void, heeding the momentary impulse, the moment of unconsciousness, the pursuit of which is at the very core of the narrative of the extreme. It is the spasm, the loss of consciousness, the loss of perception that invades all awareness with darkness. The “extreme,” thus, is the opposite of everything “ordinary” (p.42)... Today, the extreme has become the highest embodiment of liberation of mores and norms, an almost physical search for a radical, intense, and deep sensation, stronger than simply pleasure - a real, albeit temporary, modification of the consciousness of self. (Nahoum- Grappe, 2008, p.49)

Qualitative methods have been adopted in various fields to challenge “the conventional model of experimental, statistical and quantitative research,” providing researchers with the opportunity to investigate questions “that [are] ill explored (Guba & Lincoln 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), neglected (Bakan, 1967), or simply not amenable to being answered with experimental and other quantitative methods.” Such methods enable researchers to “reconnect art and science, literary forms and scientific information, and social life with its storied (Cruikshank, 1990), performative (Conquergood, 1985), and narrated existence” (in Lincoln & Denzin, 2003, p.4).

While Griffin and colleagues (2009) searched for those “familiar stories,” most likely to be told outside of the research context (p.470), I took advantage of my position and solicited, also, those *unfamiliar* stories not ordinarily invited within the “new culture of intoxication.” I challenged the traditional blackout narrative by moving beyond the experiential “what happened?” to address the phenomenological, discursive and hermeneutical. What is it like? How do we feel about it? How do we talk about it? And why do we continue to drink ourselves past the point of recollection? Inspired by the “new” modes of auto/ethnography and creative analytic practice, I asked myself these questions by interviewing twenty-three others. In bringing their and my narratives together with scholarly research and collage, the paper embodies, performs and builds on the useful but limited blackout literature. The solicited and represented responses go beyond experiential characteristics concerned with how and “what happened” to encompass those discursive idiosyncrasies where multiple voices and perspectives can be exhibited through talk, writing and art. Rather than collecting information through surveys in limiting scales and categories, storytelling provided participants with an open forum for the articulation of an under-

researched phenomenon in their *own words*, better revealing the “life of feeling” implicated in the experience.

Although blacking out was generally regarded to be a negative outcome of getting drunk, for those who frequently experienced amnesia without any “terrible” social and physical harms, and within the context of pleasure-driven intoxication with others, not remembering wasn’t “anything to be that concerned about.” As such, in the present study, emotional reactions to blacking out were constituted as highly dependant on the events and behaviours supposedly engaged in (what happened?), the severity of the memory loss experienced (how much is missing?) and, most significantly, the social damage incurred due to unremembered intoxicated behaviours (is anybody mad at me?). In the aftermath of their blackouts, unlike during drunkenness, participants described feeling concerned with how they may have (mis)represented themselves to others. When such concerns were regularly quieted through positive social feedback and reassurance that one’s behaviour was acceptable, and when the support, sympathy and care provided by friends was perceived as unconditional, drinkers felt more comfortable in their drinking environments and, as a result, more likely to “allow” themselves to slip into a manner of drinking that invariably lead to amnesia. That amnesic drinkers continued to drink past “that point” of recollection, depended on the perceived commonness and acceptance of blacking out within their social group. The discernment that friendship groups were generally accepting of blackouts and the belief that social harms were worse than physical harms speaks to a wider perceived social and cultural acceptance of drinking to such extremes as well as to the prominent role such intoxication plays in the social lives of young adults.

Participants revealed the emotional nature of the experience using two narrative voices, one often curtailng the other. In certain solicited moments of reflection, participants revealed a curious, caring and concerned voice that anxiously wondered and wished to remember. This was the voice that regarded blackouts as “weird,” mysterious, abrupt and unpredictable, belonging to participants who emphasized a sense of dissociation, awe and uncertainty over how they “got to that point.” This voice, however, tended to be the quieter voice, the less powerful voice, that often times did not leave the mind. Continually giving in “to the forces of chaos and hedonism,” it was the relinquished voice, hushed and submerged by that other, louder, more boisterous voice - the collective voice of the “new” culture of intoxication. When time restraints were removed, supplies were abundant, and participants found themselves in party atmospheres with drinking companions who were just as determined - they revealed a calculated and confident willingness to indulge and engage with the implicated risks. These contradicted narrative voices often talked to and over each other, creating a sense of tension and ambivalence in the drinker. Those who described experiencing negative and intrusive consequences, also tended to dismiss them in favour of the potential for “fun” implicated in drinking to extremes. Similarly, those who assertively declared not to care, eventually and always revealed some kind of concern. “Turning it into a joke,” for some participants, was not really a choice but rather the only way to deal with their amnesia in the face of the alternative. Although participants communicated an intrusive determination to “piece it together,” the majority eventually “gave-up” on remembering in the context of extreme intoxication. They learned to silence the inner voice that wanted “to get the full story,” accepting amnesia as an inevitable and “normal” part of a predominantly pleasurable process.

