Chapter Four

The Personal as Public:
Identity Construction/Fragmentation Online

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…one cannot speak of anything at any time: it is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, or to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground.
— Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

In *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, Kenneth Gergen coins the term "multiphrenia" to describe a new pattern of self-consciousness, one intensified by the growing "number and variety of relationships in which we are engaged, potential frequency of contact, and expressed intensity of a relationship" (1991, 61). Given the multiplication of computer-assisted modes of communication by which increasing numbers of people not only interact but also work, there is perhaps no conjecture in arguing that human beings all the more engaged in multiphrenia. In fact, such self-awareness is not so much necessary as it is inherently inseparable from the very formation of identity on the Internet, which is an increasingly influential aspect of society, providing multiple sites for innumerable cultures to develop and thrive.

Given the wide variety of interactive possibilities afforded by communicative technologies, online identity may be seen as what Madan Sarup in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* views as "a convenient 'tool' through which to try and understand many aspects—personal, philosophical, political—of our lives" (1996, 28). In other words, the creation and maintenance of an online identity can be a kind of lens through which people may sharpen their focus upon particular aspects of their comprehensive identities. And yet, it is more than this, too, for all online activities are embodied by personal beings engaged in what Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen* considers "our cultural work in progress" (1995b, 177). It is thus possible to view any genre-specific online act as a continual exercise in identity construction, a consistent, perhaps even repetitive, creation of boundaries, both real and virtual.

One such genre-specific online act is blogging, which manifests itself in a format different from other online activities such as instant messaging and social networking, and holds potentially greater similarities to the printed page. Like the MUD Turkle describes, the blog is a place where the self is multiple and constructed by language, "where people and machines are in a new relation to each other, indeed can be mistaken for each other." Also like a MUD, this genre-specific online act is an "evocative object for thinking about human identity" (17), asking people to learn a new way of thinking about and managing themselves. Blogging, then, is not only an opportunity for simple self-expression, but also a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be (184).

While what this chapter attempts is more of an overview of a particular communicative technology—one among many genre-specific online acts—I want to emphasize there is also a reciprocal relationship at work, with online identity construction influencing characteristics (if not the nature) of blogging, which in turn influences further online identity construction. In other words,

> We construct our technologies, and our technologies construct us and our times. Our times make us, we make our machines, our machines make our times. We become the objects we look upon but they become what we make of them. (Turkle 1995b, 46)

My aim here is not only to illuminate this relationship to a greater extent and complicate it by highlighting how blogging fragments and even limits the very construction of identity, but also to speculate on how such fragmentation contains the potential to make people more honest in their online endeavors.

If Rom Harre is right that the very structure of one's personal being has its source in "a socially sustained and collectively imposed cluster of theories" (1984, 21), cyberspace makes such construction all the more complex and involved, forcing encounters with a wide variety of enforced premises. These range from the particular browsers used for managing the Internet, to any of the specific communicative technologies within it, each comprising theory clusters and exerting influence. However, there is also the potential for a greater freedom of exploration and movement online than in the non-virtual world, particularly when it comes to constructing an identity online.

This freedom of movement necessarily leads to immersion at different depths. As Slavoj Žižek observes, "outside is always inside: when we are

directly immersed in [virtual reality], we lose contact with reality" (1997, 134). Alluding to Turkle's observations on MUDs, Žižek also notes how "the technology in cyberspace undermines the notion of Self" by offering "a plurality of self-images without a global co-ordinating center" (ibid.). The freedom presented by genre-specific online acts (e.g., blogging) concerns not only possibilities for the construction of online identity, but also the inevitability of its fragmentation. As Vincent Hevern explains, "voices within the self are varied, often oppositional, and resist any attempt to harmonize their multiplicity into an unstable synthesis" (2004, 330). Thus, the potential for a further de-centering of identity is all the greater, particularly given the little-to-no overarching requirements regarding how many blogs one might maintain.

Similar again to Turkle's observations on MUDs, then, blogging implies difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation of identity, all of which happen through the act of writing, the primary act involved in computer-mediated communication (CMC). According to Kurt Reymers, writing takes place "in isolation from immediate response and negotiation," but this does not keep CMC from being thought of as an oral medium, "a conversational space like the telephone, rather than the more formal space of print" (2002). Instead, CMC is a kind of hybrid writing, "speech momentarily frozen into artifact, but curiously ephemeral artifact… somewhere between traditional written and oral communication" (Turkle 1995b, 183). With CMC as the primary method by which online identity is constructed, the latter is also a kind of hybrid, a record of choices consciously made about what to include. This is because a blogger already possesses an offline identity, one which has already been shaped and is in the process of being shaped by more traditional, social and technological influences. It is up to the blogger's discretion to either make use of that identity in the construction of an online identity or attempt to disregard it, although there are even unconscious influences if the blogger sets out to establish an online identity significantly different from an identity offline.

