**Me, Myself and I : Online Embodied Identity in America**

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**Abstract**

This study looks at the phenomenon of online diaries and weblogs from a structural and psycho-analytical point of view. It examines the fears of disembodiment created by the Internet and proceeds to dispel them by showing the importance of corporeity in online diaries. Through a pictorial, textual and thematic study of two American diarists, one male, one female, corporeity appears as a major component of identity construction through online diaristic practices. Gender is shown to be irrelevant to this particular form and angle of approach, while writing appears to be inherently embodied.

The development of the Internet into a mass-medium has predictably given increased visibility to previously underground or peripheral developments. Among these, online diaries can be said to have pride of place, having moved in the span of a few years from an obscure geek-like activity to a phenomenon the mainstream press now writes about. This is mostly due to the emergence of weblogs, i.e. online journals which started out as a collection of daily updated links accompanied by a few personal comments. Over time, they branched out and diversified into informational sites and personal diaries, acquiring the nickname ‘blogs’ in the process. This turned out to be a linguistically productive move, since it gave rise to a verb and

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1 An abridged version of this paper was presented at the 6th annual conference of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), Université Marc Bloch, Strasbourg, Aug.30-Sept.3, 2002, under the title “Me, Myself and I : Online Gendered Identity in America.”
a noun, respectively ‘to blog’ and ‘blogger’. The focus here will be on personal blogs and some of their specificities.

Online diaries perpetuate a long tradition of self-representational writing even as they modify it structurally. The structural changes driven by technology indeed create a new set of expectations and of writing practises, yet they do not alter one of the major foci of diary writing, i.e., the process of identity construction which numerous critics, starting with Gusdorf in 1956 and up to the present day, have found to be at the core of self-representational writings. Taking this finding as its departure point, the present study will attempt to analyze the ways in which corporeity is involved in identity formation in online journals. Working against the assumption that the body and more broadly speaking corporeity play no part in the development of online identities, this paper proposes to look into the intersection of the body, gender and cyberspace in two Internet diaries.

**I – Disembodied in Cyberspace**

Science-fiction author William Gibson coined the word ‘cyberspace’ to refer to a two-tiered set-up including on the one hand, a system connecting men and computers and projecting a “disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that [is] the matrix”, and on the other hand the matrix itself, which is a set of interlinked databases scattered all over the world and containing “bright lattices of logic unfolding across the colourless void”. Since, in his fictional world, human consciousness can be accommodated by computers, corporeity seemingly becomes redundant. The hero of *Neuromancer*, Case, keeps referring to his body as “meat”, thus underscoring the contempt in which his society

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holds the body.\textsuperscript{6} Other science-fiction writers depict mostly dystopian worlds shunning corporeity.\textsuperscript{7}

This fictional fascination with radicalizing the mind/body divide is widely echoed in social sciences. Drawing on the fantasies designed by science-fiction writers, the earliest commentators on the Internet, be they philosophers, sociologists or pro-Internet activists, view it as a technology liable to end up in separating human beings from their body – a consummation devoutly to be wished; many in fact believe that the peculiar technological arrangement governing the use of the Internet can end up in the creation of “angelic bodies”,\textsuperscript{8} reminiscent of medieval views “of a psychosomatic individual from which the psycho part can be separated and inhabit cyberspace in its new virtual body with which it can interact with other virtual ‘angelic’ bodies”.\textsuperscript{9} For many writers, such as Internet activist John Perry Barlow, the body’s loss of materiality is supposed to lead to under-emphasizing gender, class and race, thus paving the way for a utopian world of idealized interpersonal relationships, free from the taint of social or sexual discrimination.\textsuperscript{10}

