

the
digital
divide

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Zoll

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<Sherry Turkle>
identity crisis

Excerpted from *Life on the Screen* (pp. 255–62).

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EVERY ERA CONSTRUCTS its own metaphors for psychological well-being. Not so long ago, stability was socially valued and culturally reinforced. Rigid gender roles, repetitive labor, the expectation of being in one kind of job or remaining in one town over a lifetime, all of these made consistency central to definitions of health. But these stable social worlds have broken down. In our time, health is described in terms of fluidity rather than stability. What matters most now is the ability to adapt and change—to new jobs, new career directions, new gender roles, new technologies.

In *Flexible Bodies*, the anthropologist Emily Martin argues that the language of the immune system provides us with metaphors for

the self and its boundaries.¹ In the past, the immune system was described as a private fortress, a firm, stable wall that protected within from without. Now we talk about the immune system as flexible and permeable. It can only be healthy if adaptable.

The new metaphors of health as flexibility apply not only to human mental and physical spheres, but also to the bodies of corporations, governments, and businesses. These institutions function in rapidly changing circumstances; they too are coming to view their fitness in terms of their flexibility. Martin describes the cultural spaces where we learn the new virtues of change over solidity. In addition to advertising, entertainment, and education, her examples include corporate workshops where people learn wilderness, camping, high-wire walking, and zip-line jumping. She refers to all of these as flexibility practicums.

In her study of the culture of flexibility, Martin does not discuss virtual communities, but these provide excellent examples of what she is talking about. In these environments, people either explicitly play roles (as in MUDs—multiuser domains) or more subtly shape their online selves. Adults learn about being multiple and fluid—and so do children. “I don’t play so many different people online—only three,” says June, an eleven-year-old who uses her mother’s Internet account to play in MUDs. During our conversation, I learn that in the course of a year in RL, she moves among three households—that of her biological mother and stepfather, her biological father and stepmother, and a much-loved “first stepfather,” her mother’s second husband. She refers to her mother’s third and current husband as “second stepfather.” June recounts that in each of these three households the rules are somewhat different and so is she. Online switches among personae seem quite natural. Indeed, for her, they are a kind of practice. Martin would call them practicums.

>>> “logins r us”

On a WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) discussion group about online personae (subtitled “boon or bête-noire”), participants shared a sense that their virtual identities were evocative objects for thinking about the self. For several, experiences in virtual space compelled them to pay greater attention to what they take for granted in the real. “The persona thing intrigues me,” said one. “It’s a chance for all of us who aren’t actors to play [with] masks. And think about the masks we wear every day.”²

In this way, online personae have something in common with the self that emerges in a psychoanalytic encounter. It, too, is significantly virtual, constructed within the space of the analysis, where its slightest shifts can come under the most intense scrutiny.³

What most characterized the WELL discussion about online personae was the way many of the participants expressed the belief that life on the WELL introduced them to the many within themselves. One person wrote that through participating in an electronic bulletin board and letting the many sides of ourselves show, “We start to resemble little corporations, ‘LoginRUs,’ and like any company, we each have within us the bean-counter, the visionary, the heart-throb, the fundamentalist, and the wild child. Long may they wave.”⁴ Other participants responded to this comment with enthusiasm. One, echoing the social psychologist Kenneth Gergen,⁵ described identity as a “pastiche of personalities” in which “the test of competence is not so much the integrity of the whole but the apparent correct representation appearing at the right time, in the right context, not to the detriment of the rest of the internal ‘collective.’”⁶ Another said that he thought of his ego “as a hollow tube, through which, one at a time, the ‘many’ speak through at the appropriate moment. . . . I’d like to hear more . . . about the possibilities surrounding the notion that what we perceive as ‘one’ in any context is, perhaps, a conglomerate of ‘ones.’” This writer went on:

Hindu culture is rooted in the "many" as the root of spiritual experience. A person's momentary behavior reflects some influence from one of hundreds of gods and/or goddesses. I am interested in . . . how this natural assumption of the "many" creates an alternative psychology.⁷

Another writer concurred:

Did you ever see that cartoon by R. Crumb about "Which is the real R. Crumb?" He goes through four pages of incarnations, from successful businessman to street beggar, from media celebrity to gut-gnawing recluse, etc., etc. Then at the end he says: "Which is the real one?" . . . "It all depends on what mood I'm in!"