This is understandably quite different from non-virtual identity formation. While Harre acknowledges early in *Personal Being* that a variety of texts—"diaries, engagement books, chronicles and so on" (1984, 52)—have been devices for the extension of individual memory, the genre-specific online act of blogging influences identity formation as well. A necessary part of blogging is the establishment and development of not just an online presence, but a persona, something built upon with each subsequent post. Blogging provides information not only on a subject matter, but also on the author. Blogging is therefore about the construction and maintenance of

an identity that is more personalized than in traditional academic writing. As such, a constructed online persona can be more "real" than a "real-life" persona "in so far as it reveals aspects of myself I would never dare to admit in [real life]" (Žižek 1997, 137), a characteristic of blogging which makes this genre-specific online act all the more appealing to some. There is a self-reflective process at work here as any blogger is involved in questions about how much or how little to ultimately divulge, with anonymity possibly exerting a heavy influence. Such choices belong, at least initially, to no one but the blogger, thereby attaching more meaning to whatever happens to appear onscreen.

This confessional aspect also relates to the idea of identity salience, which concerns how some identities have more relevance to the offline self than others depending upon context (Reymers 2002). Being aware of the blogging moment is necessary for not only furthering the development of a particular online identity, but also for solidifying the actual space utilized for such development. In fact, it is difficult to superimpose an identity as manifested via the act of blogging within another genre-specific online act (e.g., instant messaging). While identity in these spaces surely hold similarities, the actual online space afforded to each act alone prohibits such performance.

With the lack of a central focus bolstered by the importance of confessional choice in the construction of online identity, conflict arises, namely between different self-images, which I came across in my own experiences with blogging. Beginning with an invitation from my brother to contribute to a communal blog shared among mutual friends—the primary use of which involved telling stories about unjustified parking tickets, hellish roommates and other trying aspects of college life—I soon discovered there was more than one kind of identity construction and maintenance happening in that space. As Julie Rak writes in "The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity," the very act of blogging involves "a recouping of strategies of the real, which include the use of offline experiences as a guarantor of identity" (2005, 176). Those same activities utilized for offline identity construction, like storytelling, were important for the development of online selves, too. While the maintenance of the blog gave each contributor a somewhat anonymous outlet for venting social frustrations, the very act of blogging about such things continued to shape individual as well as communal identities.

This identity shaping occurs in an unconventional way through a particular kind of presentation. In "Screening Moments, Scrolling Lives: Diary Writing on the Web," Madeline Sorapure explains this further:

> Representing the self in a database form—creating and coding information about oneself, populating a database that readers subsequently query—develops and reflects a sense of identity as constituted by fragments and segments, each of which is separately meaningful and equally significant. (2003, 8)

In other words, like the composition of a private journal, the maintenance of any blog—personal, professional or any mix of the two—comprises a fragmented, segmented identity. No one blog represents a whole person, no more than people present themselves as whole in certain offline situations. Still, an identity comes together through storytelling and the making of observations, all of which are, in a sense, filed for anyone online to see, fragmented and segmented as these parts of an identity might be.

Interestingly enough, the fragments and segments I revealed were soon in sharp contrast to another blog I maintained. As part of a graduate course, this new blog was more public, if only because it had a wider, more knowledgeable audience base comprised of colleagues also taking the class. It also had a different focus and set of priorities: the blog was for an extended research project and allowed me to not only present my ideas and observations, but also receive feedback from individuals I both trusted and respected.

However, I used the same pseudonym in both blogs, thereby allowing readers to follow links from a detailed observation of Cindy Johanek's *Composing Research* to a spiteful, curse-ridden rant about how proud some are in their ignorance of world events, two very different entries in two very different blogs. Increasingly, I saw this as a quandary, for each blog presented rather different constructions of an online identity. While the mandarin explored an interest in the development of an online composition program, the misanthrope identified another contentious point about the activities of certain individuals at a downtown bar. Because blogs operate in a kind of "grey space between public and private spheres" (Rak 2005, 173), with "the burden of interpretation [falling] on the reader" (Sorapure 2003, 14), I had little way of knowing how readers, known or unknown, might react to these constructions of online identity.

