TEXTUALITY, PERFORMATIVITY AND ARCHIVE:
EXAMINING THE VIRTUAL BODY IN SOCIALLY NETWORKED SPACE

by

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This thesis argues that contemporary theorizations of online identities on social-networking sites (SNS) require more robust accounts of the relationship between language, performativity, and the tensions of the material/virtual binary. In her analysis of subject formation on multi-user domains, Internet sociologist Jenny Sundén uses poststructuralist philosophy to theorize identity as a process of “textual performativity”. Citing Sundén, many contemporary sociologists theorizing subjectivity on SNS use the terms “writing the self” and “performing the self” and overlook the poststructuralist philosophy that informs them. To explore the lack of philosophical analyses within sociological accounts of subject formation on SNS, and to rethink “writing” and “performing” the self, I draw on the work of J.L. Austin, Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida. I argue that creating a self on SNS is a “sedimentation” process whereby different discursive identity performances are reiterated over time, and I investigate the implications of archiving and externalizing the self.
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Introduction

“It’s more like truth as acknowledged spontaneity. It’s true right now and I am not responsible for when it’s not true anymore.”

-Karen R., Facebook user

Philosophy has traditionally been animated by tensions between binaries such as speech/writing and real/constructed and the often unspoken, but closely related, masculine/feminine. On one side of each binary is a concept culturally coded as a ‘naturalized truth’. On the other is its constructed representation. Scholars grappling with theorizing subjectivity in cyberspace have struggled with yet another manifestation of this selfsame tension: the material and the virtual. The material being the naturalized truth upon which the virtual is constructed; the virtual is a series of representations of the material. Early feminist cyberscholars attempted to circumvent this binary tension by adopting poststructuralist and feminist theory, which has had as a general aim the transcending of binaries. One feminist cyberscholar theorist, Jenny Sundén, theorizes cyber-subjectivity in her 2003 book Material Virtualities by using the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler and defines it as process of “textual performativity” (53). Because Derrida argues that the ontology of writing (discourse) can be extended to all experience, Sundén draws on Derrida to theorize what it means to textualize the self. To illustrate the performative nature of text in virtual spaces, Sundén focuses on Butler’s concept of performativity. Butler argues that the subject (self) is not stable and is constituted over time through the sedimentation of discourse (1990b). By doing so Sundén is able to negotiate the dissonance between the material and the virtual that has traditionally marked cybertulture studies.
Sundén coined the term ‘textual performativity’ after engaging in a two-year ethnographic study of a text-based virtual world known as WaterMOO. WaterMOO is a multi-user dungeon (MUD). MUDs are real-time virtual worlds that combine the elements of role-playing games (RPGs) and online chat. In the late nineties, MUDs began to move away from the adventure narrative of the RPG and became places where people created textual avatars in order to “hang out” (Sundén 2002). The avatar is a “simulacrum” of the user (Hayles 1998, 153). Thus an entire virtual social sphere is written into being in MUDs like WaterMOO. Sundén created an avatar for herself and spent two years hanging-out in WaterMOO. Sundén’s resulting work on writing and ‘performing the self’ online has been widely cited by contemporary cyberculture theorists, particularly those studying identity on social networking sites (SNS) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) (boyd 2007; 2007, Liu 2007, boyd & Ellison 2007).

As WaterMOO is a completely discursive universe, Sundén’s argument that WaterMOO is a space where users write themselves into being and perform their virtual selves is extremely apt. Social networking sites, however, present a different set of conditions. Although both MUDs and SNS were created to facilitate ‘hanging-out’ online, SNS are anchored in the offline social sphere (Zhao et al. 2008). SN relationships are based on preexisting friend connections. Facebook users use photographs and join school or work networks to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ their identities. The majority of SNS users use the sites to connect and stay in touch with offline friends (Lenhart 2009; 2007). A sizeable percentage of users also use SNS to make plans for offline social events. One user I asked lamented that she hated Facebook but was worried that if she deleted her
profile she “wouldn’t be invited to anything anymore”. Zhao et al. argue that the majority of early Internet studies focused on identity formation in anonymous environments such as MUDs, chat rooms, and bulletin boards. In their 2008 study on user identity claims in Facebook, Zhao et al. demonstrate that the kinds of identity claims that people make on sites that are anchored in offline relationships are very different from the claims made in anonymous text-based universes. With MUDs, the user is usually in a state of not knowing who is behind the avatar. With SNS, however, users almost always have met the person behind the profile (Lenhart 2009).

Despite these fundamental differences, Internet theorists are using Sundén’s terminology – ‘writing the self’ and ‘performing the self’ – to describe the process of creating a SN profile to interact with other users SNS (boyd 2007, Liu 2007, boyd & Ellison 2007). The unproblematized application of these terms to identity-formation on SNS obfuscates the underlying difference between an identity that is anchored in real life relationships and an identity in a textually constructed, anonymous universe. This does not mean that there is not something to be gained from the application of Sundén’s terminology to identity formation on SNS. To do so, however, requires a revisiting of the discursive line of force that lurks beneath a sociological application of these terms.

Throughout her work, Sundén is very conscious of the distinction between online and offline worlds that distinguishes the virtual self from the material self. She struggles with bridging the material and the virtual through the implementation of various tactics to uncover the presence of real-world social norms and conventions in virtual space. Foremost among these tactics is her analysis of online gender performance in WaterMOO. Sundén uses gender as lens through which to theorize how cultural norms
and historical exigencies are written on the body. Despite her goal to uncover the various
interstices where the material seeps into the virtual realm, Sundén risks subscribing to,
what she terms as, as *postmodern utopianism* (Sundén 2003). When theorizing the virtual
it is very easy to construct online bodies as pure symbol, freed from real-world social
norms. The negation of the material does nothing to bypass the material/virtual tension as
it simply blinds itself to the presence of one side of the binary.

Conversely, SNS—as I will show in this thesis— are anchored in the material world
and, consequently, the offline/online dichotomy impacts socially networked bodies
differently. Social networking is currently the fastest growing Internet practice. In
February 2005, only 2% of online adults reported visiting SNS daily; by December 2008,
19% of online adults had done so. Also, 75% of online adults aged 18 to 24 currently
have at least one profile on a SNS (Lenhart 2009). This reflects the changing nature of
the Internet. Online ‘character’ creation is not limited to those who want to ‘escape’
reality by entering into a fully formed virtual universe but is becoming an everyday
practice of identity. However, if one ignores the impact of social construction and
representation on profile creation because SNS are anchored in real life relationships they
risk subscribing to simply another kind of utopianism.

I am in no sense arguing that gender norms have no impact social network profile
construction; rather I am arguing for the development of a theory of identity that is
predicated on a poststructuralist account of the self that exists beyond the tensions created
by the offline/online dichotomy. The SN self is not constructed in the same manner as the
self in a MUD and yet, by virtue of it being visibly rooted in the material, is not exempt
from different manifestations of the same tensions that effect subject formation on MUDs.

I want to track how social norms and conventions impact both spheres because SN users are interacting online with users with whom they also interact with offline. The vestiges of the offline/online dichotomy that informed Sundén’s work are quickly being erased by the fusion of offline and online worlds. It is common practice to see people posing for photos knowing that they will be posted on Facebook the next day. Offline participation requires online participation. According to one Facebook user if “[y]ou don’t have a Facebook account, you don’t get invited to things”. The virtual SN identity is inextricable from the offline self. SN users tend not to fictionalize their profiles despite wanting to present an ideal self (boyd 2007) because many of their friends are users who know them intimately. By virtue of materially anchored associations, users are pressured into staying at least somewhat ‘truthful’.

Informed by past, and current studies of online identity and by drawing on the work Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, I will (re)theorize what it means to write and perform the self online. I will theorize an identity practice that, although inextricable from writing the self, differs from the construction of entirely text-based universes. I will show how the process of writing and performing the self in the virtual realm does not stop when the user steps away from the screen but continues long after the computer has been shut off. Profiles on SNS are more than written accounts of the self. Users collect and use already-authored images and videos to represent their identities. More than writing or performing the self, linking and uploading our identities is a practice of
collecting cultural signs that represent a user’s identity and publicly exhibiting those collections. It is what I shall call a process of curating the self.

Each of the three chapters of this thesis will be animated by a tension created by traditional philosophical binaries that mirror the tension between the material and the virtual. The first chapter will examine speech and writing as analogous to materiality and virtuality. The second chapter is animated by the tension between sex and gender. The third examines the enduring friction between live and externalized memory. Like the material and the virtual, each binary is between the idealized ‘original’ and the constructed ‘copy’.

Understanding the Textual Self

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will rethink the term ‘writing the self’ so that it can be applied to identity on SNS. I will draw centrally on Derrida’s work on writing as a tool to theorize cyber-subject formation on SNS. To better understand how bodies are transformed into online text, I begin by comparing a MUD character description to a SN profile. I compare a WaterMOO character description and a Facebook profile to illustrate the crucial differences between the two modes of creating discursive, embodied selves. Although there are many differences between the two ways in which one can create an online, discursive self, the paramount difference is that SN relationships are anchored in real life relationships. Thus most importantly, SN relationships are used in order to maintain preexisting offline relationships. These differences underpin my overarching argument that SN identities signal a new way of being in online and offline space.
Sundén uses Derrida to theorize the textual body in online space. Because contemporary SN theorists have adopted Sundén’s terminology, I am going to revisit the different Derridian terms that Sundén cites in her book to rethink online textuality in the context of SNS. I begin with Derrida’s concept of the ‘signature’. Sundén uses the ‘signature’ to theorize a discursive borderspace between the online and the offline. She likens this borderspace to the mutable space that Derrida argues exists between the body signaled by the signature, and the social construction that comes to occupy the space of the signed name. I argue that the SN profile comes to occupy the space of the signature, as does the user. As is the case with any autobiographical writing, users occupy the precarious position of being both the author of the profile and the content of the profile.

The ‘signature’ is deeply connected to the concept of the ‘supplement’, another Derridian term appropriated by Sundén to theorize cyber-subjectivity in WaterMOO. ‘Supplementarity’ refers to the simultaneous fluidity and fixidity of texts. Online texts, viewed at any given moment, appear to be static. At the same time they are continually shifting and mutating. A MUD character description or SN profile is continually being supplemented as elements of it are constantly being modified, added, and removed. The profile also supplements a user’s offline identity by allowing the user to communicate with other users across time and space.

Finally, I will address the Derridian concept of ‘iterability’. Iterability is the infinite force of the reproducibility of text or of any graphic mark. I examine the consequences of making our selves iterable. Iterability is also essential to the conceptual framework of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which I address in the second
chapter. Derridian ‘iterability’ will serve as a conceptual link between the two first chapters.

*Understanding the Performative Self*

Judith Butler writes in *Bodies That Matter* (1996) that performativity is not a singular act in time but is a “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names” (Butler as quoted by Sundén 2003; emphasis added). Subjects, for Butler, are not free to constitute themselves through performance but are constituted in and through discursive performances. Cultural norms and historical exigencies are written on the body creating a discursive, external self. Subversion lies in the performing of norms “in a new direction” (Sundén 2003), a process that subverts the citationality of social norms. Sundén’s project is to look for miniscule inconsistencies and ruptures in the character descriptions in WaterMOO, spaces where norms are subverted through deviant performances.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I rethink what it means to ‘perform the self’ in a realm that is not a pure textual construct but is tied to the material through anchored relationships. Current SN theorists use the term ‘perform the self’ to describe a dramaturgical performance of self on SNS (boyd 2007, Liu 2007, boyd & Ellison 2007). I theorize the performance of self that we witness on SNS as a discursive performance and use Butler’s conception of ‘performativity’ to do this. Performativity marries the dramaturgical to the poststructural; allowing a rethinking of performance through a discursive lens.
Curating the Self

In the third and final chapter, I will add another component of identity formation on SNS that is complementary to writing and performativity: self-curation. Self-curation is the gathering together of signs that represent an individual’s identity that are then publicly exhibited. Although many SN profiles share the same signs, it is the overall exhibit that makes each profile distinct. The process of curating the self implies the existence of an archive. What users are doing is taking texts from the world’s largest and most public collective source of information, the Internet, and creating individual identity archives.

To theorize self-curation and identity archive, I draw on the work of Jacques Derrida. The archive is a place of consignation. Consignation has a double meaning for Derrida. It means to assign something to a dwelling place (the inert archive), but it also signals “the act of consigning through the gathering together of signs” (Derrida 1996; emphasis original). The double meaning of consignation sheds light on what is happening online. Users are creating texts that are destined to dwell online, but they are also gathering together signs that they feel represent them.

I will argue that writing and performance, like curation, require an external substrate that acts as a prosthetic memory device on which texts and performances are recorded—the identity archive. The self becomes sedimented in an external space over time. Temporality and memory are inextricable. The archive that underlies my entire argument is not an inert space where originals dwell, but acts as a prosthetic memory and is continually mutating in form and in content. Also, users are increasingly storing more
and more aspects of their selves online. As aspects of user identity become increasingly externalized, the offline/online distinction further disappears.

In *Archive Fever* (1996), Derrida foresaw the increasing need to externalize the self. In this final chapter, I use the argument Derrida makes in *Archive Fever* to theorize archive as a site where writing, performance, and curation meet in SN subject formation. With the explosion of social networking, understanding the philosophical implications of creating a discursive, performative, externalized self is a pressing concern. Conceptions of identity in the West need to address the coexisting offline and online nature of subject formation.
Chapter 1

“The images, the representations, which come to supplement the absent presence are the illusions that sidetrack us.”
- Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*

*Introduction: Drawing Borders*

Any discussion of online identity needs to first address the lingering tension between the online and the offline, or the virtual and the material. Many cyberculture theorists struggle with these two seemingly disparate spheres by trying to find spaces where they overlap. To negotiate the *aporia* presented by the material/virtual dichotomy, Sundén uses the idea of a “borderland” to describe a space that belongs to both realms but is claimed by neither. A border implies a physical barrier such as a fence or a crossing as well as an imaginary line on a map. Borders are constructed and arbitrary but most often naturalized and taken to be indisputable. A borderland is a territory that bleeds into either space; its edges are never clearly demarcated. I want to rethink Sundén’s use of the borderland metaphor to account for the different ways Internet users engage with virtual space.

The first aspect of this ‘borderspace’ that I want to investigate is the relationship between online bodies and the actual bodies that type them into being. According to Sundén, bodies are constituted through what she terms as “textual performativity” (Sundén 2003, 53). Textual performativity can be broken down into two distinct features: writing and performance. In this chapter I address how bodies in virtual spaces are written into being.

The terms ‘writing the self’ and ‘performing the self’ both have rich
poststructuralist histories. In this chapter I ask how contemporary SN theorists have taken up the term ‘writing the self’. I argue that contemporary SN theorists obfuscate some of the philosophical lines of force that animate the term. SN theorist danah boyd argues that a SN “profile can be seen as a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being” (boyd 2007, 13). While boyd intimates that writing is at the core of how ‘being’ is understood on SN, she does not investigate how writing can be understood as the ontology of data bodies. She does not ask what SN ‘being’ consists of. Moreover, there is no obvious reason why boyd, as a sociologist, should undertake the theorizing of the ontology of digital bodies. My aim is to address what I see as a lack in contemporary accounts of subject formation on SNS.