We're all like that online.⁸

Howard Rheingold, the member of the WELL who began the discussion topic, also referred to Gergen's notion of a "saturated self," the idea that communication technologies have caused us to "colonize each other's brains." Gergen describes us as saturated with the many "voices of humankind—both harmonious and alien." He believes that as "we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become part of us and we of them. Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self." With our relationships spread across the globe and our knowledge of other cultures relativizing our attitudes and depriving us of any norm, we "exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold."⁹

Although people may at first feel anguish at what they sense as a breakdown of identity, Gergen believes they may come to embrace

the new possibilities. Individual notions of self vanish "into a stage of relatedness. One ceases to believe in a self independent of the relations in which he or she is embedded."¹⁰ "We live in each other's brains, as voices, images, words on screens," said Rheingold in the online discussion. "We are multiple personalities and we include each other."¹¹

Rheingold's evocation of what Gergen calls the "raptures of multiplicitous being" met with support on the WELL. One participant insisted that all pejorative associations be removed from the notion of a saturated self. "Howard, I *like* being a saturated self, in a community of similarly saturated selves. I grew up on TV and pop music, but it just ain't enough. Virtual communities are, among other things, the co-saturation of selves who have been, all their lives, saturated in isolation."¹² To which Rheingold could only reply, "I like being a saturated self too."¹³ The cybersociety of the WELL is an object-to-think-with for reflecting on the positive aspects of identity as multiplicity.

>>> identity and multiplicity

Without any principle of coherence, the self spins off in all directions. Multiplicity is not viable if it means shifting among personalities that cannot communicate. Multiplicity is not acceptable if it means being confused to a point of immobility.¹⁴ How can we be multiple and coherent at the same time? In *The Protean Self*, Robert Jay Lifton tries to resolve this seeming contradiction. He begins by assuming that a unitary view of self corresponded to a traditional culture with stable symbols, institutions, and relationships. He finds the old unitary notion no longer viable because traditional culture has broken down and identifies a range of responses. One is a dogmatic insistence on unity. Another is to return to systems of belief, such as religious fundamentalism, that enforce confor-

imity. A third is to embrace the idea of a fragmented self.¹⁶ Lifton says this is a dangerous option that may result in a "fluidity lacking in moral content and sustainable inner form." But Lifton sees another possibility, a healthy protean self. It is capable, like Proteus, of fluid transformations but is grounded in coherence and a moral outlook. It is multiple but integrated.¹⁶ You can have a sense of self without being one self.

Lifton's language is theoretical. Experiences in MUDS, on the WELL, on local bulletin boards, on commercial network services, and on the World Wide Web are bringing his theory down to earth. On the Web, the idiom for constructing a "home" identity is to assemble a "home page" of virtual objects that correspond to one's interests. One constructs a home page by composing or "pasting" on it words, images, and sounds, and by making connections between it and other sites on the Internet or the Web. Like the agents in emergent AI, one's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections. People link their home page to pages about such things as music, paintings, television shows, cities, books, photographs, comic strips, and fashion models. As I write this book I am in the process of constructing my own home page. It now contains links to the text of my curriculum vitae, to drafts of recent papers (one about MUDS, one about French psychoanalysis), and to the reading lists for the two courses I shall teach next fall. A "visitor" to my home page can also click a highlighted word and watch images of Michel Foucault and Power Rangers "morph," one into the other, a visual play on my contention that children's toys bring postmodernism down to earth. This display, affectionately referred to as "The Mighty Morphin' Michel Foucault," was a present from my assistant at MIT, Cynthia Col. A virtual home, like a real one, is furnished with objects you buy, build, or receive as gifts.

My future plans for my home page include linking to Paris (the city has a home page), the bot Julia, resources on women's studies,

Imari china, and recent research on migraines. I am not limited in the number of links I can create. If we take the home page as a real estate metaphor for the self, its decor is postmodern. Its different rooms with different styles are located on computers all over the world. But through one's efforts, they are brought together to be of a piece.

Home pages on the Web are one recent and dramatic illustration of new notions of identity as multiple yet coherent; in this book we have met others. Recall Case, the industrial designer who plays the female lawyer Mairead in MedievalMUSH. He does not experience himself as a unitary self, yet says that he feels in control of "himself" and "herselves." He says that he feels fulfilled by his real and virtual work, marriage, and friendships. While conventional thinking tends to characterize multiple personae in pathological terms, this does not seem to capture what is most meaningful about Case playing Mairead or Garrett (introduced in Chapter 8) playing Ribbit.