And it's true maybe we're in a bad society and we shouldn't be laughing about it and that's why a lot of us are doing it. And I think a lot of people do need something really bad to happen. And it's sad that people need that and that's why I'm trying to pay more attention to the taps on the shoulder and be thankful that I've had the horseshoes up my ass. (Female, 32)

I know that the ways in which I solicited and read the stories of participants are inseparable from my own narrative. My (auto)ethnographic approach positions my relationships with participants, personal experiences, privileged access and insider knowledge as integral to the research. My prior contact with participants helped establish a sense of authenticity and trustworthiness (Moore, 1992, p.315), putting them at ease. The "prestige level" (Female, 22) of the research context, and my position of power with it, was often suspended as participants and I related to each other throughout our conversation. Furthermore, being an insider to the culture I was studying is what enabled a "participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other" (Richardson, 1990, p.127).

Upon reflection, I realize I was trying to get participants to answer the distressing questions I myself was facing.⁸⁹ In the process of speaking and writing about this experience, we were able to "write back to cultural stories that have scripted [us] as particular kinds of subjects" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p.176) - that is, those "disordered binge drinkers" but also, and even, those "extreme" drinkers who pursue the "moment of unconsciousness," willingly and knowingly "leaping into a void" (Nahoum-Grappe, 2008, p.49). The notion that "what is moral is not 'extreme'" (p.43), may ring true in the context of a good blackout story. However, in the immediate emotional aftermath of amnesia, there is always a part of us that is concerned, whether

⁸⁹ As such, I have to question the extent to which I shaped the answers given. As Leigh and Lee (2008) point out, "negative consequences are sometimes acknowledged only when brought up by researchers, rather than being spontaneously mentioned as a feature of personal experience" (p.64). Upon close reading of my collected narratives, however, there were many instances in which negative consequences were spontaneously mentioned as part of the larger narrative being told.

we like to admit it or not. Following Goffman, Denzin notes that “we may not be fully aware of the expressions we give off” but that “behind and in front of [our] masks and performances, [we] are moral beings...occupied and preoccupied with everyday doings and emotional practices” (2008, p.120). We feel grateful and we feel “lucky,” we “knock on wood” and we thank god for the “horseshoes up [our] asse[s]” but, most significantly, we are sobered by the realization that it might, indeed, take something serious or tragic for us to change our drinking ways. With this realization, we gain agency. As Goodall has noted, “[t]he very act of writing [or telling] a story... *alters the way we think about* what we know and how we know it” (2008, p.14).

Yet the point I am making is that this experience, terrible as it was, could not in the end deter me from forming John Barleycorn's cheek-by-jowl acquaintance. All about me, even then, were the forces moving me toward him. In the first place, barring my mother, ever extreme in her views, it seemed to me all the grown-ups looked upon the affair with tolerant eyes. It was a joke, something funny that had happened. There was no shame attached. Even the lads and lassies giggled and snickered over their part in the affair, narrating with gusto how Larry had jumped on my chest and slept under the bridge, how So-and-So had slept out in the sandhills that night, and what had happened to the other lad who fell in the ditch. As I say, so far as I could see, there was no shame anywhere. It had been something ticklishly, devilishly fine - a bright and gorgeous episode in the monotony of life and labour on that bleak, fog-girt coast.⁹⁰ (London, 1913, p.22)

Following this notion that story-telling and autobiographical remembering are fundamental to knowing and “re-writing” experience, especially “the life of feeling,” the present paper explored and revealed the role of blackout narratives in maintaining pleasurable and “problematic” drinking habits. That alcohol effect expectancies remain high among those who experience *en bloc* blackouts may very well be explained by the nature of the talk adopted by these amnesic drinkers. In summary, there are conversational norms and social and cultural contexts that influence the way in which blackouts are expressed, or as Denzin would say “performed” or “enacted” (2008). There are aspects pertinent to the state itself that shape the nature and focus of

⁹⁰ Famed novelist Jack London reflecting on one of the first times he got drunk at the age of seven in his “alcoholic memoir,” *John Barleycorn*.

the conversation, that make it more open and malleable to the influence of others. And finally, there are reasons for engaging in a trivializing discourse - perhaps to negotiate the negatives and alleviate the anxieties of amnesia. Through the exchange of humorous blackout narratives, we can work to "sugar-coat" the experience in a way that fits our lifestyle, that satisfies our self-concepts and caters to the expectations of our friends. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, without memory representations for intoxicated experience, such talk influences how we remember it and subsequently plays a significant role - one, which is perhaps beyond our awareness - in repeatedly bringing us to "that point." When the irretrievableness of memory, alone, is regarded as unproblematic, and where negative consequences are discursively minimized as "not so bad," extreme drinking persists - even and *especially* in the face of amnesia. As such, I argue the emotional, collective and narrative aftermath of amnesia plays a pivotal role in maintaining positive alcohol effect expectancies and "problematic" drinking habits in amnesic drinkers.

