RESISTING AND RECONCILING A VIRTUAL AGE:
PERFORMING IDENTITIES AND NEGOTIATING LITERACIES IN
SHIFTING MID-LIFE WORKSPACES AND IMMERSIVE ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

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This dissertation highlights the intersections of age, gender, and technology at a time when the U.S. is expecting an increasingly aging labor force in the face of rapidly changing computer technologies. In autoethnographic style, I explore how subjectivities attached to age and gender are produced and negotiated at the interface of online/offline spaces. More specifically, I consider how situated (il) literacies materialize as bodies are positioned in a culture that perpetuates the appropriation of labor roles and identity performances based on age and gender. Drawing from a variety of performance theories and constitutive theories of identity, I examine how particular literacies and nuanced identities influence and are influenced by narratives that reflect everyday practices and politics. Recording and analyzing my own personal performances in the immersive online environments of LinguaMOO and Second Life, I underscore how transitioning from a ‘traditional’ home space to a computer dependent work/school space, matters for ‘real’ bodies in a ‘virtual’ age.
To my father, Edwin McComas, who unknowingly taught me to question familiar domains and to value the stories of everyday life.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER I. ENTRY POINTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transitional Zones</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place and Space/Real and Virtual</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techno-Literacies and Aging Trends in the Workforce</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techno-Literacies and Aging Trends in Education</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mis)Appropriating Labor</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning Through Technology</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Offline Subjectivities Online</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring a Virtual Landscape</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersecting Virtual Identities</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embodying The Avatar</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing through LinguaMOO</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Traditions</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Overview</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER II. FRAMING THEORY AND REVIEWING LITERATURE

Constitutive Identities

Performance as Constitutive

Narrative and Identity

Living Bodies/Virtual Identities

Bodies of Technology, Gender, and Age

Aging Virtually in the Middle

Conclusion

CHAPTER III. PERFORMING METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Embodying Ethnography

Autoethnography

Cyberethnography and ‘Epistemologies of Doing’

Textual Analysis

CHAPTER IV. TEXTING IDENTITIES AND HYPER-LINKING METAPHORS

Welcome to LinguaMOO
Patchwork Girl(s) at the Interface……………………………………… 89
Situating Identity ………………………………………………………… 91
Entering (Hyper) Texts …………………………………………………… 92
Reading Literacies………………………………………………………… 95
Shadowboxing Boundaries……………………………………………… 98
Threading Stories………………………………………………………… 101
Materializing Memories………………………………………………… 105
Mechanisms of Tradition……………………………………………… 106
Goodbye LinguaMOO…………………………………………………… 111
Conclusion……………………………………………………………… 111
CHAPTER V. MY SECOND LIFE AS AUDRY………………………… 114
Conceptualizing Second Life as a Virtual Social World……………… 115
Seaming Appearances …………………………………………………… 119
Shopping for Appearances in Second Life ................................. 120
Connecting Past and Present Spaces………………………………….. 122
Patchwork Girl Returns .............................................................. 125

After Class Ponderings.............................................................. 130

Virtual Vaginas....................................................................... 142

Conclusion.............................................................................. 148

CHAPTER VI. EMBRACING LOOSE ENDS................................. 151

Limitations............................................................................... 153

Future Possibilities................................................................. 155

REFERENCES ........................................................................... 161

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1.1 Second Life Avatar ‘Audry’.................................................. 33

4.1 Hypertext Windows of Jackson’s Patchwork Girl.............. 95

5.1 Virtual Shopping .............................................................. 122

5.2 Creating Second Life Persona........................................... 126

5.3 Wearing Man Skin............................................................ 137

Appendix .............................................................................. 161
Chapter One

Introduction: Entering the Journey

It is a sinful pleasure this willing transgression of a line, which takes one into new awareness, a secret, lonely, and tabooed world—to survive the transgression is terrifying and addictive. To know that everything has changed and yet nothing has changed; and in leaping the chasm of this impossible division of self, a discovery of the self surviving, still well, still strong, and as a curious consequence, renewed. – Patricia Williams (pp. 129-30)

Imagine…

an interwoven image of multiple sites

embodying possibilities

as

I’m imagining

and

I’m ages

of change

July 5, 2007:

As I enter this unfamiliar space I see young shapely figures punctuated in form fitting designer clothes. I observe the ease with which their slender silhouettes glide across the dance floor. I notice how effortlessly they (re)align their bodies with their desires through uninhibited aesthetic alternations. But I struggle, I cannot direct my movement as freely as those around
me, and so I remain distanced. My mobility is hindered by my lack of literacy here, and as a result my choices are limited. I change my clothing and color my hair. I virtually erase myself and blur my identity to become a timeless mosaic of idealization. Will my value increase if my difference is visibly diminished? My story reflects the changes in my mind/body as I am both subject and object in an ongoing process of transformation, knowing all the while that my position is largely dependent upon dominant social structures that map my presence, my privilege, and my agency or lack thereof. The situatedness of my being is marked on my body by those who name me this or that instead of this and that. But I am, we are…all of this and more.