To understand the mutating nature of online and offline space, I will begin by examining some fundamental differences between a MUD character and a SN profile. I try to uncover what these differences might mean for understanding the offline/online relationship and identity construction. Although both are discursive constructions of self, their differences are crucial to note. I will further elaborate what it means to create an online textual identity using Derrida’s account of writing. This chapter will focus on the tension between speech and writing as a way to theorize the binary between the material and the virtual. The virtual, as I will explain, is the realm of writing whereas the material is the realm of speech.
Characters and Profiles: (Re)presenting the Self Online Through Text

Text-based universes, such as WaterMOO, present a vastly different set of conditions than do SNS. Some MUDs require that users draft a 25,000-word history of their characters before they are allowed to socialize with other users. These characters have rich back stories and meticulously constructed histories that focus on such things as a character’s family, her role in the community, her education, and various abilities (some fantastic or magical). These histories rarely resemble the real histories of their creators and are almost always fictional. Users creatively fashion characters and are often limited only by their imaginations. Users intentionally create elaborate and fictionalized histories to escape their own realities (Horst, Herr-Stephenson & Robinson, 2009). Even character names are often fictionalized. Examples Sundén gives of these kinds of names are: “Lithium, Rosencrantz, lafemme, Speedy, ACW and anarchy” and of course there are also names like Kerri or Suzanne (Sundén 2002, 87-107). The fictionalized names reveal a deep desire of many users to write characters into being who transgress the limits of the possible.

Conversely, Facebook one example of a SNS, has a strict policy towards names. Users’ names must be “believable”1 or they are barred from accessing their Facebook profiles. Although it is possible to create a fictional SN profile, there is an assumed ‘honesty’ on SNS because the majority of users have preexisting offline relationships with their SN friends (Zhao et al. 2008). Many of the users I spoke to felt that because

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1 It would be interesting to know what Facebook believes constitutes a “believable” name. Recently a woman named Barabra Istanbul was blocked from the site (Ortutay, 2009) because Facebook believed her profile to be a fake.
they believed they were honest while constructing their profiles, they likewise assumed
other users were honest as well.

This seemingly simple difference between MUD character creation and SN
profile construction is extremely important. While a character description and a profile
both consist mostly of text, one is a rich, fictional character description whereas the other
is a presumable honest account of self that is supposed to be a presentation of ‘facts’.
danah boyd argues that one of the reasons SN users are honest is because they want to be
‘searchable’. The more accurate information a user provides the easier it is for other users
to find them and add them as friends (2007, 15).

Both a MUD character description and SN profile consist of an avatar, an icon
chosen by the user to represent themselves in user-to-user interactions. Each avatar is
associated with text that describes features of the user not apparent in the avatar image.
To understand the differences between a character description and a SN profile, I am
going to compare the texts that users link to their avatars. By comparing and contrasting
the texts themselves, I will show the similarities and differences between these two ways
of creating a virtual, discursive self. I am also going to compare the terms ‘character’ and
‘profile’ as they each imply different ways of constructing an identity. The first text I am
going to examine is a character description on WaterMOO.
The MUD Character

A character is by nature constructed or written. The word character comes from the Greek kharaktër, meaning “a stamping tool” used to make an object distinctive. Character refers to the distinctive qualities of a person or thing. It is also a person in a novel, play or movie (COD 2008). The avatar is the stamp that gives the character its individuality. A character is also by nature literary and tied to the context of its creation. Characters in novels are inextricable from the text in which they are situated, much like MUD characters. Sundén states that MUD characters are real within their respective textual universes (2002; 2003), and she argues that a MUD character needs to be examined as a “literary subject” and not an isolated text (2002, 90-91). To illustrate how the everyday act of writing makes up the virtual ontology of a WaterMOO character, I quote below an example of character description in WaterMOO taken from Material Virtualities:

Illyenna is a tall, spare framed woman with unnaturally high sharp cheekbones. Black hair streaked with white frames the face, partly hidden by a net hood of silver […].

Tattered black rags partially conceal the gleaming skin of her body, leaving glimpses of only the occasional jutting hipbone, shoulderblade, knee. As she moves, it can be seen that her forearms and hands are covered in spidery black tattoo, symbolic gauntlets […].

Her lips are dark, and if she uses her mouth to speak, she displays onyx teeth slightly more pointed than a human’s […] (Sundén 2003, 63-64).

Illyena is inextricable from the user that created her, yet she is also always separate. The user is a specter behind her that remains unseen. Illyena, the mythic vampire, exists and is ‘real’ within the text-based universe in which she was created, yet
she is also obviously fictional. To understand this contradiction, Sundén evokes Donna Haraway’s renowned example of the cyborg: MOO characters, Sundén argues, “wander virtual spaces as textual incarnations of Haraway’s mythical cyborg” (Sundén 2003, 64).

Cyborg does not refer to the sci-fi archetype of the fusion of man and machine. Rather, Haraway’s cyborg\^2 is a hybrid that transcends the traditional binaries that have marked Western thought since the Enlightenment, mainly the gender binary of male/female. The cyborg allows for “new ways of seeing or being in the world” (Sundén 2003, 65) beyond the traditional categories of Western thought. The cyborg is fighting a “border war” (1990, 150) between what have traditionally manifested themselves as firmly drawn spatial demarcations. Haraway wants to “confuse boundaries” (1990, 150) with her hybridic cyborg. Sundén also wants to confuse boundaries, specifically, the division between online and offline spaces.

As a paradigm for understanding the nature of MUD character-construction, the cyborg allows one to think of the character as its own kind of borderspace between (wo)man and text or (wo)man and machine. When Illyena’s creator is using her avatar to communicate with other users, both the avatar and the user exist in a borderspace between their two ‘bodies’. But when the computer is turned off, both bodies retreat to their separate worlds.

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\^2 Haraway’s cyborg is a hybridic entity that transgresses the entrenched binaries of Western thought. Haraway created cyborg theory in response to identity politics of 1980s feminism that, she argues, further cements categorical boundaries. The cyborg does not respect taxonomical thinking and blends the once thought inescapable categories of gender, animal and machine. Examples of the dualities she blends are machine/organism and natural/unnatural. The cyborg does not simply trouble the traditional binaries of Western thought (the mind/body duality) but categories and identities that traditionally have been deemed impossible to trouble or transgress. See for example Sandoval’s chapter in *The Cybergirls Reader* (2000) and a 1990 interview with Haraway by Penley and Ross.
The SN Profile

A SN profile is something very different than a MUD character description. A profile is defined as a short article giving a description of a person, usually a public figure (COD 2008). What this means is that users are giving an account of themselves that is meant to be a public account. Although some users seek to portray their idealized selves (boyd 2007, 22), they are not creating a character. They are creating a mini-biography of their actual self that includes, among other things, their age, education, relationship status, and matters of taste, such as their favorite quotes, music, books and films.

Facebook provides data fields that users fill-in with this information. All of the fields are optional except of the name field although most facebook profiles I examined have multiple data fields filled-in. While users could create a fictional Facebook page for a created character, the majority of users feel they need to maintain some level of ‘honesty’ on the site. This claim is supported by the fact that 89% of users aged 18 to 34 use SNS to maintain relationships with preexisting friends, and the figure is even higher for teenagers (Lenhart 2009).

To understand the difference between writing a MUD character and a Facebook profile, consider the following profile of a 28-year-old male Facebook user, Shiv. (see Fig 1.1)
Shiv is filling in data fields with information that he feels best represents him. Whether or not the information is true is beside the point, since the majority of the data fields are a presentation of a user’s preferences that partially constitute their distinctive identity (interests, favorite music, favourite TV shows, etc.). When I spoke to Shiv, he said that he was presenting an “honest, if not distilled” version of himself. Some of the other users I spoke to echoed Shiv’s sentiment. One user told me that she believed that “Facebook allows users to select which truths they want they want show”. As Liu argues in his 2007 study of Facebook profiles, “Social Network Profiles as Taste Performance”, the information being written is more of a presentation of tastes than a fictionalized account of the self. He argues that profiles are taste performances (Liu 2007). For Liu the profile is a taste statement (2007, 253). Liu also argues that Facebook users are writing themselves into being through “textual performance” (Sundén 2003 as quoted by Liu 2007, 2-3). Tastes are textualized so that they can be performed in virtual space. I address
the textualization of self in the next section and address the performance of that text in chapter two.

The juxtaposition of a MUD character description and a Facebook profile illustrates the difference in how the self is written on a MUD and on a SNS. I am not arguing that SN profiles are not constructed or written. What I am arguing is that Shiv exists outside of the bounded realm of Facebook. Shiv is not writing a character or a fictionalized self into being, he is writing his real offline self into being, even if it is an idealized and socially constructed self. Although they are aware of the constructed nature of their online personas, many of the Facebook users I spoke to feel that they are representing themselves as honestly as possible.

Sundén’s key focuses are on how offline life, norms and entrenched binaries resurface online. The challenge she faces is to “identify ruptures and inconsistencies that, in unguarded moments, might trouble the self-evident and the familiar” (Sundén 2003, 55). These brief moments of disturbances make the “compulsory structures of cultural repetitions” that mark both the material and virtual become visible (Sundén 2003, 54). She notes that her work is complicated by the strange and continually mutable relationship between the material bodies that sit behind the discursively constructed online selves and the virtual selves that interact with other virtual selves and their absent authors, “[o]ne is always in a state of not knowing who the person behind the text is” (Sundén 2002, 89).

SN profiles, conversely, display the body and are anchored in offline relationships (Zhao et al. 2008). With a MUD, the online world is affected by offline biases, stereotypes and norms. With SNS, the virtual (online sphere) also affects the material
(offline sphere). Granted a MUD is an anonymous environment, and judging the effects of virtual relationships on material ones is nearly impossible. What makes a SN profile different is that the effects of online interactions on offline relationships are immediately visible. One user I spoke to said that she “had an argument with a friend because of something she posted on Facebook”. The argument began in a virtual space and bled into the ‘real’ world.

The following example perhaps better illustrates my point. Many Facebook users, conscious of the fact that photos of them will appear on the site, take more care to ensure they look good and will “pose”. Joseph, a Facebook user I spoke to, uses the site for interacting with peers and for promoting his band. He said that at all the concerts and parties he goes to, which are many, people are constantly getting their photos taken. He noticed people changing their behaviour just to get a photo taken. Joseph’s comment illustrates that the online realm is affecting the offline realm in ways that run much deeper than the occasional Facebook argument. Facebook users are changing their behaviours because of the common practice of posting photos to the site. Offline norms are not only seeping into the virtual realm, but norms from the virtual realm are seeping into the material world. The borderland, understood as an overlapping, hybridic space, is extending increasingly in both directions.

*Writing the Body: The Role of the Signature*

Sundén grapples with the distinction between the “embodied/discursively constructed self” and the “the body”, and with the mutable space between them (Sundén 2003, 176-180). The embodied self never “coincides directly with the body” but is in “constant interaction with constructions of the body” (Sundén 2003, 178). For Sundén,
the body has been traditionally constructed as a site that possesses a certain kind of innocence: “it is an idealized form that gestures toward a Platonic reality” (Hayles, quoted by Sundén 2003, 179). The virtual body is seen as less-than in comparison to the physical bodies. The virtual body is the embodied self that is always interacting with the idealized physical body but can never take its place. Illyena exists because a types her into being. Illyena is constantly interacting with the user’s material body. She is an embodied projection, discursively constructed in a discursive realm. For Sundén, “no matter how intense their twisting and twirling, text and body never fully collapse into one another” (2003, 179). The body that animates Illyena is inextricable from her yet there is always a space between them.

The relationship between body and discourse (embodiment) is transformative in either direction, but one that never completely collapses the distinction between bodies and discourse. To negotiate this dissonance, Sundén uses the example of the signature as a space that exists as a borderland between the written ‘I’ and the ‘I’ writing. According to Sundén, although it is “never possible to ensure a correspondence between the ‘I’ writing and the ‘I’ written about, texts are nonetheless marked by their own process of inscription” (Sundén 2003, 179). The signature functions as a “borderline mark that simultaneously divides and binds together the embodied subject and text” (Sundén 2003, 179). The signature function as its own kind of borderspace that negotiates the various tensions created by the relationship between the ‘I’ writing and the written ‘I’. The signature is both a proper name that signals individuality and a graphic mark that can be repeated outside a given context.
Sundén uses concepts from Derrida’s essay “Signature, Event, Context” (1982) to flesh out the nuances of the signature and to highlight the iterable\(^3\) nature of the graphic mark/signature. The signature negotiates between the entrenched dichotomies of the real/material and the embodied/virtual. I now turn to Derrida’s essay to rethink the signature so that it can be applied to the different ways SN users are creating embodied selves. Because SNS are not an entirely discursive realm, they present a different relationship between the ‘I’ writing and the written ‘I’ than do MUDs.

Derrida argues that the signature introduces a particular relation between the present-moment and the source (of the signature) (1982, 328). Signature, for Derrida, implies a “nonpresence [of the signer]” (1982, 328) while at the same time indicating that the signer has been present in the past (to sign her name) (1982, 328). The relationship between the written ‘I’ and the ‘I’ writing is one that is predicated on presence. Derrida argues that present-moment of non-presence of the signer is a “transcendental form of now-ness (maintenance)” (1982, 328). The use of the word ‘maintenance’ signifies that the ‘I’ writing maintains the existence of the written ‘I’ while the written ‘I’ allows the ‘I’ writing to be positioned as the ‘source’ of the text. ‘Maintenance’ also refers to the French word for ‘now’, maintenant, meaning that it is a ‘maintenance’ of the subject that always exists in the present-moment. The SN user that types her embodied self into being and maintains the existence of that self. That embodied self also exists after the user has

\(^3\) Iterability is a Derridian term that denotes a graphic mark’s ability to be iterated or cited. What this means is that writing allows for discourse to be repeated/cited in a myriad of different contexts. He develops the term in response to J.L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words* (1962) in which Austin argues that utterances that ‘do’ things are performative utterances and writing and other citational practices are parasitic forms (Derrida, 1982). I will examine the term more thoroughly in the last section of this chapter and in the next chapter when I take up questions of performativity and citationality.
stepped away and maintains the user’s continued (non)presence in the virtual realm beyond the moment when she has logged off the computer. The signature acts a mediator between these two states of presence.

Sundén argues that the signature can be understood as a liminal or borderspace between the present iteration of the author and the materiality of the author as the ‘source’ of a text. The signature functions as a “borderland” that at “once separates and joins together the body writing and the body of the written” (Sundén 2003, 180). This relation always implies the presence (at some point in time) of an author as well as the non-presence of the body of the signer. Signatures are needed because bodies cannot always be materially present. This is particularly true in a realm that is entirely discursive, where bodies are never present.

To be intelligible or to have value, signatures must be repeatable. That is, they must have an iterable form. If a signature were not recognizable as an iteration of a preexisting form, it could never mediate between the ‘I’ writing and the written ‘I’. Signatures must refer to a body that actually existed at some point in time. In both MUDs and SNS, the avatar is the iterable form of the author. The signature must be “able to detach itself from the present” (Derrida 1982, 328) for it to have any meaning. This severing from a context allows the signature, like any graphic mark, to be grafted onto a new chain of signification or representational schemata. Through the signature the corporeality of the author permeates the text while the text simultaneously constructs the author. Through a signature, the author testifies to her authenticity as a corporeal body. Yet, because of the nature of the signature, the body is never present to validate the
testimony. The signature does not exist solely as a signifier of an author’s proper name but also as an iteration or citation of that name (Grosz 1995, 20).