Underneath the desire for disembodiment and the idealistic statement of purpose, there lurks the age-old disgust for and distrust of the body. The fundamental negativity of this stance derives from the very nature of the body: “being linked to flesh, matter, decay and hence to the deathbound destruction wrought by time, […] the body […] refers back to nothingness”. The anxiogenic body is best left behind or negated, a position sanctioned by a long philosophical tradition initiated by Plato in \textit{Phedon} and \textit{Phaedra}.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{6} \textit{Ibid.}, 12.
\bibitem{8} P. Lévy, \textit{L’intelligence collective : pour une anthropologie du cyberespace} (Paris : La Découverte, 1994).
\end{thebibliography}
Conversely, the mind/body dichotomy seemingly stemming from and amplified by the use of modern computer technology strikes fear in other, more technophobic commentators.\(^\text{12}\) In a lyrical expression of dismay, media theoretician Régis Debray describes the dire consequences of disembodiment: “the intellectual art of digital simulation makes nerves and muscles redundant… We have no more contact with anything material. The mind has freed itself from the hand, the whole body has turned into calculus, the earth has been left behind, ushering in mind-boggling freedom - and the toll exacted from us is loss of desire”.\(^\text{13}\)

The phobia triggered by the computer logically extends to the Internet. In cyberspace, corporeity seemingly dissolves and boils down to a set of linguistic signs. The body’s metamorphosis into text, the perceived immateriality of the flesh eventually turn it into a sheer signifier: like money in Karl Marx’s famous definition, the body-as-text is a kind of ‘general equivalent’ with connotations of both uniformity and universality, thus causing it to lose its uniqueness as well as its value as a fixed social symbol. By stretching the money metaphor a bit further, the body-as-text, like an overabundance of paper money, arouses fears of symbolical devaluation. Inflation is indeed devastating for both currency and corporeity.

Furthermore, viewing the body as an immaterial signifier, as a set of linguistic signs, entails that it is an empty form, without any pre-set content; because of this very emptiness, it is full of all possible meanings. The self-conscious and deliberate textualisation of the body underscores its function as a representation, open to a multiplicity of interpretations, a multiplicity of meanings. The body-as-text is viewed as inherently polysemous, but this very polysemy generates deep anxiety, because it is viewed as liable to undermine the stability of the representations of the body – a situation ultimately leading to the dissolution of the body.


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Disaster in the public sphere is thus predicted as a result of expelling corporeity from the scene of representation on the Internet or through the use of computers.¹⁴

**II- Embodied in Cyberspace**

Like all new communication technologies, the Internet has given rise to both utopian and dystopian interpretations, all of which, however, observation consistently fails to vindicate. In fact, and contrary to what early writers either hoped for or feared, the perceived abstractness and immateriality of the Internet may even have resulted in obsessively foregrounding the body: this is perhaps one of the reasons why the Internet, like its Minitel forebear, opens up unlimited vistas for pornography and its disquieting representations of corporeity. Even without resorting to such specialized expressions of embodiment, observation indeed shows that in online diaries, the body and more generally the material world, far from being left behind, keep cropping up under various guises. Even when the body is apparently absent, as when the diarists mourn their loneliness or the end of their relationships, this lack is the very basis of a reflection on corporeity.

However, because corporeity is a perceptual reality but a fluid concept, a tentative definition of what is meant here by this notion is in order. Corporeity may be said to be re-inserted into the text whenever descriptions of people and of the world at large are included, but also through the introduction of pictures of the writers, of their surroundings and of significant events involving the body and sexuality. The definition of corporeity this study rests on therefore encompasses not only the way the writers perceive their own bodies, but also the way they perceive their surroundings. Introducing the perception of the material world is a way of going beyond the traditional mind/body divide and of placing embodied experience at the theoretical core of this analysis.

The material world is chiefly rendered through pictures meshing with the text to a variety of effects. Inserting pictures within diaries is not specific to the Internet – the medium merely enhances the whole process, providing vividness as well as the interactivity of hypertext, enabling the reader to either click the links leading to the pictures or forego them altogether. The pictures of physical locations, of various objects taken from the writer’s environment, of the writers themselves or of the people closest to them all meet a similar need: because a diary is by definition stamped with discontinuity, because it is fragmented into a myriad narratives in discontinuous entries, the representations of body and of space function first as devices of continuity, geared to enhancing narrativity, and therefore giving both diarist and reader a framework helping to order experience.