Collective stories which deviate from standard cultural plots provide new narratives; hearing them legitimates a reploting of one's own life. New narratives offer the patterns for new lives. (Richardson, 1990, p.129)

Few really desire or understand the self-induced state that renders them obsolete from their own experiences. Not many consider "what the blackout means and what consequences it could have" (Male, 27). While my observations lead me to believe that alcohol-induced amnesia is an experience affected individuals could benefit from discussing more frankly, such discussions are rarely solicited. Constrained by those available trivializing narratives in social and popular discourse, it is undoubtedly easier for participants to talk about their blackouts in ways that are

entertaining. Yet, participation in a more serious, although non-threatening, discussion could work to motivate drinkers towards self-realization through a reconsideration of drinking habits.

Adopting the perspective of the concerned drinker, there is no denying that extreme drinking is indeed “a dangerous way to party” (Toronto Public Health, 2009). Amnesia tends to occur at blood alcohol levels just below those required to induce coma or death. The long-term effects of repeated blackouts to the brain, especially the developing adolescent brain, have yet to be understood. As Crews and Nixon (2005) point out, the permanent changes in the brain resulting from frequent heavy intoxication at a young age “could contribute to behavioral changes that alter the life course of individuals, including promoting the progression of alcohol dependence” (in Monti et al., 2005, p.210). Understandably, the social, health and economic costs associated with heavy drinking are of increasing concern to government officials, health providers, researchers and, of course, drinkers themselves. It is imperative then, that the drinking stories of young people receive more academic attention since, as Richardson reminds us, these communicated experiences are “not simply stories,” but “narratives which have real consequences for the fates of individuals, communities and nations” (cf. McClelland 1961 in 1990, p.128).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider specifically what kind of prevention and harm reduction strategies might most effectively target young amnesic drinkers, Wells and colleagues (2009) have argued that present strategies aimed at promoting moderation do little to consider the contemporary drinking practices of young adults and may need to be further developed. As such, it is my hope that the various perspectives presented above will serve to better address and target the “specific, high-risk drinking pattern” (NAS, 2007, p.1) of “extreme”

drinking to the point of non-remembrance. Furthermore, given the lack of knowledge expressed by participants regarding the effects of alcohol on memory, more detailed information concerning the nature, causes and potential consequences of blackouts, along with strategies on how to minimize one's chances of experiencing them, needs to be made publicly accessible. If communicated in an entertaining and informative format (i.e magazine article), the details and conclusions presented in this paper could provide resonances for affected drinkers as well as contribute useful knowledge to public health professionals and communicators, policy makers and service industry personnel.

To conclude, my paper brings related scholarly discourse together with personal narratives to present the ways in which the blackout experience is articulated and better define the nature of the blackout, emotional responses, social influences and processes of remembering. In relating the common ways in which subjects account for their unremembered intoxicated experiences, this study contributes to the understanding of contemporary drinking practices of young adults and draws attention to the ways in which affected populations of drinkers negotiate their non-remembrance. A self-reflexive discourse provides valid insights into the complex emotional consequences and nuances of the experience and considers how these might affect future drinking habits. By weaving personal and collected accounts into the wider fabric of memory, storytelling and problematic drinking, the paper communicates meanings, emotions, reactions and negotiations to show how a socially mediated re-construction of the blackout experience works to shape patterns of rationalization. Finally, in adopting an auto/ethnographic approach to the study of blackouts, the paper contributes an insiders outlook that will hopefully help correct

the under-representation of females and their perspectives in the blackout literature. It is my hope that the present paper serves as a valid, qualitative and nontraditional response to the useful but limited survey research conducted on blackouts in its attempt to address Denzin's search for an "interpretative social science that is simultaneously autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative and critical" (2001, p.43).