Thus, for example, when I use the name Derrida in my work, I am not only naming the man who was born in Algeria in 1930 but the cultural discourse that has come to inhabit the space of that name. The name “Jacques Derrida” signifies the man Jacques Derrida but also signifies the vast body of work he has contributed to Western thought. “Rather than naming the author, the signature infuses the text’s interior, making impossible any final separation between them” (Grosz 1995, 20). The signature is understood as a liminal space between the corporeal self and the discursively constructed embodied self, or as Sundén argues, between the online and the offline. She writes, “[t]he signature performs in this discussion as a borderline mark that simultaneously divides and binds together the embodied subject and the text” (Sundén 2003, 179).

Sundén uses Derrida’s signature as a way to theorize a borderspace between the material and the virtual. For Sundén “bodies in WaterMOO are ‘signatures’ in the sense that they inhabit a borderland” (2003, 180). She uses Derrida’s concept of the signature as a way to overcome the nagging aporia that the virtual, textual self presents for making any kinds of claims about the world.

The signature works to overcome some of the facets of this divide. The signature is a discursive mark that points to the “specificity of the body typing–always present but never visible” (Sundén 2003, 180). Yet for the signature to act as borderland, it also has to reinforce the divide between the online and the offline. This divide is exacerbated by the undeniable fictionality of the characters Sundén is studying and the anonymous nature of MUDs. Because their author of a MUD character is anonymous, the signature,
although implying the existence of the body that is actually typing, refers to an absent author. Although a real person created each MUD character, there is no point of reference and no knowledge of the body to fill the space of that name.

The signature also reinforces the differences between the virtual character and the material user. Signature functions as a “double mark”. It not only “signs the text by a mark of authorial propriety, but also signs the subject as the product of writing itself” (Grosz, 21). What Sundén demonstrates is how the material world shapes textual universes and how real-world norms and stereotypes circulate and are made visible through deconstructive readings of character descriptions. She does not address, however, how the online world seeps into the offline world, bringing with it its own set of normalizing practices, despite a two-way seepage being implied in the hybridic nature of the borderland.

I use Derrida’s signature in almost the same manner as Sundén, except I focus on the doubleness [doublure] of signature: the author writes the text but the text also writes the author. Unlike with a MUD, SN users are not building a new world but are constantly (re)encoding elements of the material world and arranging them into different couplings and groupings. This distinction underlies much of the argument I will make in the remaining sections of this chapter as well as in the rest of this thesis. There is a fundamental difference between authoring a character and arranging a profile; the latter process is informed as much by real-world interactions between users as it is by virtual interactions and online textuality.
Fig 1.2: Facebook avatars/signatures

Facebook users often change their profile pictures. Chris, a user I spoke to, changes his avatar photo on a regular basis to reflect changes in his physical appearance and mood (Fig. 1.2). When Chris changes his avatar, all the avatars in the Facebook database change. His avatar appears beside every utterance that Chris has ever made on Facebook: every wall post, comment, sent message, etc. Thus, signatures on Facebook are mutable and are not permanent. Each user has a profile picture album on their main profile page so other users can see the temporal progression of a user’s signatures. Yet there is only ever one photo associated with all their textual output in the site at a time. When Chris comments on a photo posted to another profile, his signature stands beside his utterance/statement. The utterance beside the signature fills the space of the signature with meaning, while the signature gives meaning to the utterance. Each utterance on a SNS makes up the total sum of a user’s presence, each utterance infuses the signature with meaning.

The signature on a SN profile functions somewhat like a borderspace between the material and the textual; it mediates between the material self and a self that is extended through text. Conversely, instead of being a borderland between two spheres, signature on a SNS function as a tool that extends the presence of the author beyond a bounded spatial and temporal moment. Users post on another users’ profile and these posts are read at a later time. Moreover, the author of the utterance exists beyond the confines of
their own profile as they post on another user’s profile. The signature extends their presence beyond their material body and then again beyond the borders of the profile. The signature transforms the author into a graphic mark that becomes repeatable or ‘iterable’. Other users can see where Chris has commented because of his signature and the utterances associated with it. He persists beyond the moment of signing.

Writing functions as a way to extend user-presence into the future and across space. It also makes users ‘iterable’. To be legible, a signature must be able to be severed from the author and made repeatable while always signifying the singularity of the author as an individual. A signature on a SNS signifies the singularity of the character as much as it signifies the singularity of the author of that character.

The borderland created by the melding of offline and online socially-networked space does not function in the same way as in a MUD. The majority of the Facebook users I spoke to believe that their avatars are not separable from who they are. They do not refer to their Facebook profiles in the third person nor speak in the third person while using the site (Fig 1.3) even though user status updates and event notices are in the third person by default. A user’s their signatures do not act as a borderland between separate spheres but act as a bridge between two spheres: the online and the offline. In this respect they exist as one coherent self. By becoming textual, users are able to navigate this extended space without sacrificing their individuality.

Fig. 1.3: List of events on a Facebook profile
Writing as Extension and Supplementarity

A fundamental feature of writing as a technology is its ability to extend presence beyond fixed spatial and temporal boundaries. The telephone allows people to communicate across great distances, the television allows people to project images across great space and time and the computer combines both of those abilities. According to Derrida, writing *extends* language (1967, 7). It loosens the limits of space and time that constrain speaking. Derrida believes extension is a feature of all technologies aimed at mediating communication and not exclusive to writing.

The idea of an extended presence is easily applied to the textually constructed online self because it is a product of writing and technological mediation. Writing is also a mediating technology, a technology “which *extends* very far, if not infinitely, the field of oral and gestural communication” (Derrida 1982, 311; emphasis original). On Facebook, as an example of a SN, all manner of gestures of textualized. Users ‘hug’ and ‘poke’ each other through textual interaction. The poke is a widely understood ‘gesture’ in a completely textual realm. Writing transforms the various the “content[s] of a semantic message[s]” into different *means* (Derrida 1982, 311).

With the extension of the limits and conditions of presence there is a corresponding widening and extension of the concept of text. Every use of language produces a text (Carlshamre 1986, 37). Because of this “widening” of language (Carlshamre 1986, 37) there is a corresponding widening in the “application of the concept of language” (Carlshamre 1988, 37). The widening of text allows for readings that would have previously “strayed very far from the text” (Carlshamre 1986, 37) to be considered as text. Thoughts, life and experience “are all part of ‘the text’” (Carlshamre 1986, 37). Text
is not just different combinations of an alphabetic language, but all of the ways in which utterances are fixed and made citable. Orality and gesture are bounded by space and time. They are only able reach a limited audience. Writing loosens the spatial temporal limits of communication.

‘Extension’ is conceptually tied to ‘supplementarity’. This is illustrated by the fact that in the same sentence that Derrida asserts that the written mark is an extenuation of presence, in “Signature, Event, Context”, he writes “representation regularly supplements presence” (1982, 313). The proximity of ‘extension’ and ‘supplement’ in the text clearly indicates that extension and supplementarity are, if not interchangeable, then at least two sides of the same coin. Sundén uses Derrida’s term the ‘supplement’ to point to the contradictory nature of text: it is at once fluid and fixed. For Sundén, “what is written or said cannot be altered, but can always be supplemented with new texts or utterances” (2003, 47). Online text cannot be unwritten as it needs to be supplemented with new texts and edits. Text, therefore, remains open and mutable - “texts in a MUD are clearly works ‘in making’, but also incessantly fixated over series of screen images freezing them in particular performances” (Sundén 2003, 47).

Sundén’s use of Derrida’s concept of the ‘supplement’ to understand the fluidity of online textuality proves very useful for understanding the ways in which SN profiles supplement the identity of users. A profile is always fixed by writing’s (semi)permanence and is also always mutable. According to Sundén, supplementarity is the process of editing a character description through adding and replacing. It is the always-unfinished nature of text. The online profile only changes in the moments when it is not being looked at. For the supplements to the profile to become visible users have to hit refresh
on their browsers. The profile is always changing and yet always static. Sundén argues that this “leads to a complex relationship between movement and fixation” (2003, 47).

I want to stress another understanding of the supplement, also taken from Derrida. Beyond the open-ended nature of the text, the supplement possesses the ability to become a substitute for the thing itself. The supplement not only adds to an already existing sign but it also replaces it (Derrida 1982, 145). While the act of adding and replacing can be interpreted as a process of writing the self over a period of time, it also needs to be viewed in terms of its relationship to the actual writer doing the supplementing.

Supplementarity signals a relationship between representation and the thing-itself:

But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates in-the-place-of; it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by anterior default of presence. Compensatory [suppléant] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [tient-lieu]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up by itself, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign or proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself (Derrida 1976, 145).

The supplement functions as its own kind of liminal space between the sign and the thing-itself. In the case of SN, the profile is both the supplement of the thing-itself and the sign of the thing. The profile replaces the user on the SNS and it is marked and made individual by the signature. Yet it can never fully replace the user because it is always an adjunct and can never fully be the thing that it is replacing. The supplement (the profile) can never stand in as a full replacement. It can only ever take-(the)-place for an instant and for that instant it enters into a subaltern relationship to the thing-itself (the user). The
supplement does not simply “add to the positivity of presence”, meaning that it does not simply make the present sign more present. The supplement shifts and changes the thing so that it can become present in another space and time as an iteration of itself. But this is not to say that the material body of the user exists in a dialectical relationship with the profile everything is always a supplement of something else. The endless chain of supplementation is the endless chain of the deferral of meaning [différance] or of signification. Just as the profile supplements the user, the user supplements the profile. The SN profile is meaningless without the existence of the user’s body, at least at some point. On the flipside, the material user cannot become intelligible in virtual space without the profile. The relationship between the profile and the user is not an origin story but a story of supplementation.

In the relationship of supplementarity the sign is not put into a position of being lesser-than in relation to the original. For SN, the profile is not seen as lesser-than in relation to the user. This is made clear by fleshing out where the ‘supplement’ comes from. Derrida takes the term the ‘supplement’ from Rousseau. Throughout his work, Rousseau describes all relationships (romantic, sexual, sentimental, educational, etc.) as existing in a supplemental relationship with something else (Deutscher 2005, 39). Rousseau also argues that writing exists as a supplement to speech. Therefore, speech is somehow pure while writing degrades. Rousseau argues that supplement is somehow less than the uncontaminated original (his lovers are supplements for his beloved and pure mother) (Deutscher 2005, 39-40). Derrida, although he appropriates Rousseau’s terminology, argues that the original is never pure and that there is no ideal; degradation is enfolded in the original. The supplement does not degrade but continuous to
supplement infinitely. There can never be any relief, if relief is defined as communing with the pure original. Interactions on Facebook, much like Rousseau’s account of supplementarity, are supplements for face-to-face encounters; however, the face-to-face encounter is not a pure interaction as it also functions as a supplement. Users I spoke to primarily enjoyed interacting online with users with whom they have some kind of preexisting relationship. The few users that I spoke to who have Facebook friends that they only know virtually rarely interact with them and do not enjoy the few interactions that they do have. One user said that she found it "weird" when people she did not know would try and friend her. Our material selves supplement our virtual selves and vice versa. Derrida's concept of the supplement, like Sundén's borderland and the signature, works to destabilize the material/virtual dichotomy.

My aim in this discussion has been to further destabilize the virtual/material. Beyond troubling traditional binaries, there must be other effects of creating selves in virtual space that are, if not new, exacerbated by the SN model. SN profiles are immediate extensions of offline selves. The break between the online and offline is further obfuscated by the nature of SN relationships, which are directly predicated on preexisting offline relationships. A number of pressing questions arise from this inquiry, foremost is: What are the implications of this process of supplementation and extension?
Potential Risks: Writing the Data Body

SN theorist danah boyd writes that the process of writing the self into being on a SNS is a process of creating a ‘digital body’ (2007, 12). Although she uses the term ‘digital body’ and not the term ‘data body’, she is still employing a term very similar to the term coined by the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) in 1995 to describe the total collection of files about an individual collected and stored in an external database, referred by many as the “data body” (CAE 1995, 145). As early as 1995, the CAE was already critical of the techno-utopianism surrounding the burgeoning Internet. The CAE is a group of tactical media practioners formed in 1987 whose main aim has been to explore the various intersections between art, critical theory, technology, and political activism. For the CAE, the early Internet was a double-edged sword: it had the potential to liberate the user by allowing users to engage in disembodied democratic dialogue, while at the same time serving the market needs of neoliberal capitalism (CAE, 145). The CAE’s position is emblematic of a widely held belief by cyberculture theorists. Since the birth of the Internet age, scholars have been wary of the Internet as a perfected surveillance tool. boyd is not concerned with the potentially negative nature of the SN; however, the similarities between some of the ominous early predictions by the CAE and the reality of SN require examination.

For boyd the digital body is a digital self written into being by the user with the express intention of interacting with peers. While this may be the case, there are also unintended consequences of this process, consequences that were accurately predicted by the CAE almost fifteen years ago. The CAE envisaged a system whereby a user’s information would be meticulously recorded online from birth to death. They argued that
the individual aggregated collections of information would give marketers insight ‘into consumption patterns, spending power, and ‘lifestyle choices’ of those with surplus income’ (CAE 1995, 146). In some respects this is indeed how Facebook and other social media function. Although Facebook is a tool designed to facilitate the engagement with friends in online spaces, it is also a finely crafted information collection and surveillance system (O’Neil 2007).

The data body is “the facist sibling” (CAE, 1995, 145) of the virtual body. Because information is being solicited and collected online, there is no escaping the creation of data bodies alongside the creation of virtual selves. SNS, specifically Facebook, are the most well designed tools for data collection to date. Users gladly share as much information about themselves as possible so that can become more searchable. Searchability is an essential component of SN (boyd 2007). If it were difficult to find friends, users would not be motivated to use the site. Facebook’s database is a vast network of searchable data bodies. Facebook has access to all sorts of different kinds of information about the user, information that it can sell to marketing companies or use to create its own marketing tool by tailoring its ads to the information provided by the users. The more information a user provides, the more the advertisements (or “recommendations”) are tailored to their interests. Users are motivated to write more and more aspects of their selves into being, creating an endless process of supplementation.

Fundamental to searchability is a user’s replicability. According to boyd, along with searchability, replicability is another essential component of SN. Replicability ensures that “expressions can be copied from one place to another verbatim such that there is no

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4 In 2007 Facebook launched “Pulse” an application that recommends music, books, concerts and other purchasable products based on a user’s and all their friends profile information.
way to distinguish the ‘original’ from the ‘copy’” (boyd 2007, 8) Data bodies are repeatable or iterable units of information that are valuable because of their ability to be searched, repeated and stored. Derrida argues that all language is reducible, in some sense, to units of iterability (Derrida 1982, 315). Iterability is one of the most fundamental features of writing, as it implies that the graphic mark does not have a fixed semantic reference. Any mark can be severed from one chain of signification and grafted to another. Iterable units have no beginning and no end as they are always being supplemented. Iterability is implicit in the structure of any graphic mark. It is a mark’s ability to be cited in new contexts. The SN user is transforming their very self into an iterable unit of information by virtue of creating a textual self.