In addition, chronologically arranged pictures provide a sense of the passage of time, a time frame which also contributes to strengthening narrativity. The events of daily life are forced into a narrative mold which, when looked at in a long-term perspective, infuses the diary with either the sense of a progression or of stagnation, hence furthering the fictionalisation process at work in journals. Finally, representations of body and of space function as devices of both expansion and repetition, producing and bolstering meaning, inasmuch as diarists seek absolute transparency and hence attempt to render their personal experience from as many angles as possible. This is the reason why the self-portrait embedded in a space already devoted to self-representational writing is far from being redundant; it repeats and reinforces what the written text already delineates, thus striving towards a complete rendering of experience.

Yet even as it does so, the self-portrait merely adds another layer of visual meaning to the textualisation of self, so that transparency recedes even further away. The textual and graphic representations of the body, of the material world and more generally speaking of

corporeity, although striving for transparency, in fact interplay to produce a narrative of self, a construct, rather than the hoped for, unmediated, essential truth about the diarist. This is intrinsic to self-representational writing and already perceived to be so by one of its earliest practitioners, J.-J. Rousseau\(^\text{16}\) but it is also due to the nature of language, which is both the locus of immediate experience and a medium. Language enables “the representation of an authentic self, while at the same time revealing that perfect truth has yet to be attained”.\(^\text{17}\)

### III) Corporeity, Image and Text

**a) Portraits**

The two diaries which will be examined in the course of this study were chosen for the widely dissimilar personalities of their authors, in an attempt at pointing up the structural similarities between their diaristic narratives. Bunt Sign\(^\text{18}\) is a middle-aged man who works from home for a California construction company. He belongs to a diarists’ network and has committed himself to posting an entry daily. He has kept his word since January 2000, although his diary writing in fact started in 1986. ‘Live from New-York – Lisa’s Journey’\(^\text{19}\) is the second diary under consideration. In this weblog, which she started at the beginning of June 2001 after having kept a conventional diary on and off all her life, Lisa, a thirty-six-year-old executive, delineates her ongoing autobiographical narrative. Lisa belongs to a sadomasochist diarists’ webring, where sexually explicit entries are acceptable, although these are by no means the sole purpose of her writing. As I will attempt to show later on, the description of erotic scenes plays an important if paradoxical part in her narrative of self. Both Lisa’s and Bunt Sign’s voices are hauntingly distinctive and their diaries make for captivating reading.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 238-9.
\(^{18}\) [http://www.buntsign.com/index.html](http://www.buntsign.com/index.html) Quotations from this diary will be identified by the letters BS and the entry date.
These writers, who use pseudonyms and might be expected to hide behind the screen, in fact display a large number of photographs. Bunt Sign puts up a complete photo album of his family (his parents, his sister and two nephews), as well as a few photographs of himself as a child, a youngster and as an adult. Lisa similarly includes a picture of her late mother and several ones of herself at various ages. This raises the question of the privacy of these intimate writings: family members or acquaintances might easily stumble on these photo galleries and on the accompanying texts, which sometimes reveal thoughts or deeds that are generally expected to remain private. Therefore the voluminous “picture galleries” the diarists include perhaps bespeak an obscure, unspoken attempt at coming out, at achieving a self-revelation which would allow them to make their private and public selves coincide and hence put an end to the tension inevitably deriving from concealing important aspects of one’s personality. This is a distinct possibility for Lisa, whose sexual preferences lie outside the pale of convention, and who devotes much thought to the manner in which she discloses them to her partners. In Bunt Sign’s case, however, ‘coming out’ is not linked to sexuality, as we shall see further on, but to the articulate, often witty personality apparent in his journal entries, yet hidden by a “tongue-tied and awkward” demeanor in his daily life (BS Jan. 23, 2000.) For both of them, revealing their secret truths is fraught with subversive potentialities.