Within the psychoanalytic tradition, there have been schools that departed from the standard unitary view of identity. As we have seen, the object-relations theorists invented a language for talking about the many voices that we bring inside ourselves in the course of development. Jungian psychology encouraged the individual to become acquainted with a whole range of personae and to understand them as manifestations of universal archetypes, such as innocent virgins, mothers and crones, eternal youths and old men.¹⁷ Jung believed that for each of us, it is potentially most liberating to become acquainted with our dark side, as well as the other-gendered self, called anima in men and animus in women. Jung was banished from the ranks of orthodox Freudians for such suggestions. The object-relations school, too, was relegated to the margins. As America became the center of psychoanalytic politics in the mid-twentieth century, ideas about a robust executive ego became the psychoanalytic mainstream.

Through the fragmented selves presented by patients and through theories that stress the decentered subject, contemporary psychology confronts what is left out of theories of the unitary self. Now it must ask, What is the self when it functions as a society?¹⁸ What is the self when it divides its labors among its constituent "alters"?¹⁹ Those burdened by post-traumatic dissociative disorders suffer these questions; here I have suggested that inhabitants of virtual communities play with them.

Ideas about mind can become a vital cultural presence when they are carried by evocative objects-to-think-with.²⁰ I said earlier that these objects need not be material. For example, dreams and slips of the tongue were objects-to-think-with that brought psychoanalytic ideas into everyday life. People could play with their own and others' dreams and slips. Today, people are being helped to develop ideas about identity as multiplicity by a new practice of identity as multiplicity in online life. Virtual personae are objects-to-think-with.

When people adopt an online persona they cross a boundary into highly charged territory. Some feel an uncomfortable sense of fragmentation, some a sense of relief. Some sense the possibilities for self-discovery, even self-transformation. Serena, a twenty-six-year-old graduate student in history, says, "When I log on to a new MUD and I create a character and know I have to start typing my description, I always feel a sense of panic. Like I could find out something I don't want to know." Arlie, a twenty-year-old undergraduate, says, "I am always very self-conscious when I create a new character. Usually, I end up creating someone I wouldn't want my parents to know about. It takes me, like, three hours. But that someone is part of me." In these ways, and others, many more of us are experimenting with multiplicity than ever before.

With this last comment, I am not implying that MUDs or computer bulletin boards are causally implicated in the dramatic increase of people who exhibit symptoms of multiple personality

disorder (MPD), or that people on MUDs have MPD, or that MUDding is like having MPD. What I am saying is that the many manifestations of multiplicity in our culture, including the adoption of online personae, are contributing to a general reconsideration of traditional, unitary notions of identity.

The history of a psychiatric symptom is inextricably tied up with the history of the culture that surrounds it. When I was in graduate school in psychology in the 1970s, clinical psychology texts regarded multiple personality as so rare (perhaps one in a million) as to be barely worthy of mention. In these rare cases, there was typically one alter personality in addition to the host personality.²¹ Today, cases of multiple personality are much more frequent and typically involve up to sixteen alters of different ages, races, genders, and sexual orientations.²² In multiple personality disorder, it is widely believed that traumatic events have caused various aspects of the self to congeal into virtual personalities, the "ones" often hiding from the "others" and hiding too from that special alter, the host personality. Sometimes, the alters are known to each other and to the host; some alters may see their roles as actively helping others. Such differences led the philosopher Ian Hacking to write about a "continuum of dissociation."²³ These differences also suggest a way of thinking about the self in terms of a continuum of how accessible its parts are to each other.

At one extreme, the unitary self maintains its oneness by repressing all that does not fit. Thus censored, the illegitimate parts of the self are not accessible. This model would of course function best within a fairly rigid social structure with clearly defined rules and roles. At the other extreme is the MPD sufferer whose multiplicity exists in the context of an equally repressive rigidity. The parts of the self are not in easy communication. Communication is highly stylized; one personality must speak to another personality. In fact, the term "multiple personality" is misleading, because the different parts of the self are not full personalities.