"LESSONS FOR A YOUNG DRINKER"

This is the worst. Because I see. When I'm hanging out with people and I see people that are wasted I can't fucking stand them. I can't stand them! These people who are fucked and they're just like falling over, talking shit and I'm just like "Get out of here. You're bothering me." But then I'm like - wait, *I'm one of those people*. Total hypocrite. (Female, 22)

The following is a lengthy excerpt from the article *Lessons For a Young Drinker*, written by Tom Chiarella, which appeared in the May 2009 issue of *Esquire* magazine: ⁹¹

When you start, drinking is all about expansion, escape, getting out. The act feels transgressive, edgy, puissant. You stand on the fringe of some piece of adolescent geography — a parking lot, a quarry, the roof of a rattletrap garage — and furtively take a pull of brandy; you hit the leftover champagne glasses at a cousin's wedding, creep to the attic with filched bourbon or a backpack loaded with beers long forgotten on the top shelf of some garage refrigerator. This, in turn, forces you into some iconic poses — leaning against the hood of a car, hitting on a 40, throwing back a shot like you were born doing it, levering a beer bottle with two fingers.

When you look back on your world with some booze in you — at your family, at your home, at your troubles — you'll find yourself a little unhinged from expectation, from fear. This is undeniably heady. For a while, for a long while maybe, you surprise yourself. You're braver. Sharper. You say some shit you shouldn't. You say some things that must be said. You sing better. You tell more truths. Things seem to get done when you drink. You feel located in the moment and the moment is all that matters. It feels good out there, beyond the rules, beyond the hand-me-down lessons of school and work, and yes, you'll take another pull.

Understand, from the get-go, these are fun illusions.

The young drinker is usually not self-aware. Observe yourself and take notes. That's a key to drinking: don't stop looking. When you are less drunk than everyone else, look around. When you are more drunk than anyone else, look at your own dumb ass in the mirror. To persist, you must make a style out of it. Don't slouch. Don't slosh. Make rules: I don't drink beer from boots. Don't chug. Don't shotgun. Don't hoot. Like that. Walk into a bar as if you've been there before. When entering a crowded joint, know your poison. (...)

⁹¹ To read the full article visit: <http://www.esquire.com/features/drinking/drinking-at-young-age-0609>

Lose the urgency, too. Drinking should not be the event in itself.

There is no lesson plan, but you have to learn. No authoritative how-to. That's your job. Everyone in a bar is a kind of how-to. How to handle it, how to share it, and how to let it go. Drinking must be mastered, or it will master you.

Every once in a while, you'll turn around and you'll encounter that guy [girl], any one of many guys [girls], really — the shouter, the stumbler, the puncher, the teary guy [girl], the sleepy drunk, the ass-grabber, the chest-poker, the jabbermouth, the spitter, the wobbly fool. One version or another, [s]he's always there. Really look then. Understand that that guy[girl] doesn't know what [s]he is, doesn't know what [s]he looks like, what people say about him [her]. Fair warning: You'll probably be every one of those guys[girls] eventually. Figure out that you don't have to be.

Quit. For some period of time, anyway. A week. A month. Three years. Whatever it takes. Just walk away. Study the absence. Feel it (...) Know what it means to not drink, too (...)

So I did. For three months. The difficulties I had writing, because I was drinking, got under my skin in such a way that they started to restructure my thinking. As I struggled to write, I glared at my glass. *If it's gotten so shitty*, I thought, *then why am I drinking?* Alcohol, for me, has always been a kind of propelling and navigating device and suddenly, I could *physically* feel it holding me back only to then hurl me in the wrong direction. I started noticing things. A change in my personality. In my ability to focus. I began to take note. Of that older woman at the family restaurant downing drink after drink, barely keeping her head up, and yet still getting served.

"It's okay, she comes here all the time," said the waiter when I brought it to his attention. I began to take note. Of that college girl, in a heap on the sidewalk outside the bar, stretched out in a pile of her own puke without a jacket or friend in sight. I started noticing these things and they *really* started to bother me. And so I learned, in the process of writing this paper, that *not* drinking is what propelled me, and finally enabled me "to get it done."

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Appendix

A. *"I Did What? Shut the Fuck Up No I Didn't...I Did? Fuck."*

Because you don't have to remember the good time, to know you had one.