Both writers probably also incur the risk of discovery because, by undertaking a diary, they commit themselves to truth telling: this is an essential part of the covenant entered into by diarists. That ‘truth’ might be a construction when writing a diary is irrelevant at this point. What matters is that the galleries of portraits of the writers and of their families help to give substance and consistency to their own story and to their personal history. Portraits assure not only the readers, but primarily the writers, of the reality of their existence. In

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19 [http://www.section12.com/users/lisa_p/pictures/oldpage/bio.html](http://www.section12.com/users/lisa_p/pictures/oldpage/bio.html) Quotations from this diary will be identified by the letters LL and the entry date.
addition, and more importantly, they function as devices for self-reassurance when confronting the feelings of vacuity and nothingness arising from the realization that the passage of time annihilates much of what constitutes experience. Pictures supplement memory, and representations of corporeity in its temporal dimension rescue consciousness from the void, flesh it out and thus help re-member the disjointed past.

b) Places

Pictures of physical locations appear abundantly. These perspectives on the writers’ surroundings seem to function in two distinct ways. One of them is that they give the reader a sense of depth, as they contribute to ground the diary in physical reality; as such they also function as a kind of visual archive, offering the reader an inside look at middle-class life in America. Mentions of central air-conditioning (LL July 5, 2002) or descriptions of Tivo, the television recording service (BS Jan. 6, 2002), of a family birthday party (BS June 11, 2000) or of a baseball game (BS Sept. 10, 2000, Sept. 11, 2002), to quote but a few examples, may be seen as primary sources of social history providing the basis for an ethnography of contemporary social mores in the United States. In addition, entries written after the 9/11 attacks by both Bunt Sign (BS Sept. 11, 2001 seq.) and Lisa (LL Sept. 12, 2001 seq.) as well as pictures of the World Trade Center and then of Ground Zero in the latter’s weblog add to the archival function of these documents and illuminate the juncture of historical events and individual perception in diaristic writing online.

c) Food

Food and its corollary, dieting, course throughout their writing (BS Jul. 13, 2000, Sept. 7, 2001; LL Jul. 27, 2002); recipes or pictures of memorable dishes frequently appear (BS Aug. 9, 2000); brand names of cereals, chocolate bars and other foods are also mentioned. Eating at restaurants is often described, most noticeably by Lisa, whose social life is more active than Bunt Sign’s. Family meals of course figure prominently, as well as the sociability
induced by diary-writing itself. The meals taken with other diarists met through the webring give rise to comments which are then linked to one another in the journals of each of the persons involved in the meeting. Food thus retains its traditional function of incorporating individuals into groups.

The dominant theme, however, is that of dieting. Bunt Sign interprets his craving for food as a displacement of his feelings of inadequacy and of his mild social phobia. Lisa establishes a direct link between her unhappiness and her lapse from thinness and fitness and compares her craving for food to an ‘addiction’ (LL Apr. 13, 2002). She has been in therapy and has been attending ‘recovery meetings’ for her ‘eating disorder’ (LL Apr. 19, 2002). For both of them, the struggle never ceases: “So the third day into my […] diet, Grady brings me a piece of the chocolate birthday cake from his party […] Did I eat the cake? Naturally. I'm a weak, weak person” (BS Jan. 23, 2000). Lisa’s diary features a special section entitled ‘Progress Notes’ entirely devoted to dieting and working out and carefully recording weight gain or loss (LL Dec. 27, 2001 seq.)