According to Derrida all textuality implies an iterability. What he means by this is that all writing is characterized by the possibility of repetition, a repetition that does not necessarily mean sameness but implies both sameness and alterity. The word iteration means literally “to perform or utter repeatedly” (COD 2008). It also has another meaning which is the repeated application of a mathematical procedure: the process is the same yet each time it is performed the answer differs. This is an excellent example of how writing or textuality implies a simultaneous repetition and difference. Iterability is the power to be repeated that separates text from utterance. Text, in its very structure, possesses the possibility of repetition. Subjects then are not sovereign over their own speech if all utterances are already iterable.

Consider Facebook’s Terms of Use as they relate to the ownership of User Content. All users agree to the following terms whether aware of it or not:
By posting User Content to any part of the Site, you automatically grant, and you represent and warrant that you have the right to grant, to the Company an irrevocable, perpetual, non-exclusive, transferable, fully paid, worldwide license (with the right to sublicense) to use, copy, publicly perform, publicly display, reformat, translate, excerpt (in whole or in part) and distribute such User Content for any purpose, commercial, advertising, or otherwise, on or in connection with the Site or the promotion thereof, to prepare derivative works of, or incorporate into other works, such User Content, and to grant and authorize sublicenses of the foregoing.

Facebook’s User Agreement implies that each user is an iterable unit (data body) of information that is composed of smaller also iterable parts. Facebook has the right to publicly perform and publicly display identities. Facebook becomes the sole owner of the ability to iterate. The data body is a collection of images and texts that can be cut off from their original meaning (the profile) and placed in new contexts. Facebook reserves the right to reproduce user identity in part or in whole, the topology of the user’s data body is always ready to be reconstituted, recontextualized and reshuffled. Facebook alone determines the contextual framework of the collection of texts that a user has gathered. Unlike a MUD character description, the form of a SN profile is designed to break the self into iterable pieces of information. Each text box that a user fills in (job, relationship status, hobbies, etc.) is another piece of the profile.
Conclusion: Animating the Textual Body

The user agreement implies an inherent textuality of user content by acknowledging its ability to circulate outside of its original context. Gestures and utterances are made textual and are extended to countless new contexts. The ways in which online texts are continuously embedded within new chains of signification and are produced so to as be infinitely reproducible underscores the importance of thinking an ontology of Internet users that is primarily textual. With the Derridian concepts of the signature, the supplement and iterability, I have rethought what it means to create a textual self in a virtual space.

The signature helps to negotiate the strange and mutable borderspace between the written ‘I’ and the ‘I’ writing, between the ‘original’ and ‘copy’ and between the ‘material’ and the ‘virtual’. It helps to transcend the lingering tensions that the pairing of these terms necessitates. In contrast Sundén argues that the MUD character acts a signature. I argue that both the profile and the user function as signatures that continually supplement one another. Sundén’s argument implies that the character description supplements the absent author. While this is also true for SN profiles, the reverse of this relationship also exists; the user functions as a supplement for the profile. For many, the profile is ‘more real’ than the author. Understanding the nature of textual identity is only part of the overall picture of cybersubjectivity on SNS. A textual self is a static self. It needs to be animated for to be ‘real’ within a virtual space.

In the next chapter I address how language can ‘do’ things in the world. I examine how Butler takes up Derrida’s theories of writing –specifically iterability– to theorize performativity. In his 1982 essay “Signature, Event, Context”, Derrida develops the term
iterability as a response to Austin coining the term ‘performative’ in the 1955 lecture series *How To Do Things With Words*. Austin’s aim is to describe what spoken utterances ‘do’ in the world. Butler relies on Austin for her theory of the ‘performativity’ but she rethinks the performative so that it becomes a framework for all discourse. Butler approaches Austin via Derrida and conceptualizes the performative as a citational act (Lloyd 2007, 62). Like Austin, Butler believes that statements have the power to ‘do’ things; however, the things that they do are not performative acts per se, but rather reinforce and replay certain norms. She deconstructs naturalized truths such as gender by arguing they are discursively constructed; Butler shows that we “do” gender. The appropriation/critique of Austin is a fertile site of inquiry to address these two often disparate but both poststructuralist thinkers. Because Sundén turns to Butler to flesh out a rich theory of online performance, it is fruitful to return to Butler to better understand how identity presentation on SNS is a performance of self – while never forgetting that this performance is a written performance and, always marked by textuality.
Chapter 2

“The mark cannot be stripped of its essential alterity, of its ability to be inscribed onto new chains of signification” –Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”

“Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender?” –Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the process of writing the self into being through a Derridian framework. Although I have begun to formulate what it means to become a cyber-subject on a SNS, there are other aspects of subject formation that need to be addressed. In her 2007 work on SN, danah boyd quotes Jenny Sundén in a section of her paper titled “Identity Performance”. boyd argues that because SN identity is a performance, users must “write themselves into being” (2006, 12). Users create textual bodies in order to perform their identities. Performance requires bodies to do the performing. boyd sees identity formation as an embodied performance, where users modify their behaviour in virtual space according to social cues (2007, 12). For boyd, textuality and performance are inextricable. Hugo Liu also quotes Sundén in his essay, “Social Networking Profiles as Taste Performance” (2007). He argues that in order to exist in a virtual space users have to write their selves into being through “textual performances” (Sundén as quoted by Liu 2007). Online performance animates the otherwise static textual body. Users perform their identities, giving their profiles an affective layer beyond static text. Performance is the underlying relationship between data bodies. The difference between Sundén’s use of performance and boyd’s and Liu’s appropriation of Sundén’s theory, is that Sundén couples her theory of writing the self
with a Butlerian understanding of performativity. For Sundén, online character creation is a product of “textual performativity” (Sundén 2003, 53-55; emphasis added). Although boyd and Liu both quote Sundén’s term ‘textual performativity’ in their work on SN, by focusing on a dramaturgical understanding of performativity they do not allow for the incorporation of discursive formulations of subjectivity.

Sundén never uses the term ‘performance’ in Material Virtualities. She always uses the term ‘performativity’. Performance invokes a dramaturgical understanding of performance, whereas Butler’s theory of performativity is a discursive, temporal account. Sundén focuses on Butler because her argument in many respects mirrors Butler’s famous assertion that ‘biological’ sex (male or female) does not exist (Sundén 2003, 53). By troubling the binary conception of male/female, Sundén is able to destabilize the material body’s role as a naturalized truth upon which the virtual body is constructed. To move beyond a naturalized or ‘essential’ conception of the subject, one must adopt a discursive understanding of subjectivity. In a discursive theory such as Butler’s, performativity assumes that each uttered statement or speech act is only intelligible as it enters into a preexisting matrix of social norms and conventions. For Butler “there is no doer behind the deed” (Salih 2002, 99). Online statements must enter into a system of conventions in order to be made intelligible. To theorize how social norms circulate online, Sundén uses Butler’s performativity to tether the virtual to the material through historicity. As in the material world, discourse in the virtual realm is only intelligible because of historical precedent and/or context.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I examine a general confusion that surrounds the use and misuse of the term ‘performativity’. The concept of
performativity has roots in theatrical performance, speech act theory and poststructuralism. Although theatricality is an essential part of performativity, because my focus is a discursive/textual subject, I am going to focus primarily on speech act theory and poststructuralism. In the second section, I will examine speech act theory and Derrida’s subsequent critique of it more closely.

The contemporary concept of performativity stems in part from a reinterpretation of J.L. Austin’s speech act theory. Speech act theory examines how spoken language can ‘do’ things in the world. Understanding how language can result in tangible, material action is essential to understanding the dynamics of virtual realm that is entirely constituted through language. However, an Austinian understanding of language does not account for the temporal nature of identity and language – i.e., the social, political and historical context of a speech act. Language can only ‘do’ things because others understand it and it can only be understood because it enters into a preexisting matrix of social norms and conventions. For this reason I need to add another dimension to Austin’s theory.

Butler arrives at Austin’s performative through Derrida’s critique of Austin in the essay “Signature, Event, Context” (Loxley 2007). Foremost in Derrida’s critique is the concept of ‘iterability’. Iterability is the graphic mark’s ability to continually be cited in new contexts (Derrida 1982). Iterability is valuable to an understanding of performativity as it allows for a temporal understanding of the performative as the iterable mark always exceeds the spatiality and temporality of its context. The iterable mark is continually entering into new contexts. Because SN users attempt to create discursive, textual
versions of themselves they are making all the different iterations of themselves immediately visible.

In the third section I address an important criticism that has been leveled against Butler’s use of the term performativity in her efforts to theorize subjectivity and identity formation. Many have argued that because Butler posits the subject as wholly discursively constructed, she does not allow for the material existence of real bodies. Theorists who attempt to qualify virtual subjectivity often encounter many of the same criticisms. I will use Butler’s response to her critics to respond preemptively to the very same criticism that could easily be leveled against my own argument. An exegesis of Butler’s response will serve to bring together the material and the virtual and will set the stage for an account of cyber subjectivity on SNS using performativity as a framework. The last section of this chapter will speak to how gestures and interactions are textualized and performed on SNS, which I will show by comparing subject performativity on Facebook with Sundén’s account of subject performativity on the MUD, WaterMoo.

Confusing ‘Performance’ with ‘Performativity’

I asked a handful of Facebook users whether they thought the term ‘writing the self’ or the term ‘performing the self’ best described the process of creating a cyber-identity. Many of the users I spoke to felt that SN identity was a product of both performance and writing. When discussing what it means to ‘perform the self’, some of the users I spoke to compared the performative nature of Facebook to already familiar scenes of performance. One user compared Facebook profile construction to getting dressed in the morning, another to different mannerisms people affect in order to project a certain image. The comparison of Facebook to familiar stages of performances reflects
an understanding of ‘performance’ that is primarily dramaturgical. Hugo Liu writes that SN profiles are the “newest stage” for performances of self and that SN is a product of “textual performance” (Liu 2007, 253). He credits Sundén for developing the term ‘textual performance’. However, Liu has confused a dramaturgical understanding of online cyber-subjectivity with an understanding of online cyber-subjectivity through the discursive lens of performativity. Liu is assuming performance and performativity refer to the same conceptual framework, which, as I will show, they certainly do not.

The way that these terms are used interchangeably is reflective of a greater confusion in society at large (Miller 2007). This confusion calls for a certain demystification of what exactly the term ‘performativity’ signifies. Before elaborating what it means to construct a performative identity, I am going to try and disambiguate the two threads that run through contemporary understandings of performativity.

There are two senses within the overarching term ‘performativity’ that are frequently conflated by cyberculture theorists who argue that online bodies ‘perform’ their identities. boyd and Liu are emblematic of the movement of Internet theorists who have adopted a theory of dramaturgical performance to describe identity formation on SNS. Sundén and other early feminist Internet scholars, such as N. Katherine Hayles, argue that online identity is a function of textual performativity. Seemingly, these are two discrete formulations of cyber-subjectivity; however, because Sundén is widely cited by contemporary SN scholars such as boyd and Liu, there are certain slippages between dramaturgical and discursive conceptions of performance. I want to add another dimension to an existing dramaturgical understanding of cyber-subjectivity on SNS.
Online textual performance, for cybersociologists, stems from a dramaturgical understanding of performance taken primarily from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1959). Dramaturgical theories, such as Goffman’s, aim to rethink societal contexts as ‘stages’. Performativity as ‘performance’ has seeped from the confines of the stage and is now used a theoretical paradigm to theorize the everyday interactions between subjects. These stages are places where performers interact with other performers and engage in, what Goffman terms as “impression management” (Goffman as cited by boyd 2007, 12; emphasis original): “Impression management is a part of a larger process where people seek to *define a situation* through their behavior” (boyd 2007, 12; emphasis original). Every social situation is a new stage where subjects negotiate their identities with others. Hugo Liu argues SN profiles are “taste statements (Liu 2007, 253) that are ‘performed’ by SN users. He writes: “[s]uccessful performers are ‘aware of the impression they foster’. Thus, taste statements need to be crafted so as to stand up to the scrutiny of an audience” (Liu 2007, 253). Simply calling it a taste performance, however, does not account for the temporal and performative elements of the SN profiles.

In a theatrical or dramaturgical conception of performance the subject is posited as the locus of an action. The action is “performed *by the subject*” (Ruitenberg 2007, 260; emphasis original). The subject performs their identity “like a role” (Ruitenberg 2007, 263). Like Butler, I want to avoid a fundamentally a self-determining subject in lieu of a theory of the subject that is more open and not unified by any kind of universal truth (Ruitenberg 2007). For Butler the subject is “*performatively produced* by the discourses in which [she] participates” (Ruitenberg 2007, 263; emphasis added) instead of the subject consciously performing her identity.
Butler popularized the term performativity in the work *Gender Trouble* (1990a). I concentrate primarily on Butler’s account of performativity for one key reason: Sundén’s theory of textual performativity, now widely used by contemporary scholars theorizing cyber-subjectivity on SNS, is derived from Butler’s concept of performativity. The importance of Sundén’s and other early feminist cyberscholars’ is that they introduced a discursive understanding of subjectivity to the notion of virtual space. Like Butler, they “ask questions about the formation of identity and subjectivity” and trace “the processes by which we become subjects when we assume the sexed/gendered/raced’ identities which are constructed for [and by] us” (Salih 2002, 2). This line of inquiry is not being addressed in many current accounts of identity formation on SN. For that reason alone, I want to rethink performance on SNS through a Butlerian lens. This will enable me to add a discursive layer to already-existing accounts of cyber-subjectivity. I am now going to move to some of the underlying theory behind performativity. I will begin with Austin’s concept of the performative to better understand how exactly it is that language can ‘do’ things as it as fundamental building block of Butler’s theory.

*Austin’s Performative*

In the 1955 lecture series *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin argues that traditional philosophy has always been preoccupied with true/false statements. Austin wants to shift philosophy’s focus away from a grammatical understanding of language toward an understanding of language that is phonocentric (Derrida 1976; 1982). Phonocentrism is a theory of language that sees writing as parasitic to or lesser than spoken language.
Austin argues that philosophy has always been concerned with written descriptions of the world as opposed to inquiring how language can ‘do’ things in the world. Written statement, he argues, are essentially “conceived as a true or false ‘description’” (Austin as cited by Derrida 1982, 321). Austin calls statements that are true/false claims ‘constatives’. Austin wants to draw philosophy’s focus away from constative statements toward a philosophic inquiry that is centered on another kind of statement – statements that ‘do’ things in the world, which he calls ‘performatives’. Austin views ‘constatives’ as essentially static claims whereas ‘performatives’ are dynamic. Performatives bring into being the thing that they name. The language and the act the language invokes are interchangeable. ‘Performatives’ are a kind of ‘speech act’ that can be defined by the simple phrase: "to say something is to do something" (Austin 1962, 12; emphasis original). Austin’s most famous example of saying and doing is the example of the wedding vow, “I do”. When the statement “I do” is uttered in the correct context, the statement is “doing something – namely, marrying, rather than reporting something” (Austin 1962, 13).