1. The Classic- stories at breakfast the morning after. Apparently you had quite the night, but you don't remember a damn thing.
2. The "Aw Fuck"- You drunkenly call your ex and confess your never dying love to him/her. You realize this when they call you the next day about that date you promised. Aw fuck.
3. The "What is this tube doing in my arm"- you wake up in the hospital. Fighting the biggest guy you could find seemed like a good idea at the time...
4. The Empty Condom Wrapper- you might have had the best sex of your life last night...except you couldn't feel it at the time, and you definately can't remember if it was good or not (nor can you remember your mystery bedmate's name, damn)
5. The Wet Wakeup- you wake up covered in either pee or puke or both, and you're not even sure if it's yours. Lovely.
6. The Kodak Moment- pictures, proof that you're a drunken idiot.
7. The Ink- waking up realizing the Dave Matthews Band logo is tattooed across your back is not exactly the way you like to start your days. You don't even like Dave.
8. The "I thought with cruise control you didn't have to steer"- great. now there's a hole in your car to match the hole in your head. Good one, dumbass.
9. The "I thought this yellow paper was a thank you note"- nice citation, slowbus. The cop was not making small talk with you, and that strait line you walked, yeah that wasn't hopscotch. This is gonna look great on your resume.
10. The All-Time Favorite- you wake up with your clothes on, no idea where the fuck you are, and digging into your pockets to find your cell phone to call a ride, you find: 2 dollar bills, soaking wet and crumbled up; your driver's license (useless); a bottle cap; a receipt for 6 taquitos and bag of munchies from 7eleven; and a gum wrapper, which is crumpled around old gum. and no cell phone. Start walkin bitch.

To all the times that we wake up with no recognition of the night before....cheers.

B. Bellwood Foundation PSA

The Bellwood Foundation

Let's Start Talking

Female: Even as a teenager, I was an alcoholic. From the moment I took my first drink, it was dramatic. My ordinary life was transformed. But then, I began waking up in the morning in stark raving terror. I couldn't remember. What had I done this time?

I finally entered treatment and began to understand my disease. Today, I've learned to love myself - and others. You can too.

Announcer 1: Addiction is one of today's most serious, but treatable, health problems. Isn't it time we started talking about it? Visit Bellwoodfoundation.ca. Be informed and learn about your options.

Announcer 2: The Bellwood Foundation. Let's start talking.

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C. Toronto Public Health Extreme Drinking Campaign

Ever notice how, sometimes, a few beers have a different effect than other times?

That's because there are a number of factors – other than the amount you drink –

that influence how you react to alcohol, including how, when, where and why you drink.

Knowing the facts will help you stay in control. As a first step, it's smart to learn what drinking excessively means, what the risks are and what is meant by “one standard drink” of alcohol.

Extreme drinking means drinking more than your body can handle, which can put you at risk of passing out, memory loss, impaired judgment, blackouts, vomiting, injury, and – worst of all – alcohol overdose.

Alcohol overdose is serious. It occurs when a person drinks too much, especially if it is consumed quickly. Because alcohol is a depressant, the brain reacts by slowing down many critical functions, including blood pressure, heart rate and breathing. In this situation, the

brain tries to take care of us and sends a signal to the stomach to vomit and eliminate any unabsorbed alcohol. Drink enough and your heart can be slowed to the point of stopping.

How much is too much?

Whether or not you choose to drink is up to you. And only you can decide how much is too much. Here are some questions to help you think about alcohol's impact in your life.

- ☐ Do you drink to escape your problems or stress in your life?
- ☐ Do you drink to feel better?
- ☐ Do you drink to feel more confident?
- ☐ Is drinking the main reason for getting together with friends?
- ☐ Have you ever missed work or skipped class?
- ☐ Do you ever have trouble remembering what happened?
- ☐ Have you ever felt embarrassed or guilty afterwards?
- ☐ Have you ever hurt yourself or someone else?
- ☐ Have you ever had unplanned, unprotected or unwanted sex?
- ☐ Do you usually throw up or have a hangover?
- ☐ Do you ever drive?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, it may be time to take a look at your drinking and make some changes.

If you need emergency help, please visit your local emergency department or call 911, or contact a nurse at Telehealth Ontario by dialing 1-866-797-0000.

For non emergency information and treatment:

Drug & Alcohol Registry of Treatment (DART).....www.dart.ca
Phone (24 hour): 1-800-565-8603

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).....www.camh.net
CAMH Emergency Department located at 250 College St.
Phone (24 hour): 416-535-8501 ext. 6885

Distress Line.....www.torontodistresscentre.com
Phone (24 hour): 416-408-HELP (4357)

Assaulted Women's Helpline.....www.awhl.org/services.htm

All crisis line phone numbers below are 24 hour.