Growing fat and slimming down become stages in the narratives of self and the fastidious descriptions of their struggle with the temptation of fattening foods, repetitive and trivial as they are, turn into stages in a Sisyphean progression towards an imaginary state of goodness. Dieting can indeed be linked to the religious ascetic practises common in earlier periods, when fasting or abstaining from appetizing foods were part and parcel of religious observance. But as will become obvious as this analysis develops, dieting is one of the ways in which the diarists try to address and control the unruliness of the body – an unruliness which is inherent in corporeity.

\[d)\textit{The body proper}\]

The diarists themselves are of course the main focus of these self-representational works. Yet Bunt Sign himself hardly seems to do more than skim the surface of his life.
throughout his diary. Both his pictures and his writings are governed by a sense of decorum: never is there any unconventional exposure of any aspect of his inner life; romance or sex are conspicuously absent from either text or images. However, an oddly revealing narrative does emerge, for all that it abides by the most rigorous decency laws.

It is first and foremost the narrative of a suffering body, with descriptions of a tooth ache (BS Aug. 8, 2000), or of his back acting up (BS, Sept.1, 2000). In a striking episode (BS July 11, 2000), Bunt Sign feels a lump in his throat which keeps him from speaking, yet fails to call his HMO for an appointment, because of his stated reluctance to be in touch with other people apart from his immediate family. When recounting his latest holidays, just below a family picture displaying a child whose birthday is being celebrated, he mentions his “nosebleeds” (BS July 19, 2002).

A process of metaphoric displacement and substitution seems to be at work here: his body seems to be the only possible transmitter of a message, for lack of words to talk about body matters. Language can inscribe inner conflicts, feelings and emotions into the shared discursive space of intersubjectivity. But Bunt Sign paradoxically seems to be in a situation in which conflicts or emotions cannot gain access to this discursive space: language - which he uses with talent when writing journal entries - seems to collapse whenever his inner conflicts threaten to emerge. In a bout of self-examination and self-deprecatory irony, Bunt Sign thus writes (BS Aug.29, 2002):

In the same spirit that I never drive without the radio on so that I won't hear anything in the car engine that I don't want to hear, I work all day with either the TV on or music playing. I don't pay all that much attention to either when I'm concentrating on a task, but it's good to have it there for when my concentration lapses and I might accidentally let a bad thought creep into my head. (…)
If the thoughts I've been expressing here lately seem a little superficial and disjointed, it's because I'm not letting myself wallow too deeply in anything that might be troubling or might wrench me in some disturbing direction. Until now, of course, which is where all this is coming from.
And I'm not about to let this go on long enough to let the darkness take over, or to bring any demons to light. I'm not even going to repair that mangled metaphor, because I kind of like the paradoxical nature of it.
Yet what he cannot convey or refuses to convey through language comes through as a gesture, a kind of violent, physical acting out. In Freudian terms, his body becomes a site of symptoms. In entry after entry, through its postures, its attitudes, its reactions to minor stimuli, his body overtakes him, bypasses the repressive hold he maintains on language and gives expression to what he wants to hide. States of mind are thus communicated through ailments, which give a visible bodily inscription to hidden processes.

Bunt Sign takes stock of these ailments in a process of narration whose purpose is twofold: it is illocutionary, i.e. narrating the disorder is an action unto itself which may be interpreted in a variety of ways by the readers, but it also is a re-enactment through language and as such it creates the discursive space necessary to distance the narrator from his own experience. The online diary functions as a writing space in which these physical traces can be both acknowledged and left behind. This is necessary because pain turns the body into the Other, unpredictable and threatening, and hence endangers his sense of self. Bunt Sign therefore uses his diaristic narrative as a distance-producing device in an attempt to gain control over the otherness exposed by the advent of pain.

Pain plays a different though no less essential part in Lisa’s weblog. Firstly, just like Bunt Sign, she mentions her ailments, giving for instance a full account of her fears when undergoing gynaecological tests (LL May 14, 2002) and showing her body in a clinical light. But unlike her male counterpart, for whom sex is a glaring absence, Lisa combines descriptions of her daily routines and states of mind with an erotic diary, encompassing descriptions of what she calls ‘scenes’ as well as her search for a stable relationship. So her body might be expected to be a site not of symptoms, as for Bunt Sign, but of pleasure. This expectation, however, is constantly thwarted by her choice of sexual behavior. In the few but graphic descriptions she provides of the mistreatments she craves and submits to (LL Aug. 27,

2001 *seq.*), pleasure is only a side-effect. As she describes her ‘training’ and defines the degrees of pain she wants to experience and the various implements used by her partner, the suffering body she describes becomes a pathway to selfhood through control.