Unable to ultimately choose one over the other, I engaged in recognition of this identity multiplicity and subsequently implemented it by separating my mandarin and misanthrope, effectively eliminating the link for future audiences. I see such an action as potentially more authentic, more honest than the maintenance of one catchall blog, which can cause problems related to the blogger as well as the audience. Without clear delineation,

online identities—as well as the work performed by them—could be called into question. Through separation, though, I like to think I am able to retain more of who I am, to give enough space for these varied voices to not only breathe but thrive. This also allows, in Sherry Turkle's words,

> a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity. It makes it easier to accept the array of our (and others') inconsistent personae—perhaps with humor, perhaps with irony. We do not feel compelled to rank or judge the elements of our multiplicity. We do not feel compelled to exclude what does not fit. (1995b, 261-262)

Interestingly enough, Žižek makes a similar observation about how the virtualization aspect cancels the physical distance, thus suspending the presence of the Other so that "neighbors and foreigners are all equal in their spectral screen presence" (1997, 154). This is in sharp contrast to Madan Sarup's argument that "to maintain a separate identity, one has to define oneself against the Other" (1996, 47). However, perhaps the Other comes not so much from the outside anymore, but from inside, which is another kind of limitation on the construction of identity. While such a limitation is self-imposed if a person keeps more than one blog, this also appears to allow for greater experimentation with the construction of multiple identities. The genre-specific online act of blogging thus limits identity construction, fragments it, but also encourages further construction.

The anonymity possible in blogging is also possible in commenting on particular entries, which brings me back to Harre. Harre stresses that personal beings be thought of as "social productions if we are to fully understand their nature" (21). One such social production is Harre's notion of the file-self, in which "a person has only limited ways of drawing attention to him or herself, perhaps by making sure that his or her file is 'interesting'" (69-70). Furthermore, the file-self is "an assembly controlled by a principle of selection or central relevance" (70). Harre offers some examples of file-selves—a job application, a credit check, a police investigation, a medical consultation—explaining that a person in such a form "can be present at many different places and so take part in many different episodes at once" (ibid.).

As a communicative technology, blogging is another kind of file-self. Through this genre-specific online act, people reduce themselves to stores of information they deem interesting and/or important. In contrast to other file-selves, blog file-selves control assembly and determine principles of selection or central relevance. When it comes to blogging as a kind of file-self, bloggers are the file-masters. Still, a person as file-self, even through

the genre specific online act of blogging, "cannot initiate a conversation, nor can he or she unilaterally close it" (ibid.). This is because of a reduction of the psychology of personal being to biography, even to autobiography. There is a lack of immediacy to any file-self, for although some blogging software allows for and even encourages comments and feedback, little still occurs in real time.

However, this lack does not necessarily prohibit the construction of identity, offline or online, both of which involve "a mediation between persons using the technology of communication" (Reymers 2002). As communicative technologies change, so to do people in how they construct they identities, as they are "capable of multiple self-presentations, depending on episode, that is, on interactors in the one case and on readers in the other" (Harre 1984, 69). It is through these ever-changing communicative technologies that "sexuality can no longer be a private, individualized affair; it is socially defined and normalized" (Sarup 1996, 105). This kind of definition and normalization is something which only increases with the genre-specific online act of blogging, exacerbating what Žižek sees as "the paradoxical intermediate role of fantasy…a construction enabling us to seek maternal substitutes, but at the same time a screen shielding us from getting too close…keeping us at a distance from it" (1989, 119-120). Bloggers are so close yet so far away, which is also a limitation. Blogging is so pervasive, comprised of so many statements, with each having the capacity for what Foucault calls "repeatable materiality":

> the statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry. (1972, 105)

Such statements may be composed and received in a great number of ways, with authors meaning one thing and readers interpreting another, both of which are equally important in the construction of identity. As Sarup explains, identity "may perhaps be best seen as a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash" (1996, 25). This includes not only more traditional textual forms, but all manner of discourse from diverse groups, such as family, school, workplace, media, government, and so on. People possess the potential to mediate these differences within themselves, never necessarily unified, and "it is these very differences that create the space in which the human subject exercises a measure of interpretive freedom" (ibid.).

There is a limit to this freedom, though, at least according to Žižek,

who envisions cyberspace as "a future of unending possibilities of limitless change [which] conceals its exact opposite: an unheard-of imposition of radical closure" (1997, 154). Within the context of the genre-specific online act of blogging, fantasies are increasingly externalized for public viewing and "the sphere of intimacy is more and more directly socialized" (1997, 164). There is thus less real space to exercise freedom of interpretation and identity construction. Blogging offers an opportunity to be increasingly visible to others, which can in turn present others with the opportunity to be unduly influential on one's construction of identity. This is because online identity construction, which the act of blogging surely entails, and psychoanalytic encounters are both "significantly virtual, constructed within the space of analysis, where its slightest shifts can come under the most intense scrutiny" (Turkle 1995b, 256) from both the blogger and an audience.