For Austin, more than simply being spoken utterances, ‘performatives’ is any utterance “which allows us to ‘do’ something by means of speech itself”(Austin as cited by Derrida 1982, 321). Although he begins by aiming to reprivilege the spoken, Austin concludes that any utterance that is communicative is a ‘performative’ whether spoken or written (Derrida 1982, 321). This insight is particularly important for theorizing a realm that is entirely discursive. In virtual space all manner of communication is textual thus the performative must take textual form.
Not all Performatives are Successful: Felicity and Infelicity

For Austin, there is more to speech act theory than the distinction between performative and constative. Another essential feature is the relationship between the speaker and the speech. The speaker is posited as the locus of the action/effect of the utterance. Namely, the success of the performative is contingent on the speaker’s intentions. If I say: "I promise to be there at noon", I am doing something. I am making a promise and I am responsible for keeping that promise. The subject constitutes the promise as opposed to the promise constituting the subject. If one transplants this conception of the subject to a theory of identity, the subject is responsible for performing their identity. Successful identity performances depend on the subject much like the success of failure of a promise.

As long as I keep my promise my performative utterance is felicitous (to use Austin’s terminology). Felicitous means that my speech act (promise) successfully became the thing that it named (Austin 1962, 24-38). Speech acts that are not successful are infelicitous. A marriage that occurs when one of the participants is already married and therefore unable to actually become married is infelicitous. If I lied when I said, “I promise to be there at noon” then the performative is infelicitous because my intention was never to keep my promise in the first place.

Beyond the intention of the speaker, the ‘felicity’ of a speech act is determined by what Austin terms as the “total speech act” (Austin 1962, 52). The ‘total speech act’ encompasses the intention of the speaker, the contextual parameters, and the conventions surrounding the speech act and its effectiveness. For Butler, the most important feature of the total speech act is its conventionality. Conventionality refers to all “procedures”
(Austin 1962, 27) and conventions that make a speech act intelligible to others. For a speech act to be intelligible, conventions that precede it must exist (Austin 1962, 15). “I do” has a universally understood meaning because of the historical conventions that surround it as a statement that binds two people together. Each utterance of “I do” only functions as an iteration of all the previous uttered “I dos”. Butler incisively points out in the introduction to *Excitable Speech* that “there is no easy way to decide on how best to delimit that totality” (Butler 1997, 3). Conventionality implies an inherent historicity, a ‘before’ that is nearly impossible to demarcate. By using the term ‘total speech act’ Austin is implying that there can be limits the historicity of an utterance. As Butler shows, this delimitation is impossible.

*Austin’s Performative in Virtual Space*

Understanding how language can “exceed the subject’s own temporality” (Butler as quoted by Kirby 2006, 92) is key to understanding performativity online. Online performativity is defined by breaks in temporality. There is always a pause between a user’s posts and when and how that post is received. Even with real-time chats there is always some kind of spatial and temporal dissonance between speaking subjects. As an example, if I write someone a message or post on another Facebook user’s wall, they receive the message at a later time. Beyond posting messages, there are applications that allow users to give each other virtual ‘gifts’, ‘cocktails’ or even ‘hugs’. When I want to hug someone online, the textual act of sending someone a hug becomes the very thing that it names. Although ‘hugging’ is defined as “squeezing someone tightly in one’s arms (COD, 2004), the virtual iteration of a hug is as ‘real’ as its physical counterpart. Thus the online hug can be understood as a performative speech act. Online discourse
encompasses all elements of communication, from physical gestures to invitations to parties. If we understand a performative to be a statement that cannot be proven true or false, the majority of wall posts or site posts on Facebook and MySpace are in some way, shape or form, performatives. The textual hug is not “setting out to describe a situation, an event or an action: it is an event or an action” (Loxley 2007, 8; emphasis original). When a user sends another user a textual hug, they mean to convey the same emotions of a real hug.

Using a strictly Austinian framework to analyze online performatives, however, lacks a deeper understanding of the social norms and conventions that are embedded within each speech act. Utterances only function because they are “repeated in time and, hence, maintain a sphere of operation that is not restricted to the moment of the utterance itself” (Butler 1997, 3). Delimiting the borders of a speech act risks cutting off each speech act from a greater societal context. To overcome this genuine problem, I need to turn to Butler and Derrida–just as Butler initially approached Austin through Derrida–to better elucidate the temporal nature of the performative (Loxley 2007). Butler believes that subjectivity stems from a subject’s repeated performance of norms over time. Butler’s focus on the historical sedimentation of norms over time transforms the performative into performativity and shifts the locus away from a subject that constitutes an action to a subject constituted by that action. Derrida’s critique of Austin introduces these important, discursive, elements to performativity.
Butler’s Reading of Austin Through Derrida

Derrida’s critique of speech act theory hinges on a critique of Austin’s phonocentrist account of language. Austin wants to shift philosophy’s focus away from the written to the spoken. Derrida wants to transcend this binary completely. Instead of simply reprivileging the written, Derrida extends the ontology of writing to all experience. Austin also argues that for a speech act to be felicitous, the speaker must be present. A felicitous speech act is a successful speech act. The performative correctly becomes the thing that it names – i.e., saying ‘I do’ becomes a marriage. For Derrida, however, "there is no experience of pure presence, but only chains of differential marks" (1982, 318). What this means is that the speaker is not the ‘origin’ of a speech act. In a sense, Derrida’s account highlights the impossibility of delimiting a speech act. There is no origin for Derrida, only a chain of differential marks or iterations. Because a felicitous speech act requires a present subject, Derrida wants to transcend the infelicitous/felicitous distinction by extending presence across chains of signification that stretch in every direction of time and space. A performative, for Butler as well as for Derrida, does not require the speaker to be present for the performative to have an effect. This is particularly important when examining the effects of language in virtual space.

The gravamen of Derrida's response to Austin is the concept of iterability (Miller 2007, 229). Iterability stands in between Austin and Butler and, as a concept, is extremely useful in theorizing the ontology of data bodies. Iterability allows for the contexts of speech acts not to become saturated with meaning (Miller 2007, 229). This means that the limits of a total speech act can never be fully defined. Speech acts are always iterable and can always enter into new contexts. Because a felicitous performance must occur in the
correct circumstances, its meaning can become exhausted. Derrida argues that because speech acts are constantly being cited in new contexts, they have no fixed contextual meaning. Moreover, there is no interior coherence to a speech act at all. It can be grafted onto a new chain signification beyond the conscious presence of the speaker (1982, 322). The iterable speech act, as it is imbued with different meanings, is not considered lesser to previous or ‘original’ speech acts. As each speech act becomes iterable and enters into new contexts, it only becomes legible as it enters into a matrix of preexisting norms and conventions, a matrix whose limits are never clearly defined.

Convention for Derrida is a “very historically sedimented notion” (1982, 323). Conventions are social constructions that become sedimented, layer upon layer, over time. Austin does not examine the constructed nature of the conventions that make speech acts intelligible. Butler’s concept of identity is drawn from Derrida’s analysis of conventionality. For Butler, identity is also a historically sedimented notion. Identity is a product of a series of reiterated acts that become sedimented over time. It is important to maintain, however, that for Butler, a sedimented identity is not a fixed identity. Butler writes: “Performativity is not a singular ‘act’ for it is always reiteration of a norm or a set of norms” (1995, 12; emphasis added). By appropriating Derridian iterability, Butler is ensuring that —despite her invocation of Austinian language— her conception of performativity is not rigidly defined. Butler’s subject is continually supplementing her own identity through the reiteration of performative speech acts and, like the virtual subject, is discursive.

With a discursive subject, there are certain risks. These risks have been taken up Butler’s critics who are wary of discursive formulations of subjectivity and concerned
that she does account for the existence of real, material bodies. Butler’s response to this critique illustrates how she is able to negotiate the simultaneous existence of a discursive subject and real, material bodies. I will now to turn to both the criticism of Butler and her subsequent response, as I believe that these preemptively address criticisms that could easily be leveled against my own argument. It also further circumnavigates the lingering tensions between reality and construction or, for the purposes of my argument, the material and the virtual.

**Defending the Discursive Subject**

Butler’s critics are primarily concerned with the pain and suffering of ‘real’ women. They argue that that there is real, material violence in the world that is being done to and on women’s bodies and a discursive understanding of bodies that aims to blur the sex/gender binary, risks obfuscating the experience of real trauma (Butler 1995). In response, Butler wrote *Bodies that Matter* to show how bodies are brought into being through performative reiterations (Butler 1997, 2). Her next book, *Excitable Speech*, addresses the relationship between material violence and discourse. Here, Butler examines the potential for trauma and pain effected by language, particularly hate speech. She wants to know whether or not words really have the ability to wound.

Discursive bodies are not abstractions of real bodies if discourse itself has the power to cause harm. If bodies are, in fact, constituted in and through discourse than one would assume that violent actions and violent languages can be viewed as being able to inflict trauma. This is immediately relevant for the present argument about the construction of cybersubjects. Cybersubjects are discursively constructed entities, which,
though intimately related to the body that animates them, are still abstractions of real bodies.

In a completely discursive realm such as the virtual, this question becomes all the more pressing because the only way to inflict pain online is through language. Many of the Facebook users I spoke to gave examples of pain that they had felt or were the cause of while online. This dissonance is reflective of a lingering cultural separation between the material and the virtual, particularly when it comes to understanding pain and trauma. Butler argues that the forceability/capacity of language to cause trauma is evident in how the law characterizes hate speech (Butler 1997, 42-63). She asks: “What [might it] mean for a word “to do” a thing […]?” (1997, 44). If the law characterizes hate speech as constative, hate speech becomes removed from the material world of action. Constatives are statements that describe the world; they do not bring into being the thing that they name. If someone utters a racial slur and that slur is considered a constative statement, they are describing the world as it is. If the slur is considered a performative speech act, then words can actually ‘do things’ in the world as opposed to merely describing. Butler argues that we still want to view language as constative, particularly when it comes to injurious speech (1997, 10-13).

Butler’s response to this criticism can be seen as occupying a middle ground between Austin and Derrida. Although I am not attempting to theorize the effects of injurious speech in socially networked space, it is important to be able to assert the existence of discursive bodies, while at the same time asserting that there are real material consequences to the creation of these bodies. To do this, I also want to adopt a view of language that is performative as opposed to constative. I want to theorize the
performative nature of written discourse in order to animate the static data body. Butler’s critics demands that she acknowledge the existence of real women’s bodies is the same criticism that cyberscholars continually have had to address. Cyberscholars aim to discuss real people without being able to prove their reality. Butler further proves the existence of the discursive subject by proving discourse’s ability to cause real harm. I now take up this precise argument and present the SN subject as also existing within this in-between space. It seems we are back to borders: the SN subject is again occupying an in-between space. I turn away from this current theoretical exegesis in order to examine how this critique emerges in online spaces. To do so, I will examine Sundén’s appropriation of performativity before I conclude with an examination of performativity on SNS.

Textual Performativity in MUDs

In the section of Material Virtualities entitled “Textual Performativity”, Sundén uses a Butlerian theory of identity to theorize the process of character creation on WaterMOO. Sundén concentrates primarily on the famous Butler assertion that “the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (Butler, quoted in Sundén 2003, 53). Sundén focuses on this citation because Butler’s thesis is, fundamentally, that ‘biological sex’ (as in male or female) is culturally constructed as naturalized truth upon which gender is constructed. In a parallel move, Sundén wants to question the material body’s role as a naturalized truth upon which the virtual body is constructed. Sundén argues that if the material body is also discursively constructed (i.e.: there is no naturalized truth) then the tension between the material and the virtual is able to be circumvented. MUD character creation is, therefore, no different from any other kind of subject-formation. To illustrate this Sundén focuses on gender selection in
WaterMOO. Gender is an iteration of a sedimented convention and only becomes intelligible as it enters into a matrix of social norms. By selecting a gender, MUD users employ language to ‘do’ their avatar’s sex.

Online gender selection is viewed as necessarily constructed and is, by necessity, contrasted to the ‘stable’ sexed identities of the actual bodies of users. In WaterMOO there is an @gender command that allows users to select their avatar’s gender. WaterMOO allows users to choose from the following gender categories: “male, female, neuter, either, Spivak⁵, splat, plural, egotistical, royal and 2nd” (Sundén 2003, 28). The proliferation of categories indicates that a user can select genders that are outside typical gender conventions; however, if one digs a little deeper it becomes clear that all of the gender commands refer to preexisting online conventions (Sundén 2003, 28). The @gender command is responsible for controlling the different pronouns that the program will use to describe a user’s character’s actions. ‘Neuter’ uses the pronoun ‘it’ and is the default position of the program. If a user does not choose a gender, they are automatically degendered or neutered. The “either” category, in contrast to the neutral ‘it’, uses s/he as a pronoun, encompassing both sides of the gender binary. Another example is the “Spivak” command that uses gender-neutral commands like “e” and “em” (Sundén 2003, 27-30). Sundén likens the @gender command to a performative. Users select a gender and by virtue of that ‘act’ they become the gender they have selected. The @gender command, “by producing the effect that it names, could fruitfully be compared to what

⁵ Although seemingly a reference to postcolonial feminist scholar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the Spivak command was developed by mathematician Michael Spivak and “they are the most simplistic if gender pronouns” (Help text from LamdaMOO as quoted by Sundén 2003, 28). People who do not want to identify with either traditional gender use the Spivak.
J.L. Austin designates a ‘performative’” (Sundén 2003, 29). The @gender command also exemplifies how language is constantly constrained by conventionality and yet there is still a choice. Sundén’s example of the @gender command illustrates how many elements of the body have to be written and performed in a virtual space. It makes clear simply “how much we take the [visible] body for granted” (boyd 2007, 12).

What is important to Sundén is how “sexed and gendered bodies are materialized through a series of reiterated acts in language” (Sundén 2003, 29; emphasis added). Every time the user logs on, the character’s selected gender becomes visible and the gendered identity is further sedimented. Bodies on WaterMOO are created through the repetition of the gendered pronoun that they have selected. As bodies become increasingly textual they come to

inhabit a symbolic universe, temporarily released from the reality of the typists. At the same time, these online bodies can never be released from the material and cultural conditions in which they are grounded, nor from those discourses of the gendered body that render them meaningful (Sundén 2003, 29-30).

Sundén is arguing that the MUD character can never be released from its tie to the material world despite inhabiting a symbolic, textually constructed universe. She is attempting to make clear the fundamental tie between the material and the virtual. The grounding of virtual bodies takes place because of the cultural conventions that make virtual bodies intelligible.

If a MUD character can never be released from the cultural conventions of the material world, imagine how closely tied SN profiles are to the material, as they claim to be honest representations of SN users. Although there are limits to the different possible genders a MUD user can choose, with Facebook the limits are even more constricted.
Users have to select either male or female. The more the online realm is anchored in the material, the more normative discourses limit the possibilities of creating a self. I am now going to compare gendered subject formation in WaterMOO, and Facebook to better illustrate the differences in cyber-subject performativity in both platforms. Hopefully, their similarities and differences will help better illustrate performative subject formation on SNS.

**Subject Performativity on Facebook**

To maintain the illusion of ‘reality’, Facebook only allows users to choose either male or female. There are no alternative gender selections available to users. Moreover, users have to choose a gender. There is no default gender available. When users sign up they immediately have to select male or female or they cannot create a profile (see Fig 2.1).