As theorized by psycho-analyst Didier Anzieu, for the masochist, “the function of individuation of the Self can only be achieved through physical suffering (tortures) and moral suffering (humiliations)”. Lisa internalises a set of rules which are literally inscribed in her body by the contract she draws up with her partner stipulating what kind and degree of pain will be inflicted. Even though appearing to submit, she is in fact in total command of her own body; she appropriates it by setting up and enacting her own law and in so doing, she exercises control over its otherness, as well as over her supposed tormentor. That submission and domination belong in the same sphere is perceived by the diarist herself, who writes: “In my heart of hearts, I don’t believe a Master exists for me. Could I ever have that level of respect for a man?” (*LL* May 31, 2001). In the relationships she describes, she is very much the prescriber of behavior (*LL* May 10, 2002), further underscoring the subtle and complex links woven between submission and domination.

Writing, by allowing Lisa to re-experience what she has experienced through her body, also enables her to work out a definition of self thanks to the distancing from and re-interpretation of actual events, frequently giving her diary the feel of a self-help book. Both Lisa’s writing and her use of pain in carefully controlled situations function in similar ways, as devices to keep in check the uncontrollable in corporeity – and thus attain a sense of selfhood.

This is why the apparent divergences between the representations of corporeity in the two diaries under consideration in fact cover up many underlying similarities. For Bunt Sign, it seems that corporeity can be addressed in his text only through socially acceptable

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channels: pain, food, dieting, bingeing, etc… His own relationship with body matters apparently under-emphasizes corporeity and is carefully swathed in conventional, culturally familiar channels, at a total remove from formless outpourings. For Lisa, alternating descriptions of her melancholic moods with those of her longing for love and a few erotic scenes, corporeity seems to be in the foreground. In fact, Lisa’s diary, brutally candid as it may seem, is basically similar to Bunt Sign’s apparent lack of regard for the body. Both use their suffering bodies and their writing up of their experience of corporeity in order to integrate the discontinuous fragments of their identities, finally taking possession of their body through representation.

For both diarists, moreover, the self-portraits and the pictures of various physical locations combine with the daily entries to tame the unheimlich, the feeling of strangeness that overcomes individuals as they realize that the Other is within themselves – not least because the body, familiar as it is, ultimately manages to escape control. One of the ways of coming to terms with the strangeness within is, as we have seen, a focus on corporeity and on its perception. Embodied writing in online self-representational writing is thus first and foremost a way for diarists to “incur the risk of experiencing [their] body, of discovering the very flesh of [their] existence”. This is why Bunt Sign’s outwardly utterly conventional approach of the body nevertheless is a way of hacking up an opening in a situation where the body seems to be negated, in the process giving himself some purchase towards coming to terms with corporeity. When his body asserts itself despite his best efforts at repression and denial, the ensuing confrontation is an ever so slight movement towards self-awareness. Lisa’s masochistic testing of the boundaries of pain can similarly be seen as a persistent quest for a unified self through both control of corporeity and embodied writing.

The passageway or transitional space afforded by the diary allows the writers to institute the body as language and to embody language, in a back-and-forth, mirror-like movement, and hence to initiate an identity formation or re-formation process grounded in corporeity. Body and identity thus constitute and institute each other. By retracing each day’s stream of trivial, mundane events and anchoring them in corporeity, both Bunt Sign and Lisa turn their bodies into a theater of the self. In so doing, they turn their lives into a relatively ordered narrative and produce themselves as subjects. The construct they build shifts away from post-modernist conceptions of multiple selves or fragmented authorship in an attempt to re-institute the unified, embodied subject of traditional narratives. That the attempt is doomed to fail is irrelevant inasmuch as the complex interplay of textual and graphic representations of corporeity contains, in and of itself, both the means and the end of self-representational writing, where process is all.