However, limitations on identity formation come not only from within the confines of cyberspace, but also from without. One need only look at the increasing debate about blogs, particularly in academia, regarding the creation and maintenance of an online identity. While some on hiring committees see the creation and maintenance of a blog as a reason for denial of employment, many students and professors find the freedom and format of blogs refreshing, even vital to their professional development and scholarly endeavors. In other words, while some academics view blogging (an autobiographical act in itself) as both a chronicle of episodes and having "to do with a growing grasp of capabilities and potentials" (Harre 1984, 213-214), hiring committees are more concerned with "the social conditions of the confirmation of recollections" (214). In essence, then, this academic debate reveals the truth of Turkle's earlier statements about the reciprocal relationship between genre-specific online acts and identity construction: each influences the other in such a way that both undergo a process of continual change, with debate an often integral part.

For the most part, the debate over the professional uses of blogging within the academy began in 2005 with "Bloggers Need Not Apply," an op-ed piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* written by Ivan Tribble, a pseudonymous humanities professor at a small liberal-arts college in the Midwest. While the title alone was incendiary, much of the content marks observations about the often-negative impact that even maintaining a blog can have on a person's job prospects, particularly if one includes it on a vita. This is largely because a blog, writes Tribble, "easily becomes a therapeutic outlet, a place to vent petty gripes and frustrations…an open diary or confessional booth, where inward thoughts are publicly aired"

(2005a). It is this potential for openness and confession that troubled some committee members at Tribble's school, concerned as they were about "a blogger who…might air departmental dirty laundry (real or imagined) on the cyber clothesline for the world to see" (ibid.). In a way, then, Tribble invokes Michel Foucault's observations on the nature of the statement:

> Every statement is specified in this way: there is no statement in general, no free, neutral, independent statement; but a statement always belongs to a series or a whole, always plays a role among other statements, deriving support from them and distinguishing itself from them: it is always part of a network of statements, in which it has a role, however minimal it may be, to play. (1972, 99)

In other words, Tribble's concerns about the maintenance of a blog (and an online identity) stem from the medium's inherent openness and honesty (perhaps too open, perhaps too honest), with the confessional aspect in particular as something to be feared.

Furthermore, what some might see as positive aspects of blogging, such as the immediate accessibility and distribution of thoughts and ideas, Tribble also sees as problematical, noting that "for professional academics, it's a publishing medium with no vetting process, no review board, and no editor" (2005a). By its very nature, blogging goes against the traditional notions of academic scholarship and publication. It not only presents a threat, but, similar to Foucault's understanding of discourse, presents

> not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking, subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. It is a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed. (1972, 55)

If this exteriority is cyberspace, blogging is then one site among many in a larger discursive network. This appears to matter little to Tribble, though, who implicitly identifies himself as a member of the old guard who just does not "get it."

In fact, he admits this outright in a follow-up piece, "They Shoot Messengers, Don't They?" written in reaction to the heightened online activity created by "Bloggers Need Not Apply." In first responding to questions of free speech online, Tribble makes specific note of the bloggers in the candidate pool, stressing that largely the exercising of questionable judgment in their use of free speech online negatively impacted their chances

of being hired. More importantly, though, Tribble revives the point that "the issue is not the medium itself, but how it is used" (2005b). He questions again whether an online projection presents someone as s/he wishes to be seen, particularly to hiring committees.

It would seem, then, that Tribble asks for a kind of active dishonesty. As Sarup observes, identities, "our own and those of others, are fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities" (1996, 14). This is something that apparently has no place in academia. Yet Sarup also explains that "identity is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accomplished by a certain absence, without which it would not exist" (1996, 24). Perhaps Tribble asks not for active dishonesty but merely a greater sense of discretion (some might even say common sense) in the genre-specific online act of blogging. This still strikes me as a limitation, though, because "people are continually using their life situation and experience as material for the ongoing construction of their identity" (Sarup 1996, 35). Is this something that can (or even should) be avoided?

This issue of projected identity online both inspired and enlightened graduate student Rebecca Anne Goetz who, until recently, had never thought "there might be a connection between my blog and my professional fate." In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* op-ed piece of her own entitled "Do Not Fear the Blog," Goetz gives another perspective on blogging, which she considers "a scholarly activity that isn't always scholarly." She stresses how there is a breakdown of hierarchy "in the blogosphere so that even graduate students can be public intellectuals of a kind." Goetz sees academic blogging as a worthwhile practice because it can be evidence of serious thinking and engagement with colleagues about the vocation. Still, like Tribble, Goetz notes that "the meaning and purpose behind a blog is…in the eye of a blogger" (2005). It might be helpful, therefore, to see blogging as a private as well as public form of wrestling with the self. Bloggers would do well to consider not just what identity they are constructing online, but also what that online construction reveals and conceals. Both Tribble and Goetz stress the need for self-reflection, particularly when it comes to blogging for professional development.