![Sign Up](image)

**Fig 2.1: Facebook sign up page**

Facebook posted on its blog that they were forcing users to select a gender because the default pronoun ‘they’ caused errors when translated into other languages. Facebook, to counter backlash from those arguing that female/male choice is too limited, promised to
allow users to opt out of selecting a gender altogether. A Facebook representative said that Facebook had “received pushback in the past from groups that find the male/female distinction too limiting” (Hefflinger 2008). Over a year later opting out is not yet an option. When I tried to set up a Facebook account I was not allowed to not select a gender.

With WaterMOO, as I illustrated in the previous chapter, there is a high level of fictionality embedded within the process of creating a character description. WaterMOO and other MUDs foster creative play in performing the self, whereas Facebook is operating under the pretense that profiles truly represent the reality of bodies. The more the virtual body is considered to be an accurate representation of a real person, the more it is a collection of reiterated norms. The reiteration of norms is the only ways we can make ourselves understood to others. Identity creation is limited by profile constraints and is clearly marked by social norms and conventions. Because Facebook does not allow much room for creative play, the only way that bodies can become visible is through perpetually referring to social norms as identity markers. In a distilled version of self, the only thing that is left is convention. A SN identity is a simply a collection of sedimented social norms.
The Sedimented Subject on SNS

Sundén wants to demonstrate “how the construction and enactments of characters can never be as conscious and free as they might seem” (Sundén 2003, 54). Characters are not free from dominant discourses and the circulation of norms affect character construction on WaterMOO. Sundén’s project is to counter the dominant view of the late 1990s and early 2000s that the Internet was an ideal place removed from the racisms and sexisms of the ‘real’ world (Boler 2007; Nakamura 2000, 1998). Early Internet theorists believed that “access to cyberspace [would] break down ethnic and racial differences” (Nakamura 1998, 255) and would be able to reduce bodies to “just minds” (Nakamura 1998, 255). As theorist Lisa Nakamura argues “the technological utopia of difference” (1998, 263) is another myth that aims to reinscribe traditional modes of “Othering”.

The unavoidability of social norms is even more evident with Facebook, as SNS aim to ensure that users stay tethered to the material world. Users are choosing to adopt online selves that are constrained by conventionality so that they can be intelligible to other users, instead of embracing the potential for a more flexible portrayal of self. An obvious example is the comparison between the gender choices available to WaterMOO users and Facebook users. Because Facebook profiles aim to be ‘real’ portrayals of its users, the naturalized male/female binary emerges as the only possible selection for gender.

For Butler, the normative social constraints imposed on the potentialities of character construction are neither final nor opposed to agency and are always open to reinscription in new ways, as Sundén reiterates: “The construction of the subject is never final, and its subversive potential lies in the ways norms can performed in new
directions” (Sundén 54, 2003). This is why making ourselves iterable is so risky. We open ourselves up to new points of subversion while allowing others to perform and reiterate aspects of ourselves beyond our control. Recall the Facebook user agreement from the previous section:

[Users] grant, to the Company an irrevocable, perpetual, non-exclusive, transferable, fully paid, worldwide license (with the right to sublicense) to use, copy, publicly perform, publicly display, reformat, translate, excerpt (in whole or in part) and distribute such User Content for any purpose.

Users are transforming their bodies into an iterable speech acts. Profiles are not a collection of static texts, but are animated through a textual performativity whose contextual parameters are not set by the subject.

Performativity as a framework helps to elucidate what it means to create discursive versions of our selves. Despite the potential for agency on SNS, the reiteration of cultural norms is, for the most part, the rule when it comes to the formation of cyber-subjects. Most users simply like to do quizzes and send each other virtual cocktails. Moreover, there is nothing wrong with these kinds of practices. I want to stress that I am not criticizing practices that are pleasurable to most users. Rather, my point is that there are material consequences to online actions and that cybersubjectivity does not occur outside of a relationship to the material.

As Butler argues in Bodies that Matter, performativity is not a singular act but a “reiterative or citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names” (Butler, 1993). As users post updates, do quizzes, add links, and communicate with others, they are constructing an online, sedimented identity, the layers of which are immediately visible. Every time a user makes a change to their profile it is flagged in the
public news feed and recorded. Identities are formed by the citation of cultural norms that become sedimented over time.

What SN profiles do is make the layers of performative sedimentation visible. Each iteration of self is immediately visible to other users. As I have argued, simply examining cyber-subjectivity in terms of a dramaturgical performance does not account for the ways in which cultural conventions and norms make textual selves intelligible to other users. Furthermore, SN users often invoke cultural conventions and stereotypes so that they can feel more included. All of this does not occur the moment a user signs up for an account but rather is a slow, sedimentation process that occurs over time.

**Conclusion: Sedimentation, Archive and Self-Curation**

In this chapter I illustrated the temporal nature of cybersubjectivity. Each online speech act is not a discrete unit of communication but part of a greater, sedimented whole. By focusing on Austin’s speech act theory, I examined how language can ‘do’ things in a virtual space. I further investigated the discursive nature of Austin’s ‘performative’. Butler’s reconfiguring of the ‘performative’ brings to light how subjects are constituted through a series of reiterated and discursive speech acts.

Butler’s subject is constituted in resistance to a sex/gender binary. For Butler, ‘biological sex’ is construction and this allows her to move beyond our culturally sedimented sex/gender binary. Sundén constructs her subject as also resistant to the material/virtual binary. Although contemporary SN theorists never explicitly address the lingering material/virtual binary, I believe that is still a salient feature of any theory of cyber-subjectivity. For this pivotal reason, I have recreated Butler’s argument. I brought out the temporal nature of cyber-subjectivity on SN as I examined both Sundén’s and
Butler’s arguments. There are three functions of temporality crucial to cyber-subjectivity on SNS. The first is the nature of SN communication. Users communicate across time and space by posting messages on each other’s walls that are meant to be read a later date. The second is fundamental to the communicative utterance. It always transcends its historical moment by entering into preexisting matrix of social norms in order to become intelligible. The final function is the sedimented nature of SN identity. It is a collection of reiterated performatives that become intelligible over time.

In the next chapter, I examine the temporal sedimentation process of identity on SNS more closely. Facebook has a “News Feed” feature, where profile changes are flagged and made public. As users modify their online identities, these modifications are made evident and are archived in the news feed. Identity formation is a temporal process, as a subject’s history is brought into the present through their different performances of self. Facebook profiles are in many ways personal identity ‘archives’ that are ‘curated’ and ‘exhibited’ by SN users.

As more and more of our selves are being recorded and made public, our identities are becoming increasingly externalized. In *Archive Fever* (1996), Derrida examines archive as a fundamentally iterative and citational practice. Moreover, he argues that to archive is a kind of performance. He asks of archiving: “Why archive this? Why these investments in paper, in ink, in characters? […] Does this merit printing? Aren’t these stories to be had everywhere?” (Derrida 1996, 9). These same questions can be asked of SN users. Why archive yourself? Why do you feel you merit printing, merit public remembrance? By consigning their identities in external place, SN users are assuring the “possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of
reimpression” (Derrida 1996, 11-12) of their selves. User identities can be performed outside of the social contexts of the original performative or utterance. This emphasizes how speech acts can exceed their own temporality.

I examine the implications of the externalization of identity through the lens of the archive. I am primarily going to examine this phenomena using Derrida’s *Archive Fever* as a guide to theorize virtuality and the archive. Archive fever, for Derrida, “accumulates so many sedimented archives” (Derrida 1996, 20); each layer of which “seems to gape slightly” (Derrida 1996, 20) so that we can catch fleeting glimpses of what is underneath. This last chapter will prove to be the final layer of a multi-faceted understanding of cyber-subjectivity on SNS.
Chapter 3

“There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without an outside”

-Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

*Introduction*

The two previous chapters have been animated by a series of tensions: the material and the virtual, speech and writing, and sex and gender. On the one side of each dichotomy is the oft-idealized 'original'; on the other is the oft-maligned constructed 'copy'. These tensions mirror the primordial tension between memory and construction, or as Derrida terms it in *Archive Fever*, live memory and external memory (1996, 35). Live memory is the irreproducible moment of the occurrence of an event, while external memory is the event mediated through technology so that it can be reproduced. External memories are the “memory-traces of external events” (Freud as cited by Derrida 1996, 35) that have been preserved on an “external substrate” (Derrida 1996, 8). The event, through mediation, becomes iterable beyond the spatial-temporal limits of its one moment of existence. Memory needs to be externalized or the event is forgotten; however, externally remembered memories are always representation.

Sundén tries to circumvent the tension between the material and the virtual by theorizing a borderspace where the natural (the material body) and constructed (the virtual body) are so blurred that they are virtually indistinguishable. Butler’s assertion, “[biological] sex does not exist” does the same work to destabilize these entrenched binaries. By asserting, “[biological] sex does not exist”, Butler attempts to bypass the traditional sex/gender (nature/construction) binary completely. By critiquing Austin’s
speech act theory, Derrida tries to unsettle speech’s role as naturalized in the speech/writing binary by claiming that writing can be extended to all experience. This claim allows Derrida to transcend the speech/writing binary completely, in the same manner that Butler’s aims to transcend gender and Sundén aims to destabilize the boundaries between the material and the virtual. All three theorists are asserting, in some sense, that if all experience is mediated and predicated on a system of differences, we do not need to search for origins.

These same tensions also appeared, in their own way, in the various conversations I had with Facebook users. Many acknowledge that their profiles are somehow separate or less-than in relation to their ‘real’ selves. The Facebook self is a self that is textually performed, thus mediated, and recorded in an external space. A user's material body is the privileged original.

As more and more elements of our selves are being recorded, preserved and consigned on an external substrate, questions about externality, memory, identity and virtuality are becoming increasingly pressing. Ideally, the elements of a SN ‘identity archive’ (profile) work best when viewed as a whole. Derrida writes: “Consignation aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida 1996 3; emphasis added). Corpus being Latin for body refers to a collection of written texts (COD 2004) that are usually collected under some overarching theme. In the first chapter I discussed the body and how it becomes textualized. In the second chapter I examined some of the ways in which language allows bodies to ‘do’ things. In this chapter I am looking at the collection of
texts that are archived in an external space that constitute the textualized body. The ‘body’ of texts collected in a SN profile is our embodied self online.

Derrida foreshadows these concerns in *Archive Fever*, where he asks: “what happens [to archive] in virtual space and time?” (1996, 66). An archived event is mediated through an external technology and has been placed on an external substrate so that it can be preserved. Virtual events will require us, according to Derrida, to “abandon or restructure from top to bottom our inherited concept of the archive” (1996, 67) that has traditionally been one of static privilege. What I mean by this is that, traditionally, archive has been defined as a “repository or ordered system of documents” that serves as the “foundation from which history is written” (Merewether 2006, 10). Once texts are placed in the archive, they are permanently conferred with archive’s privilege. Moreover, until recently, there has been “no thinkable archive for the virtual” (Derrida 1996, 67).

Derrida is not claiming to completely rethink the archive in terms of virtual text. What he does claim, nonetheless, is that the time has come to “abandon our […] inherited concept of the archive (1996, 67). While Derrida is not necessarily using ‘virtual’ in the exact same sense that I have, he does acknowledge digital technologies present an “archival earthquake” (Derrida 1996, 16) whose aftershocks will forever change the role of the archive.

Not only is archive the place where past events are stored but “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and its relationship to the future” (Derrida 1996, 17; emphasis original). What happens when our very identities becomes the content of the archiving archive? The Internet is clearly the world's biggest archive; its technical
structure has revolutionized the structure of archivable text. Never before has the ability to make private texts public through archiving been so widely available. A SN profile is in many ways an identity archive through which users make certain aspects of themselves public. SNS are one of the most popular online destinations (Hartgai 2007; Lenhart 20007; 2009) among all Internet users. Clearly, Internet users want to externalize and preserve aspects of their selves so that they can enter into virtual conversations with other users. I am not making any claims, as others have, about this obsessive process of producing and consuming identity as being inherently narcissistic (Buffardi & Campbell 2008). What I am concerned with is the philosophical implications of creating external identities.

In the previous two chapters, I addressed both what it means to write the self and perform the self in virtual space. Textualization brings the virtual self into being, while performativity animates otherwise static text. I believe that there is a third dimension that needs to be added to those two terms: archiving and/or curating the self.

_Digital Revolution in the Archive_

SN users are selecting elements of their identities that they record and store externally so that other users can visit their public identity ‘collections’ or ‘exhibitions’. Derrida writes that digital technologies emerging in the mid-nineties “[are] on the way to transforming the entire public and private space” (1996, 17). As Derrida accurately foreshadowed in 1996, the first traditional limit that is being transformed by digital technology is the limit of the private and the public (17). Through a process of textuality and performativity, users can make their private selves public as they create external
profiles that house collected aspects of their identities. The private to public transition does not simply consist of taking an object out of its hiding place and making it available to others; it also means releasing possession of an object so that it becomes part of public memory. An archived object is made institutionally public (Derrida 1996). What this means is that the archived object becomes imbued with an institutional power that asserts its importance through the process of archiving. According to a recent New York Times article, one of the major appeals of using SNS is the constant updating and information sharing, which makes users feel like celebrities. NYT Journalist Allen Salkin quotes one user in his article as saying that on Facebook, “[y]ou have movie star issues, and you’re just a person” (2009). By making aspects of self publicly iterable through the creation of an external, textualized version of their selves, SN users are trying to assert their own cultural importance. They are attempting to imbue their virtual selves with the institutional power of the archive as they make themselves publicly iterable. At the same time, users must sacrifice the ability to control the difference contexts in which their archived selves appear.

Profile creation is a process of making previously private elements of a user’s identity immediately perceptible to others. Archive is defined as the act of making the private public through the placing of text on an external substrate. A profile is, in this sense, an identity archive. Derrida defines archive as a process of domiciliation or “house arrest” (1996, 2) of texts that allows a text to pass from “the private to the public” (1996, 2). An archive is distinct from a “collection or library” (Merewether 2006, 10) in that it serves as the basis for historical remembrance. Societies gather together a collection of
texts that they transform into historical monuments through the process of archiving (Foucault 2006).

To better illustrate what I mean by 'curating the self' and 'identity archive', I am going to begin at the beginning of the archive, as Derrida does in Archive Fever. Derrida begins by examining the process of externalizing text, or assigning text a dwelling place. The text that has been placed in a privileged space is considered the original while its copies are free to circulate in new contexts. This presents an obvious difficulty when theorizing the virtual identity archive. The original is kept secret while the copy is archived. Derrida was correct in asserting that digital technology would transform the function of archive. He writes that digital technology (specifically email) “is on the way to transforming the entire public and private space of humanity” (1996, 38).

The Domiciliation of Text: Turning the Private Home into Public Space

Archive, by its very definition, implies an external, topological privileging of text. Texts need to be place in a privileged space (the archive) in order to be considered ‘archived’. This space is what Derrida terms the archival “dwelling place where they dwell permanently” (1996, 2). Through a process of domiciliation, texts are “institutionally” shifted from the private sphere to the public social sphere (Derrida 1996, 2-3). This “domiciliation” or “house arrest” of text is where our contemporary understanding of archive begins (Derrida 1996, 2).