*SAFE (*7233) on Bell, Rogers, Telus or Fido cell phones

GTA: 416-863-0511 GTA TTY: 416-364-8762

Toll-Free: 1-866-863-0511 Toll-Free TTY: 1-866-863-7868

Toronto Health Connection.....www.toronto.ca/health

Monday - Friday 8:30 am - 4:30 pm

Phone: 416-338-7600 Translation services available

TTY: 416-392-0658

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D. BAC Levels and Their Effects for a "Typical" Person

EXTREME DRINKING

3

TABLE 1.1 BAC Levels and Their Effects for a "Typical" Person

BAC Levels (mg/ml)	Effects
0.2–0.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental functions begin to be impaired
0.3–0.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attention and visual field are reduced, cerebral control relaxes, and there is a sensation of calm and wellbeing
0.5–0.8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflexes become retarded • difficulty of adapting vision to luminosity differences • overestimation of performance abilities • aggressive tendency
0.8–1.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficulty in driving/controlling vehicles (for alcohol-impaired pedestrians, in walking along the road) • impairment of neuromuscular coordination
1.0–1.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of coordination • inability to correctly interpret what is happening • poor judgment • difficulty in walking and standing steadily
2.0–2.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nausea • vomiting
3.0–3.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • serious intoxication • lowered body temperature • partial amnesia ("blackout") likely
≥4.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • alcohol poisoning • coma • risk of death (about 50% of people who have a BAC ≥4.00 will die of alcohol poisoning)

Sources: International Center for Alcohol Policies (2005), Lang (1992), and Melcop (2003).

E. Extreme Drinking - ICAP - Key Facts and Issues

Key Facts and Issues

Policy Issues › Extreme Drinking › Key Facts and Issues

Drinking patterns associated with heavy drinking carry with them potential for social and physiological harm (see ICAP Health Briefings). One such pattern, involving rapid heavy drinking to intoxication is extreme drinking, also referred to in the literature as “binge” or “heavy episodic” drinking.

Extreme drinking is characterized by:

Intoxication: Excessive or heavy drinking and its physiological effects.

Motivation: The clear presence of intent and a directed quest for some degree of altered state of consciousness or loss of control (albeit neither unbridled nor limitless).

Process: Typically, a social and positive process in which the pursuit of pleasure and excitement goes beyond the boundaries or norms of usual social drinking within a given culture.

Outcomes: Attention to drinking outcomes, both positive and negative.

Alcohol Experience: The capacity for a "controlled loss of control," balanced with the development of so-called "alcohol maturity."

There has been a lack of consensus on the definition of other terms, such as “binge,” used to describe this drinking pattern.

The clinical definition of "a binge" is characterized by the consumption of alcohol to intoxication, usually a solitary and self-destructive activity lasting up to several days and involving a loss of control.

Epidemiological definitions have relied on measurements of quantity, setting the threshold at 5 or more drinks for men and 4 or more for women per occasion.

1/2 bottle of spirits or 2 bottles of wine on the same occasion (Sweden);

6+ drinks per occasion for women / 8+ drinks per occasion for men (U.K.);

6+ bottles of beer per session (Finland);

blood alcohol concentration (BAC) raised to 0.08g/ml or above (U.S. NIAAA).

The lack of specificity regarding the duration of an "occasion," and of the size, strength, or type of drinks involved may compromise the ability to apply this definition to actual drinking behavior (e.g., alcohol content of drinks varies, especially between international definitions of a "standard drink").

Aside from these unit-based definitions, other, less widely used definitions exist that rely on self-reported frequency of "feeling drunk" rather than on quantity of alcohol consumed.

Extreme drinking behavior is in large part shaped by cultural view on drinking and its role and meaning in society: Some cultures regard extreme drinking as an acceptable drinking pattern for men but not for women. Some cultures include rapid and heavy drinking episodes into rites of passage for young people.

Extreme drinking may be associated with particular celebrations in some cultures but is otherwise absent from drinking occasions.

Extreme drinking may represent a "time-out" from conventional behavior, often in association with celebrations and holidays (e.g., *Mardi Gras*, *Fastnacht*).

Whatever its cultural roots, extreme drinking contributes to health and social costs (see ICAP Health Briefings). It is of particular concern with regard to young people, but also occurs among adults.

Some of the health outcomes include: increased risk for stroke and other cardiovascular problems; during pregnancy, adverse effects on the health of the fetus; elevated risk for neurological damage.

Adverse social consequences include: impaired work performance and absenteeism from the workplace; impaired academic performance; increased risk of motor vehicle crashes; association with other risky behaviors, such as unprotected sexual activity.

Numerous prevention and policy measures are aimed at preventing or reducing the incidence of extreme drinking. These have focused on changing cultural attitudes toward drunkenness and making the drinking environment safer.

Initiatives include education, changing social norms around drinking, screening and brief interventions to reduce problems, and responsible hospitality measures to prevent extreme drinking and to reduce potential for harm.

See the ICAP Blue Book for examples of interventions implemented internationally.