They are split-off, disconnected fragments. But if the disorder in multiple personality disorder is the need for the rigid walls between the selves (blocking the secrets those selves protect), then the study of MPD may begin to furnish ways of thinking about healthy selves as nonunitary but with fluid access among their many aspects. Thus, in addition to the extremes of unitary self and MPD, we can imagine a flexible self.

The essence of this self is not unitary, nor are its parts stable entities. It is easy to cycle through its aspects, and these are themselves changing through constant communication with each other. The philosopher Daniel Dennett speaks to the flexible self in his multiple drafts theory of consciousness.²⁴ Dennett's notion of multiple drafts is analogous to the experience of having several versions of a document open on a computer screen where the user is able to move between them at will. The presence of the drafts encourages a respect for the many different versions while it imposes a certain distance from them. No one aspect can be claimed as the absolute, true self. When I got to know French Sherry, I no longer saw the less confident English-speaking Sherry as my one authentic self. What most characterizes the model of a flexible self is that the lines of communication between its various aspects are open. The open communication encourages an attitude of respect for the many within us and the many within others.

As we sense our inner diversity we come to know our limitations. We understand that we do not and cannot know things completely, not the outside world and not ourselves. Today's heightened consciousness of incompleteness may predispose us to join with others. The historian of science Donna Haraway equates a "split and contradictory self" with a "knowing self." She is optimistic about its possibilities: "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly; and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another."²⁵

When identity was defined as unitary and solid, it was relatively easy to recognize and censure deviation from a norm. A more fluid sense of self allows 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.

notes

1. Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies* (Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 161–225.
2. mcdee, The WELL, conference on virtual communities (vc.20.17), April 18, 1992.
3. The sentiment that life online could provide a different experience of self was seconded by a participant who described himself as a man whose conversational abilities as an adult were impaired by having been a stutterer as a child. Online he was able to discover the experience of participating in the flow of a conversation.

I echo [the previous contributor] in feeling that my online persona differs greatly from my persona offline. And, in many ways, my online persona is more "me." I feel a lot more freedom to speak here. Growing up, I had a severe stuttering problem. I couldn't speak a word without stuttering, so I spoke only when absolutely necessary. I worked through it in my early twenties and you wouldn't even notice it now (except when I'm stressed out), but at thirty-seven I'm still shy to speak. I'm a lot more comfortable with listening than with talking. And when I do

speak I usually feel out of sync: I'll inadvertently step on other people's words, or lose people's attention, or talk through instead of to. I didn't learn the dynamic of conversation that most people take for granted, I think. Here, though, it's completely different: I have a feel for the flow of the "conversations," have the time to measure my response, don't have to worry about the balance of conversational space—we all make as much space as we want just by pressing "r" to respond. It's been a wonderfully liberating experience for me. (Anonymous)

4. spoonman, The WELL, conference on virtual communities (vc.20.65), June 11, 1992.
5. Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (Basic Books, 1991).
6. bluefire (Bob Jacobson), The WELL, conference on virtual reality (vr.85.146), August 15, 1993.
7. The WELL, conference on virtual reality (vr.85.148), August 17, 1993.
8. Art Kleiner, The WELL, conference on virtual reality (vr.47.41), October 2, 1990.
9. Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, p. 6.
10. Ibid., p. 17.
11. hlr (Howard Rheingold), The WELL, conference on virtual reality (vr.47.351), February 2, 1993.
12. McKenzie Wark, The WELL, conference on virtual reality (vr.47.361), February 3, 1993.
13. hlr (Howard Rheingold), The WELL, conference on virtual reality (vr.47.362), February 3, 1993.
14. James M. Glass, *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Post-modern World* (Cornell University Press, 1993).
15. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (Basic Books, 1993), p. 192.

16. Ibid., pp. 229–32.
17. See, for example, "Aion: Phenomenology of the Self," in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Penguin, 1971).
18. See, for example, Marvin Minsky, *The Society of Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1985).
19. See, for example, Colin Ross, *Multiple Personality Disorder: Diagnosis, Clinical Features, and Treatment* (John Wiley & Sons, 1989).
20. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1960).
21. Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 21.
22. Ibid., p. 29.
23. Ibid., pp. 96ff.
24. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown & Co., 1991).
25. Donna Haraway, "The Actors Are Cyborg, Nature Is Coyote, and the Geography Is Elsewhere: Postscript to 'Cyborgs at Large,'" in *Technoculture*, eds. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 22.