Once text has been given a permanent dwelling place, it becomes marked by an “institutional passage from the private to the public” (Derrida 1996, 3). In this private turned public dwelling place texts are classified into archive “by virtue of a privileged
This topology creates a set whose rules of selection are pre-decided. Texts are privileged above other texts and are spatially separated. What is archived is deemed important to our collective memory as opposed to what is not archived or intentionally forgotten. As we gain the technology to increasingly archive more and more events, we expand the possible limits of the archival substrate in which we can house texts.

SN profiles function, at least technically, in the same manner. Private aspects of the self are made public as users fill in SN profile data fields. By creating a profile, SN users are privileging certain elements of their selves by placing them on an external substrate. Users are choosing which parts of their identity they want to take from the private realm to make public. SN users assert their own originality by creating virtual versions (copies) of their selves. Users are archiving the virtual copy in an external space. The copy is housed in the archive while the original is kept private. SN theorist danah boyd quotes a teenage MySpace user as saying "if you don't exist online, you don't exist at all" (2007, 1). The existence of a virtual copy asserts the lasting existence of an original. Without the presence of a copy, how can the original exist as original? Users, however, are archiving the copy while the original remains hidden from public view. They are keeping their ‘real’ selves private and making their virtual (copied) selves public. Derrida was correct in foreshadowing an upheaval in archival practices in the aftermath of the rise of digital technologies. The copy and original are perpetually shifting places. Archivization does not assure originality of text; the digital archive is populated with copies. Moreover, the archived copy—the SN profile—lasts beyond the death and disappearance of the original.
**Ghosts in the Machine: the Archival Death Drive**

Derrida argues that the archival drive is inextricable from the “possibility of forgetfulness” (Derrida 1996, 19). Without the ever-present threat of death, “there is no archive fever” (Derrida 1996, 19). The drive to externalize memories is powered by the finitude of memory itself. If we could always be present to tell our own stories, there would be no need to inscribe and house memories. Because of our “radical finitude” (Derrida 1996, 19) there is a perpetual need to archive.

By housing elements of their selves in an external space, SN users are preparing to live beyond their own deaths, whether that be the temporary death of the user that occurs when she steps away from the screen or her actual physical death. Users want to assert that they did not die while offline by posting as many updates as possible. With each new update each user is really saying: “Hey! I am back. When I disappeared, it was only temporary.” The user is thus able to combat the “in-finite threat” (Derrida 1996, 2; emphasis original) of forgetting. The constant updating of a user’s status indicates just how intimately tied SN profiles are to the user’s body. Users have to update infinitely to combat their own encroaching deaths. It is “the destruction of memory makes that the archive necessary” (Creet 2003). Many profiles consist of a stream of posts that indicate where users have been or where they are going. Each update is an assurance that the user did not die while offline. Each post is an assertion of the user’s continued existence.

Because of this tether to the offline sphere, there are an increasing number of Facebook users who are becoming concerned with what will happen to their Facebook profiles after they die. Unlike with a MUD avatar, SN profiles are stand-ins or copies of the user. Many users are more familiar with a friend’s profile than they are with the
actual person. One Facebook user I spoke to said that although she ‘knew’ all of her friends in an offline capacity, many of them she had not seen since she was a child. She said that without their profile picture, she would not be able to recognize them. SN users develop a genuine, affective tie to the profile. A textual version of a user is as real as the actual material body of that person. For many, the copy is the only version of the user they are familiar with. SN profiles, like other practices of creating an embodied self, allow users to indulge the in the illusion that they will survive beyond their deaths. Users want to believe that they are part of the archive. In essence, we all want to believe that we part of the “foundation from which history is written” (Merewether 2006, 10). What happens, then, when more and more people are able to live beyond their own deaths through the infinite process of archiving of self?

Although the question of what happens to the traces of our online selves after we die is not new (Ward 2004), because so many Internet users have SN profiles it is becoming an increasingly disturbing issue. One blogger writes:

> The functionality of Facebook has allowed people to document their daily rituals and their entire adult lives on Facebook. A perfect autobiography of sorts. Pictures, comments, reactions, friends, family, personality, random thoughts... etc. It seems a shame to get rid of it, but morbid to keep it (Bouchard 2009).

The uncomfortable feeling associated with the existence of profiles beyond the death of the user illustrates just how intimately the body and the profile are connected. The archival drive is the unquenchable desire to record everything so that it can persist

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6 One blogger, in particular, illustrated the often disturbing nature of the relationship between the material and the virtual body. “Akuma Prime” created a year’s worth of posts so that his blog would be updated after he committed suicide. His case illustrates just how intimately tied users are to their different virtual iterations of self (www.akumaprime.com).
beyond our deaths. This creates an inherent “uncanniness” (Creet 2003) that lurks behind the preserved document. Furthermore, creating an archive of our own identities is, in its own way, also a kind of being-toward-death or erasure of self. The ephemerality of memory makes that the archive necessary. With a SN profile, unlike the traditional archive, it is the copy that is archived on an external substrate and not the original. The original offers itself up for erasure. The copy is what lives on in the archive.

According to early media theorist Walter Benjamin (1968), the original maintains its originality through the preservation of its aura. The aura is the material history of the original. The material history of the original is only maintained through its archiving. The aura of the original is the “unique existence of the work of art [determined by] the history to which it was subject to throughout the time of its existence” (Benjamin 1968, 220). If aura is what separates the copy from the original, the more we archive our histories on external virtual substrate, the more we risk destroying our own originality/aura. Perhaps this is what Derrida means when he argues that that the archive drive parallels the death drive. Perhaps archivization is simultaneously a conservation drive and the drive to destroy. Archivization “produces the very thing it reduces, on occasion to ashes” (Derrida 1996, 94). When everything is archived, the original is destroyed.

Benjamin argues that before the advent of mechanical reproduction there was no need to focus on aura, as the copy posed no threat to the diminishment of the original. Hand-made copies are obvious copies, whereas a mechanically reproduced copy is only differentiated from the original by its aura. The original must be archived for its aura to be preserved so that the copy can circulate and enter into new contexts. The copy is always ready to be transformed into an original through archive. To better illustrate the
relationship between original and copy in the next section I draw on Benjamin's conception of aura to theorize the implications of creating copies of our selves. What happens to our own auras as we further create textual versions of ourselves?

*The Aura of the SN User*

The original/copy relationship is one that mirrors the tension between the material and the virtual. The original is the naturalized truth upon which the copy is constructed. Walter Benjamin examines this tension in the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1968). Reproduction, for Benjamin, no matter how perfect, lacks one crucial element: the original’s “presence in time and space” (Benjamin 1968, 220). As copies proliferate, circulate, and enter into new contexts, the domicile of the original is the one point in time and space that the copy cannot occupy. The original must be kept separate and safe as the “presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin 1968, 220). Copies circulate and enter into contexts that “would be out of reach for the original itself” (Benjamin 1968, 220). These new contexts, although never actually touching the original work of art, serve to depreciate “the quality of its presence” (1968, 221). The historical testimony of the original is lost in the proliferation of copies, and it is this thing that is lost that that Benjamin terms as the “aura” of the original (1968, 221). Thus, despite the potential disappearance of all the “material differences” (Groys, 2003, 97) between the copy and the original, one invisible difference remains: the aura (Groys, 2003, 97).

The difference between the original and its copy, for Benjamin, is “exclusively topological” (Groys 2003, 99). The original occupies a specific location. Most often this
location is some kind of archival dwelling place. A text that is kept private never enters into public memory. An archived text, conversely, has been deemed important enough to expend energy on its preservation. Through its connection to its external substrate, the original is granted a privileged place in history: “[t]he uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (Benjamin 1968, 223).

The only difference between the ‘original’ and ‘copy’ according to Benjamin is that one is archived while the other circulates into new contexts. “[I]f the distinction between the original and the copy is only topological” (Groys 2003, 99) then the copy is always ready to be made into an original and vice versa.

Benjamin argues that as the masses crave spatial proximity to the original, copies become preferred to the original. The original remains hidden in the archive because the copy is easier to access. The masses, in their fervor to close this spatial gap become “ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (Benjamin 1968, 223). The art consumer wants it delivered to her doorstep —“When one goes to a work of art, it is an original. When one forces the work of art to come to oneself, it is a copy” (Groys 2003). The SN user creates a profile that enables a carefully curated version of her self to travel into new contexts that were previously unavailable to her. By doing this she is creating a ‘copies’ of herself so that she can enter into new contextual topologies. Conversely, the SN user does not physically need to be present for a user to visit their profile. SN users go to another user’s profile web address to wander through their profile exhibits. The profile may be a copy but because other users visit the profile, it also takes the place of the original. This illustrates how the
‘copy’ and ‘original’ are continuously interchangeable and that how rules of the virtual archive are perpetually being rewritten.

SN profiles allow the user to stay in touch with friends that hitherto would have simply drifted in and out of her life. Many of the Facebook users I spoke to said that they initially created their own profiles so that they could see what had become of people from their past. Facebook allows users to maintain friendships with people from across the different times and spaces of their life. The profile is preferred to the ‘original’ because many of the newly reestablished online friendships only ever occur as an interaction with the profile. SN users maintain profile-profile relationships because these are people who have not seen each for years. These are people who would not even recognize each other where it not for the Facebook profile picture. Many users have moved away from their hometowns and they have rekindled childhood friendships through Facebook. When the only real life connection to someone is a childhood memory, the profile becomes the focus of the relationship. The ‘consumer’ of the virtually sustained relationship wants the relationship delivered to their doorstep. Because “[i]t is distance alone, […] that makes a work of art an original”, when that distance is negated “by ordering a work of art to be delivered to one’s door, it shows that work to be […] a copy” (Groys 2003, 99). SN users are forcing copies of other users to come to them while at the same time they are also actively visiting another user’s identity archive. The contradiction lies in the fact that, through a process of topological privileging and domiciliation, the profile is archived and the creator of the profile occupies the contradictory role of being both the author of the copy and the original. The original (the material body of the user) is made into a
(temporary) copy when other SN users ‘visit’ the SN profile. Yet it is the original that can never escape being marked by the signature of the author (the temporary copy).

Although the terms ‘copy’, ‘original’, and ‘aura’ capture some of the dynamics of the relationship between self and profile, there is something else occurring beyond the simple creation of a copy. Benjamin concludes his essay on mechanical reproduction with an extremely optimistic view about the potential of reproduction to “democratize culture and art” (Agger 2004, 151). Archiving or the preservation of the aura of the original ensures that art is only available to the few instead of the many. Although the SN user may have to sacrifice her aura in order to enter new contexts, the opening up and proliferation of archives leads to new, more ‘democratic’ conceptions of memory. What is remembered is decided, not by the few but by the many.

SN users are gathering together a collection of signs that they feel represent their identity and are displaying these collections in a (semi)public space. These signs are not simply filled in data fields but are also all their wall-to-wall conversations, their photos, the quizzes that they take and the games that they play. Whatever the content of the archive, it is user decided (to a point)⁷. Even their friends are part of the exhibit. Every profile displays all of a user’s friends. Also, as friends post photos of other users and comment on other users’ walls, a user’s friends further contribute to the curation process. Profiles become dynamic exhibitions where the process of curation is constant much like the process of supplementation. The profile is an identity archive that users perpetually change and update (supplement), like a curator. Users are gathering together different images, videos, and texts that they feel represent their identity.

⁷ The content is user decided to a point and I will get to that point shortly.
It is precisely this *exteriority*, this ‘outside of the individual’ that is of paramount importance to understanding the logic of online self-curation. Any kind of archive becomes prosthetic to our memory function. More importantly, embedded within this externalization is an assurance of the “possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression” (Derrida 1996, 11). If online identity is a product of archivization, then what does it mean for identity to be reproduced and repeated continually in an external space that is prosthetic to ourselves? Moreover, what is this archive of self made up of? More than simply a collection of “iterable graphic marks” (Derrida 1996, 12), the identity archive consists of all of the elements that I have discussed previously. It is a collection of convention and social norms. It is a wholly discursive self. The previous chapters have led up to the following question: If, in order for an object to be archived it must possess the ability to be preserved, how do we then archive our *bodies*?

*Consignation: the Topology of the Identity Archive*

Derrida focuses on archive as a space for what he terms as external consignation. Much like Derrida’s entire conceptual framework, consignation has a double meaning: assigning something to a dwelling place (the inert archive) and also “the act of consigning through the gathering together of signs” (Derrida 1996, 3; emphasis original). While SN users are assigning text a dwelling place (i.e., a web address) they are also gathering together a set of both original and copied texts that they feel represent their identity. Hugo Liu calls this collection of signs on a SN profile ‘taste performance’ (2007). Mackenzie Wark famously calls all of our external performances our “wardrobe
of signs” (1997). Whatever the terminology, it amounts to a subject consciously selecting aspects of her self to exhibit to others. Like a museum, each profile has a theme. The theme is the user’s name. My name, Kelly Ladd, becomes the overarching theme of my profile exhibit. I collect images, videos, and bits of text under the rubric of Kelly Ladd. I consign the bits and pieces of myself that I deem important enough to be archived to an external space beyond my body. This collection circulates into new contexts, new moments in space and time that have previously existed beyond my reach.

Recall that the “consignations aims to coordinate a single corpus” (Derrida 1996, 3). It is SN users who coordinate their own online corpus/bodies. They decide what aspects of their selves are to be made public. The order of the archive, how and what is archived, is an intensely powerful function “of unification, of identification, of classification” (Derrida 1996, 3). The power embedded within the archive is the archontic function of archiving, which is always paired with consignation (Derrida 1996, 3). When gathering together texts to create a body that represents a theme, how does one select which texts to archive and which to discard? There is a secret institutional power that lurks in the process of consignation, much like in the process of externalization. Once a text is consigned to an archive it is externalized and is deemed to be part of history. This is the institutional power of the archive: the power to decide what is worth remembering and what should be forgotten. Derrida asks the following of the process of gathering together signs under a single corpus:

What comes under theory or under private correspondence, for example? What comes under system? under biography or autobiography? […] In each of these cases, the limits the borders, and the distinctions have been shaken by an earthquake, from which no classificational concept and no
Derrida argues that the limits of the archive, what is in and what is out, are often declared “insurmountable” (Derrida 1996, 4). What this means is that the order of the archive is never questioned, when in reality these limits are never assured. Also, if Derrida’s argument is that everything is text then by extension, everything is archivable. There are no limits to the archive.

Archive fixes text in a place of externalized privilege. Archives are mutable and dynamic, can get bigger, smaller or be destroyed completely. Usually they are established after the death of the author. Derrida uses the example of Freud’s last home to illustrate the transformation of domestic space into archival space. The Freud museum was established after Freud’s death. After Freud’s death Derrida wants to ascertain what is happening when “a house, the Freud’s last house, becomes a museum” (1996, 3). For Derrida this indicates the “passage from one institution to another” (1996, 3). This passage mirrors the transition from the material to the virtual or from speech to writing.

When the subject no longer fills the space of their name with their body, that space is filled in by the texts that they have left behind. As important as the consigning of signs to an external substrate, is the order in which these signs are collected. The order of the archive is its topology. SN users possess an archontic power over their own identities as they organize its constituent parts. As the Facebook User Agreement indicates, however, identity archives are reproducible ‘in whole’ or ‘in part’. Like with any museum exhibit, although the curator decides how the whole exhibit works together, we
can focus on one element of the archive or its entirety. The curator has no control over
how the exhibit is received.