F. Criteria for evaluating CAP ethnographies

1. Substantive contribution. Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?
2. Aesthetic merit. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretative responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?
3. Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgment about point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?
4. Impact. Does this affect me emotionally? Intellectually? Generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?
5. Expresses a reality. Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem true -- a credible account of cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the real?

Taken from Laurel Richardson's *Feathers in our CAP* (1999, p.666)

G. Blog Homepage (Online Consent)

It has come to your attention that you spend some evenings awake, drinking and somewhat coherent, only to wake up the next morning with no recollection of what occurred. This is the alcohol blackout: not an uncommon experience, yet surprisingly understudied.

This research blog has been set up to collect your personal blackout stories, and is part of a master's thesis project at Ryerson University (linked). Be sure to read the following information and content policy (Blogger's content policy linked) before posting! It's important that you understand what you're being asked to do and what will be done with the information posted to this site.

Investigators

Graduate student:

Justyna Rechberger, Communication and Culture

M.A Candidate (Ryerson); B.J conc. Psych (Carleton)

Supervisor:

Elizabeth Podnieks, English

B.A. (McGill); M.A. (Toronto); Ph.D. (Toronto)

Project Description

What is the nature of the blackout, how do you make sense of it, and how is it communicated? On the next page you will find a response guide which may help you in thinking and writing about past experiences. Topics to consider include: the blackout itself, immediate reactions, processes of remembering, social contexts, communicated attitudes, and influence of blacking out on drinking habits.

Submissions are not restricted in length and you are encouraged to be descriptive – take as much time as you like! While the purpose of the project is to explore any main aspects of your experience, there are some boundaries on the type of content that can be posted. Please read this content policy (linked), taken from Blogger.com.

To be eligible for the study: you are at least 18 years old, do not consider yourself to be an alcoholic, identify yourself as a social drinker (you may drink heavily, but rarely drink alone in private settings), and you experience (or have experienced) blackouts.

Goals and End Product: The project aims to assemble your stories with existing research, theory and social conversation in order to construct the blackout experience and comment on the ways in which it is written and talked about. The stories you submit may be stylized, directly quoted and/or paraphrased in part or in whole. The end product will take the form of a composite narrative with identifying information removed. The narratives will be assembled with abstract imagery and collage in order to make the information interesting and accessible to those experiencing blackouts. The end product will be accompanied by an academic paper theorizing the project and the processes of making it. Both will be available in the Ryerson Library. In summary, the content you post to this site may be altered, republished and made publicly available, in a print publication or online. If published, a space will be provided on this blog for comments and criticisms of the article.

Risks: You may experience a general discomfort associated with not being able to remember. Also, recounting past blackout experiences and their aftermath may trigger some psychological stress. Counseling contacts are provided at the bottom of this page.

There are also some risks around **confidentiality** and **posting to a blog**. When posting your narrative, you should remain anonymous or provide a pseudonym. Please do not use your real name. If you provide an email address it will not be published. All posting's to the site will be held until approved, and may not be used – this is at the discretion of the researcher. If approved, the content of your post will be publicly available on the blog.

Because you are posting information online, full confidentiality cannot be promised. To avoid social and legal harms please adhere to the content policy (linked again), refrain from posting any images as well as information that could identify anyone other than yourself and be wary of

writing about illegal activities, as they may be reported to the authorities. The blog will remain online indefinitely.

Benefits: This project hopes to build on existing alcohol blackout research by focusing on the descriptive dimensions of experience through open-ended story-telling, rather than collecting information through surveys in limiting scales and categories. A better understanding of drinking practices, social contexts, and attitudes towards alcohol and memory may emerge. A narrative/creative approach will benefit knowledge by allowing you to reflect on experiences and reactions in relation to various situations and in your words. Such responses can prove more "truthful" than surveys and more accessible to those experiencing blackouts. The project provides an open forum for you to articulate an under-researched experience and may provide you with insights into your experiences related to the perspectives of others. Individual benefits from participation in this study, cannot however, be guaranteed.

Voluntary Nature of Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you do not have to answer or address all suggested topics. If you decide you would like to withdraw a posting you can do so by sending the researcher an email referencing the specific posting. The posting will be deleted and will not be considered for the end product, without any penalties to you. There can be no reassurance, however, that the posting has not been cut and pasted elsewhere. While you can withdraw, there remains some lack of control over data while it is posted online.