Still, it is obvious that a problem of identity remains, given the academic blogger's responsibility regarding self-representation, and so long as it remains possible for blogging to be detrimental toward the acquisition of a teaching or research position. Perhaps one solution to this problem concerns not just the possibility of identity multiplicity, but a further actuality of Gergen's aforementioned multiphrenia, i.e., the establishment and maintenance of not just one online identity, but many, which is surely something blogs, by

their very nature, allow. This potential resolution originates not so much with hiring committees, who should revise their understanding of a job candidate's professional identity, but more with the candidates themselves. If having a catchall blog can indeed be problematical for reasons ranging from privacy to possible employment, the idea of multiphrenic blogging might allow scholars, as academics and as individuals, to retain more of who they are.

All the more then, blogging involves active choices, active responsibility concerning what parts of one's identity is revealed to others. Of course, much the same happens offline, too, with one's choices about discourse and dress dependent upon atmosphere and context. As Robert MacDougall notes in "Identity, Electronic Ethos, and Blogs," discursive practices in both online and online environments change. Bloggers have a tendency to "use blogs as a near-exclusive form of interaction for the persona/e they maintain there" (2005, 589). Reymers echoes this by stating that the maintenance of "an ongoing role relationship that delivers meaning and purpose to the individual leads to a commitment to maintaining the specific identity associated with that role" (2002).

I want to emphasize (again) this chapter's particular perspective on identity, as "not something we find, or have once and for all" (Sarup 1996, 28). Identity itself is a process, thus making it very difficult to grasp, much less maintain commitment to an online incarnation, which is partly the reason for the Foucault epigraph. The epigraph is not intended to be pretentious, but instead acknowledge the difficulty in addressing and committing to anything within computer culture because new objects and communicative technologies emerge and change with great consistency. This is also part of the reason I refer to the genre-specific online act as blogg*ing* as it is a constant, consistent activity, even retaining a kind of autonomy. I view this as bearing some truth even for those thousands of unattended blogs on the Internet. It is almost in spite of such abandonment that these genre-specific online acts, relics though they are, still exist, maintaining a kind of persistent presence, testimony, and history of those who followed an alleged trend only to subsequently forsake it.

Having gone without any updates to either the mandarin or the misanthrope for at least a year, I suppose I must count myself among those who, in one way or another, have disowned their online identities. While neither the mandarin nor the misanthrope is an accurate reflection of who I am now, I still cannot bring myself to forever delete either construction. This resistance is, perhaps rather obviously, similar to why I keep old emails and archive IM conversations. Incomplete and unfinished as they

are, both blogs remain part of me as well as part of the larger, continual testing of identity taking place on the Internet. Because of its nature as an open communications network, the Internet has become "a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life" (Turkle 1995b, 180). It is through such experimentation that the rules as well as the roles within Internet culture(s) consistently undergo similar processes. As Reymers observes, the Internet presents greater opportunities for "attachment and idea-sharing between people in all facets of experience, from emotionally remote to personally intimate, from business relation to personal friend to sex partner" (2002), all of which ultimately exert influence back upon the (re)formation of an online identity. In other words, included in the creation of my third and fourth blogs, both updated within the last week, are the influences of the mandarin and the misanthrope, as well as the comments offered by others about them.

As such, the limitations on the construction of identity through the genre-specific online act of blogging are both internal and external. They originate within the communicative technology itself and continuing outward, beyond the realm of cyberspace and into real life, as evidenced by the ongoing debate concerning the possibility of academic blogging. Limitations also arise within the communicative technology in another way, for a people externalize multiple selves on the screen, these become "like the layers of an onion: there is nothing in the middle, and the subject is this 'nothing' itself" (Žižek 1997, 141). This decentering is as much a part of the construction of online identity as its very multiplication without limit (Turkle 1995b, 185). However, the Internet, by inature, implicitly encourages such multiplication, making for the sort of society in which the very concept of multi-identities is valorized (Sarup 1996, 142). The fragmentary aspects of constructing and maintaining an online identity via blogging is something to be embraced rather than feared. In essence, it is because of the limitations from within and without that the genre-specific online act of blogging can work as more than "a space for growth" (Turkle 1995b, 263). Indeed, it can become a vital part of the continual exercise in constructing identity throughout computer culture(s).