The SN user decides the categories of the archive, within given parameters of
course. Users fill-in prescribed text boxes with text of their choosing and these texts form
the skeletal core of their archive. Users can select whether to fill-in all the available fields
or just a few. For some users I spoke to, their identity archive is a bare-bones version of
their offline selves (see Fig 3.1) while others try and fill-in as much as possible (see Fig
3.2).

![Fig 3.1: Profile with very few data fields](image1)

![Fig. 3.2: Detailed profile](image2)

The text boxes in the “info” section of the profile are more of a taste performance or
exhibition than a dynamic archive. Because the categories are non-negotiable, for a
certain section of their profile, users have to sacrifice the archontic power that determines
the categorical boundaries of the archive. Users can choose to omit certain data fields but
they can never add data fields off their own choosing. Unlike with a MUD character or even a personal web page, SN profiles require that all users maintain a certain level of uniformity. While SN users have the opportunity to externalize their selves so that they can be present beyond their own bodies, the topology of the SN archive is, in many ways, predetermined.

Archived texts are always transcriptions of live memory: “[e]verything begins with reproduction” (1978, 211). Archive indicates an externalized memory that comes to occupy the tenuous position of “original”. With SN the profile is always ready to take place of the original. In the user/profile dynamic, it is not the original/material user that is being archived but the copy created by the user. Moreover, it is reductive to even call the SN profile a copy of the original. The copy/original labeling maintains the same underlying dichotomy between the material and the virtual that I have been attempting to circumvent for the past eighty or so pages. Like the different binaries that have animated this thesis (speech and writing, sex and gender, and the material and the virtual), the tension between the original and the copy is another binary that animates cyber-subject formation on SN.

Now that the role of the archive has been inverted, the limits that have always kept the original and the copy separate are slowly dissolving. As Derrida argues, digital technologies have led to an upheaval in the function of the archive. Just as quickly as the original becomes a copy, the original regains its place as original. In virtual spaces the original and the copy can coexist simultaneously. The user and their profile occupy both positions as copy and original. What is happening is best described by Baudrillard in 

*Simulacra and Simulations*, he argues that the real can be reproduced infinite times
because the sovereign difference between the real and the simulation no longer exists (1994, 3).

*Risky Archive: Confession and Self-Sacrifice*

An example of the disappearance of the sovereign difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘simulation’ on SN is the perpetual updating of a user’s status. As blogger Scott Bouchard articulates, profiles allow users to document their daily lives in virtual real-time. A documentation that is a simulacrum or ‘copy’ of the real event outlasts the event itself and thus becomes the only documentation that testifies to an event having occurred. As more users have mobile devices, users are increasingly describing what they are doing as opposed to what they have done. Information that was previously the domain of the private sphere (i.e.: I am having lunch) is becoming public and being recorded. The more users expose of their private-selves, the more they are seen to exist in virtual space. Users are rewarded for their participation by being invited to more events and receiving more friend requests.

In SNS the perceived rewards mask the constant barrage of information solicitation. Information that once gathered is, arguably, the Internet’s most valuable commodity. This information economy requires an information archive be maintained. Examples of this are the tracking cookies that enable unsolicited pop-up ads to appear on a user’s screen that are tailored over a long period of time to a user’s surfing habits or the Amazon book suggestions based on the purchasing habits of other users with similar tastes. Consumers are thus *rewarded* for confessing their likes and dislikes by being surrounded by what is familiar. Those who opt out are punished by having to deal with unfamiliar commodities.
Transgressive behaviours that aim to test the limits of norms are automatically dissuaded since they lead to the unknown, the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable. If a user lies or presents an alternative self, they become less searchable and are thus excluded from potential friends groups. Moreover, the ‘suggestions’ of products to buy, groups to join or friends to add, will not correspond to their actual tastes. The image below is an example of a suggestion based on a user’s profile information (Fig. 3.3).

![Facebook suggestion based on profile information](image)

Fig. 3.3: Facebook suggestion based on profile information

CMC, once heralded as the precursor to a new democratic age, is therefore an automated form of confession in which users willingly convert their body into text or data fields that enter into an economy of information working in a feedback loop: the more we confess the more we need to confess to maintain the status quo. Users’ preferences are fed back to them in different guises allowing the user to consume more of the same (Elmer 2003), comfort in one’s surroundings being the ultimate reward.

These choices –this data *archive*– is as much representative of identity as a self-authored web page. Once a body is willingly transformed into text so that it can be archived and made public, it enters into an economy where is it given value and thus it is circulated, linked to, and in many cases, consumed. The data body is a by-product of the externalization and self-curation of identity. The more information we make public, the more exposed we become.
Conclusion

The virtual archive allows us to be curators and consumers at the same time. Through the continual process of archival coming into being and consumption, copies are continually made into originals. Texts, however, do not become fixed in their archival domicile but are always open to supplementation. Each supplement becomes a part of an archival whole and is made visible as a sedimented layer of identity. Every edit or add-on is another aspect of the curatorial process beyond the simple gathering together of signs. The process of supplementarity and the sedimented layers of our identities that are inextricable from any identity formation are simply made more visible. Each layer is transformed into text and displayed.

Despite the risk that I outlined in the previous section (the SN profile as form of perfected automated confession) I believe that the opening up of archive has the potential to democratize the “foundation from which history is written” (Merewether 2006, 10). Archontic power is an elitist power and, although we may have to sacrifice our aura in the process, the foundations upon which cultural history is built are fundamentally changing. Although Facebook profiles may appear narcissistic and pedantic, there are many users who link to witty and insightful blog posts and who want to record all manner of thoughts and writings. One user I spoke to uses the photo album function on Facebook to exhibit her art pieces (Fig 3.4).
Fig 3.4: Painting in a Facebook exhibit entitled “Cut-Outs”

However, if I am to follow my own argument to its logical conclusion, I should not be making a distinction between the SN profile used to exhibit art and the SN profile used to send a friend a virtual cocktail or sandwich (Fig 3.4).

Fig. 3.5: Virtual gifts sent to a Facebook user

It is easy to adopt early social theorist Theodor Adorno’s view of mechanical reproduction instead of Benjamin’s, by arguing that it leads to a “moronic and stupefied” popular culture that is defined by its “eternal sameness” (Adorno 1975, 14). I would like to adopt Benjamin’s more sanguine take on the proliferation of copies by asserting that it is inherently positive. To negate archontic, institutional power, archive must be open to all manner of texts, despite the risks implicated in expanding the limits of archive and the risk of creating a perfected form of automated confession or nullifying culture. Both a painting and a virtual sandwich become part of a user’s identity, an identity that persists long after the user has logged off. The implications of
identity archives lie in the fact that identities are preserved long after the user has logged off or, more morbidly, beyond the death of user.
In this thesis, I divided the process of creating a SN persona into three distinct functions: writing, performativity, and curation. Writing brings the embodied, virtual self into being. More than the physical act of typing, writing implies a construction of self that is both separate from and part of the ‘I’ writing. The main distinction that I want to highlight between writing a MUD character description and a SN profile is that the former makes no claims about its realism while the latter attempts to obfuscate its constructed origins. Embedded throughout this discussion has also been an attempt to transcend the material/virtual tensions by likening it to tensions that have traditionally animated philosophy. Each chapter grappled with circumventing its own tension: the first was the tension between speech and writing, the second chapter addressed the tension between sex and gender, and the last chapter dealt with the tension between live memory and external memory or reality and representation.

To illustrate the constructed nature of the SN profile, I used a Derridian framework to theorize the process of writing a socially networked self into being. I focused on three, interrelated Derridian terms: signature, supplement and iterability. The signature is the space between the ‘I’ writing and the written ‘I’. As users write themselves into being, they are both the product of their own writing and the origin of that written mark. Both the user and the profile stand in between the virtual and material. The profile is the constructed discursive self created by the user to interact with other users. The user writes the SN profile. The SN profile, however, also writes the user. Moreover, other users, by posting pictures of their friends and commenting on their
friends’ walls, are contributing to the discursive process that creates online selves.

Through the written interactions between users, virtual selves are brought into being. As users interact with one another, these interactions seamlessly move the virtual into the material and vice versa. Through writing and a process of continual supplementation, the user can create a self that stands in between both the material and the virtual and, in many ways, becomes indistinguishable from who they are. The profile and the user are becoming increasingly difficult to tell apart.

Writing the self into being also creates an iterable form of self. Although users are continually connected to their profiles, their profiles are also replicable outside of the user’s field of presence. I illustrated the iterability of the SN profile with the different images I chose as examples. Although every user gave permission for me to use images from their profiles, they had no idea which image nor how I would use it. I wanted to replicate the iterability of the data body that lies beyond the control of the user.

After my discussion of writing the self, I turned to Butler’s conception of performativity. I used performativity to attempt to answer a question that has lurked at the edges of my project since I began to theorize cyber-subjectivity on SNS: how does the static written self become animated through language? For contemporary SN theorists, the dynamic aspects of the SN profile stem from it being a kind of theatrical performance and to an extent, I agree with this assessment. But as philosophy of education scholar Claudia Ruitenberg argues, anyone who theorizes subjectivity simply in terms of theatrical performance is missing out on the rich philosophical possibilities of Butler’s work (2007). Taking heed, I attempted to trace some of the genealogical lines of force that animate Butler’s argument. I approached Butler this way in order to emphasize
the postructuralist tradition within her work, particularly Derrida’s influence. As Butler is heavily influenced by Derrida’s notion of iterability, I was able to bring together the concepts of writing the self and performing the self in new and dynamic ways by fleshing out this particular conceptual background. I used Butler’s theory of performativity to attempt to ‘animate’ the static data body in excess of textual supplementation.

The performative becomes intelligible through repeated, reiterated performances, which become sedimented over time. In a discursive realm there is textual evidence of this sedimentation. The layers of a user’s identity are visible. Because performativity is textualized, there is an underlying concept of archive. Archive plays an essential role in cyber-subjectivity. Both writing and the performative imply the existence of an external substrate. Writing’s relationship to the archive is obvious. The performative speech act’s relationship to archive lies in the preexistence of social norms and conventions. If speech acts were never recorded through a process of externalization and mediation, they could never enter into a preexisting matrix of conventions and social norms in order to become intelligible. Identity, for Butler, stems from the continual (re)performing of social norms that become sedimented over time. The online archive records and preserves each sedimented layer.

Archive is the process of making the private public through a topological privileging of text. Archive also asserts the originality of the privileged text. Once a text is placed on an external substrate it is institutionally marked as the original. Clearly, the virtual archive is transforming the relationship between the original and the copy. Derrida accurately foreshadowed this upheaval in his 1996 work, *Archive Fever*. While a text archived in virtual space will not persist infinitely and there are limits to what can be
archived, the virtual archive *appears* to have no limits and this potential has ignited a feverish need to preserve. Users carefully select what they will preserve on their SN profile. Their profiles are continually being curated while other users visit their exhibit. Archive is a product of consignation and externalization and of gathering-together and preserving. SN profiles are living records of a user’s life. The more layers a user adds to their archive, the more they feel the need to archive.

Sundén’s account of early cyber-subjectivity provided the skeletal structure for a thinking of subject formation on SNS within a poststructuralist tradition. In a virtual universe, such as WaterMOO, where users write into being not only their selves but also every aspect of the discursive physical realm, using writing and performativity as a framework to theorize the ontology of cyber-subjects is extremely apt. I found it difficult, however, to import Sundén’s argument unproblematised, into a virtual universe that is not entirely textual. For this reason, I returned to Derrida and Butler to be able to *(re)*theorize a poststructuralist account of cyber-subjectivity on SNS. In the end, I believe that my account and Sundén’s are not all that different. Initially, I believed that I would uncover a deep dissonance between her account and my own. This dissonance is apparent in how contemporary SN theorists use the terms ‘writing the self’ and ‘performing the self’ to theorize cyber-subjectivity on SNS.

Philosophy has traditionally been marked by a series of binary oppositions: male/female, sex/gender, speech/writing, material/virtual, etc. This thesis has been an attempt to negotiate a ‘borderspace’ between different manifestations of this reoccurring tension. SN identity offers a way into this borderspace—a way in that looks more like
‘bordertime’ instead of borderspace. By investigating the relationship of archive to cyber-subjectivity, I was able to add a temporal dimension to Sundén’s account.

SN cyber-subjectivity is neither offline or online, nor material or virtual. Users create discursive, virtual versions of themselves to interact with each other, much like any kind of online universe; the key distinction is that the virtual self is a collection of texts and images that represent real-life events. More than simply having a profile picture, most SN profiles house pictures and descriptions of important events in a person’s life.

**Implications**

Facebook is one of the most popular online destinations for Internet users (Lenhart 2009). Clearly, SNS offer something new to Internet users that has them signing up in droves. More than simply providing a virtual framework to support existing friend networks, SNS allow users to communicate with other users across space and time. While this in itself is not so new, sites like Facebook have made the maintenance of this kind of networked relationship extremely easy. The majority of users I spoke to initially joined Facebook because they wanted to reconnect with childhood friends. One user told me that she signed up for an account so she could see who, among her high school friends, was married or had children. By creating an external identity users can enter into previously inaccessible contexts and have meaningful relationships with people that they rarely see.

But beyond the ability to network with friends, there is something else happening in socially networked space. The basic ontology of our identities is changing. Internet users do not have separate identities in offline and online space but are increasingly
traveling between the two realms as themselves. Although Internet theorists have proven that real-world norms and social conventions affect the virtual realm in the same ways that they affect the material, before the recent explosion of SNS it was more difficult to pinpoint the spaces where the material and virtual overlap. Ten years ago, those with online personas were in the minority and anyone who spent hours in online discursive universes ‘hanging-out’ was seen as wanting to escape reality. Now, if someone does not have a SN profile it is quite surprising. Clearly, there is a deep-seated appeal in creating textual versions of our bodies that are publicly displayed and in creating bodies that are not fictional characters but attempts at creating ‘truthful’ versions of self.

On the surface the appeal of SN lies in the overwhelming need to feel, as a recent New York Times article argues, like celebrities and friends play the role of “paparazzi” (Salkin 2009). Whenever a celebrity does something, whether it is noteworthy or not, it is made public; any SN user can feel like a “starlet” (Salkin 2009). SN users also have the chance to make not only their textual selves public but let other users know what they are doing at all times. This perpetual updating of the SN profile is yet another sedimented layer of SN identity.

Embedded within my examination of cyber-subjectivity on SNS there has been the occasional glimmer of the inherent risks involved with this process. The data-body is the ‘facist’ by-product of creating a virtual self. It is always lurking on the edges of what, on the surface, appears to be a positive way to present one’s self. I did not even touch upon all the potential negatives involved in making private aspects of one’s identity publicly iterable. As I demonstrated in chapter two, the ‘public’ self/profile created by SN users is tightly constrained by social norms and conventions. Rooted within the risks
implicated in the creation of SN profiles is another feature that I briefly hinted at in the third chapter: the democratization of archive. The opening up of archive leads to a democratization of the textual monuments upon which history is written. A discussion of the risks involved in SN subject formation calls for a simultaneous examination of the potential sites for democratic engagement. Having illuminated some of the philosophical implications of creating a virtual identity on a SNS, I hope to investigate these two interrelated lines of inquiry in my future work.
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