Questions about the Study: If you have any questions about the research or this blog please contact: Justyna Rechberger (jrechber@ryerson.ca)

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
416-979-5042

Agreement: By posting to the blog, you agree that you have read and understand the information in this agreement and that you have had a chance to ask any questions. Your posting to the site also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. By posting to this site you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Agree (linked)

Contacts for Counseling

For Ryerson University students: 4169795070, www.healthct@ryerson.ca

For York University students: Patricia Poulin - 4164876709

For University of Toronto students: 4169787970

For an addiction assessment call CAMH: (416) 535-8501 ext. 6128 or ext. 7064

Ontario Toll-free Information and Support Line: 1-800-463-6273 or 416-595-6111

H. Consent Agreement (For Face-to-Face Interviews)

Constructing the Alcohol Blackout, An (Auto)Ethnographic Narrative Collage

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to be a volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators:

Graduate student:

Justyna Rechberger, Communication and Culture

M.A Candidate (Ryerson); B.J conc. Psych (Carleton)

Supervisor:

Elizabeth Podnieks, English

B.A. (McGill); M.A. (Toronto); Ph.D. (Toronto)

Purpose of the Study: Alcohol-induced amnesia, or "blacking out," is a state often associated with alcoholism and results in the inability to remember conscious experience from the prior evening's drunken episode. The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of the blackout and its aftermath through open-ended story-telling and interviewing.

Description of the Study: You should not drink alcohol for this project. You are being asked to discuss your knowledge of and/or past experiences with alcohol blackouts. This can be done over the phone, through email or in person. Questions are open-ended and may address: the blackout itself, immediate reactions, processes of remembering, social contexts, communicated attitudes, influence of blacking out on drinking habits, alcoholism and predictive factors. Interviews or correspondence should not last more than an hour. In-person interviews will be carried out in a private designated room on the Ryerson University campus and will be audio-recorded.

To be eligible for the study: you are at least 18 years old, do not consider yourself to be an alcoholic, identify yourself as a social drinker (you may drink heavily, but rarely drink alone in private settings), you experience (or have experienced) blackouts, you have written on the subject of alcohol and/or memory, you have counselled individuals who experience blackouts.

Goals and End Product: The project aims to assemble personal stories with existing research, theory and conversation in order to construct the blackout experience and comment on the ways in which it is written and talked about. The contents of our interview may be stylized, directly quoted and/or paraphrased in part or in whole. The end product will take the form of a composite

narrative with identifying information removed. The narratives will be assembled with abstract imagery and collage in order to make the information interesting and accessible to those experiencing blackouts. The end product will be accompanied by an academic paper theorizing the project and the processes of making it. Both will be available in the Ryerson Library. In summary, your words may be republished and made publicly available, in a print publication or online. If published, a forum will be provided for comments and criticisms.

Risks: As someone experiencing blackouts, you may experience a general discomfort associated with not being able to remember. Also, recounting past blackout experiences and their aftermath may trigger some psychological stress. Counseling contacts are provided at the bottom of this page. As a counsellor or academic, your responses may be assembled with the narratives of affected individuals, and as a result may implicate, oppose or comment on their experiences. Through continued correspondence and questioning, efforts will be made to ensure my understanding of your response is correct and its placement within the article is fair. The decision to quote your interview in the article is at the discretion of the researcher.

Confidentiality: As mentioned above, the information collected through our correspondence may be used in an article, which will be pitched to a number of publications. Interviews will be loyally transcribed from audio recordings and confidentiality can be maintained through the use of a pseudonym or stating your title (i.e addictions counsellor). The audio tapes and transcriptions from interviews will only be accessed by the researcher and will be kept in a confidential location for 5 years, after which they will be destroyed. To avoid social and legal harms refrain from discussing illegal activities, as they may be reported to the authorities.

Benefits: This project hopes to build on existing alcohol blackout research by focusing on descriptive dimensions of the experience through open-ended story-telling, rather than collecting information through surveys in limiting scales and categories. A better understanding of drinking practices, social contexts, and attitudes towards alcohol and memory may emerge. A narrative/creative approach will benefit knowledge by allowing affected individuals to reflect on experiences and reactions in relation to various situations and in their words. Such responses can prove more "truthful" than surveys as well as more accessible to those experiencing blackouts. The project provides an open forum for the articulation of an under-researched experience. In assembling personal stories with perspectives from academic and professional fields in a publicly accessible and interesting manner, a more comprehensive and wide-reaching understanding can be gained. Individual benefits from participation in this study, cannot however, be guaranteed.

Voluntary Nature of Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University. At any particular point in the study, you may refuse to answer any particular question or stop participation altogether without penalty.

Questions about the Study: If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

Justyna Rechberger
jrechber@ryerson.ca

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
416-979-5042

Agreement:

Your signature below or response to this email indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature/response also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement. You have been told that by signing this consent agreement/responding, you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

For in-person interviews, your signature below indicates you agree to have your interview audio-taped.

Signature of Participant

Date