**IV) Gendered self-representation ?**

Gender can be briefly defined as the social construction of sexual differences. This point has to be made because the notion of gender has tended to lose its definition as a construct and to be naturalized or biologized. Social representations of masculinity and femininity too often tend to be viewed as innate or ontological in nature, ending up in a stereotypical vision of a-historical feminine or masculine specificities, at the expense of individualities, and reinforcing the oldest and the worst clichés about men and women even while purporting to defend the latter.

What is indeed abundantly clear from the observation of a large number of diaries, as well as from the observation of the two diaries under consideration here, is that embodied identities in online diaries seem to blur conventional gender lines; fluidity in self-definition appears to be the norm for both men and women, who use identical strategies to create and
consolidate their fictional personae. For instance, it is impossible to cast Lisa into the role of the feminine Other27 to any man, least of all Bunt Sign, because both diarists are equally preoccupied with their own sense of otherness in relation to themselves, their self-perception and their social selves. What is more, the most stereotypically feminine subjects, such as being in love, cooking, dieting, cleaning house, maintaining relationships with friends and family appear just as consistently in Bunt Sign’s and Lisa’s diaries. The same holds true for work- and politics-related issues, i.e. the public sphere, traditionally ascribed to men: both diarists describe their work at length, although Bunt Sign tends to discuss politics at more frequent intervals. These two writers, stark opposites in everything from their geographical locations to their jobs to their families – and also, of course, in the matter of sexuality – share in fact a preoccupation with corporeity in all its guises. Both the male and the female bodies shown in their diaries are the objects of representation through text and images, both the male and female subjects are producers and consumers of representations of corporeity. Gender therefore is not a useful category when looking at identity construction in online diaries. It can indeed hardly be used in a context in which the major goal is construction of self, with its attendant focus on individual choice subverting cultural conventions and dominant cultural narratives.

As this study draws to its close, we may now try and address the fears raised by the advent of the computer and of Internet-mediated communication regarding corporeity. The written word on the Internet rests by definition on an absence generated by writing: the apparent absence of a body and of a voice, made invisible and inaudible by the technological apparatus. Yet, as Roland Barthes indicates, “writing involves the hand, hence writing is the body, its drives, its controls, its rhythms, its ponderousness, its shifts, its complications, its escapes, in short, […] [writing reflects] subjects weighed down with their desire and their

unconscious”. The body is undeniably present, even when it seems totally mediated by the surface of the screen, because the body is always produced and construed discursively: there is no such thing as a material body separated from language. Reading diaries or writing them online therefore means connecting with embodied experience and inventing an approach of reality in which body surfaces reflect the depths of selfhood.

In addition, for all the talk of virtuality and immateriality, language itself is far from being either abstract or disembodied, as linguistic theory and psychoanalysis have evidenced. Lacan indeed underscores that language is not immaterial: “it is a subtle body, but a body. Words are trapped in all the corporeal images which captivate the subject”. In other words, the signifier itself, viewed in its materiality is inseparable from meaning. The body of the signifier-phonemes, of morphemes, is indissolubly linked with the infinite of the signified and resonates in and with the body of the speaking subject. Writing itself “becomes a body which carries words, not towards someone else, but towards other parts of oneself.”. Online embodied writing thus becomes a fully rounded, thorough representation of corporeity channelling a quest for a unified self.

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Diaries cited

Lisa’s Journey : http://www.section12.com/users/lisa_p/
While Lisa’s journal is now offline, a few samples of her writings can be consulted thanks to The Wayback Machine, an Internet archive set up by the company www.alexa.com along with the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution : http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.section12.com/users/lisa_p/

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30 D. Sibony, op. cit. « l’écriture devient un corps qui porte les mots non pas vers quelqu’un mais vers d’autres parts de lui-même. » 276, my translation.