This was my first time at Blue Fusion Jazz Club in Second Life, and Audry, my avatar, was without a doubt a visual virgin, a newbie that looked odd and monstrously disheveled in comparison to the experienced and fashionable clientele that frequented this virtual gathering spot. My sense of presence was heightened even more by my observable lack of knowledge as I tried to camouflage my status through keyboard based mobility. But alas, Audry’s moves were awkwardly staccato, and initially I, her owner, was embarrassed by her lack of gracefulness and her perplexing appearance. From the neck up she had the face of a grumpy old man donning a rented skin I found while shopping for mature, middle-aged crafted bodies. From the collar down she had the body of a young voluptuous woman with porcelain skin, perky breasts, and long slender legs. Audry’s virtually patched persona was controlled in part by the author of this dissertation, who was at the time negotiating a number of new spaces and identity narrative offline as well as online. In both spaces, socially constructed gender/age representations were in
In Second Life she shopped for a female avatar with middle aging skin to represent her online self. In ‘real’ life, she shopped for anti-pro-aging complexion creams and hair colors to represent her offline self. It was a paradox that became even more complicated when she realized that Audry, as her embodied profile, was a visual image that invited deeper inquiries by mirroring performative acts of resisting and reconciling shifting identities in a virtual age.

This dissertation is a journey through various interconnections that surfaced while investigating and (re)negotiating situated literacies and identity narratives about gendered relationships with machines and computer technologies. While negotiating transitional zones, I enter Shelly Jackson’s hypertext story, Patchwork Girl, and the virtual worlds of Lingua MOO and Second Life. I enter these spaces as platforms for viewing how particular subjectivities are produced at the intersection of everyday practices and techno-literacies, which in turn position the body in particular ways in regards to established hierarchies and inequities. Recalling individual challenges and insights that occurred while negotiating my own techno-cultural agency in these three online spaces, I explore how experiences online can be linked to past and present hegemonic norms offline. Throughout this journey, connections are made between ‘real’

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1 The term ‘virtual age’ as I refer to it, encompasses the notion that we are living in a time when virtuality has been made visible by means of computer technologies, and that this in turn has blurred the boundaries between ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ worlds.
and ‘virtual’ situations performed at the interface of familiar narratives and unfamiliar cultures.

Employing cyberfeminist auto-ethnography, I investigate how narratives formulated within a traditionally patriarchal society embody, influence, and reflect situated literacies and identity performances during transitional zones of shifting into new and unfamiliar computer mediated spaces. Specifically, this inquiry focuses on how situated techno-literacies are negotiated at the interface of computer mediated environments and how these literacies are interwoven with past and present contexts through identity narratives. In addition, I suggest that a ‘digital divide’ is produced in multiple ways that extend beyond the notion of accessibility to computers and training.

While I explore these platforms, I consider ways in which each of these immersive online spaces, by virtue of their programming, and I, by virtue of my participation, reinforce, resist, and reconcile hegemonic forces and hierarchies. Finally, by juxtaposing online and offline issues of gender and age, this research illuminates how socio-economic opportunities and constraints are perpetuated and reinforced through situated techno-literacies, and how this then positions bodies within a technology/service divided labor forces.

Before continuing, I will address key concepts and terms used throughout this dissertation. Namely, I will discuss how transitional zones, space and place, and real and virtual, are defined in the context of this research.
Transitional Zones

Life transitions are not uncommon; in fact they occur as a result of life performed at the interface of everyday events that are interwoven into ever-changing socio-cultural contexts. Indeed, as I discuss transitional zones throughout this dissertation I refer to the process of shifting into unfamiliar identity performances while resisting and reconciling familiar familial narratives that no longer apply to changed circumstances. For example, in regards to age, socially constructed clocks attach expectations to the body as it passes through specific developmental stages from birth to death. Temporal determinates are internally (personally) and externally (socio-culturally) placed on the body through reiterative narratives. However, implicit in such timeline narratives are particular subjectivities that are influenced, supported, and perpetuated through ‘acceptable’ performances that meet social and personal expectations and norms (Polkinghorne, 1988).

As Lachman and James charted a *Course of Midlife Development* in 1997, they noted that midlife, which they considered to between the ages of 40 to 65, had been previously perceived as a “relatively quiet period,” in comparison to young or old life stages (p. 1). Limited research on this particular stage of life is in part due to the fact that a midlife time frame was non-existent before medical/technological advancements extended life expectancy. Because longevity varies across cultures, the boundaries we assign to the middle phase of adulthood depends on morality expectations related to
given locations, backgrounds, and situation (1997). And even then, ‘middle’ is difficult to pinpoint unless an exact ‘exit’ date is known. While chronology may define the physical body in terms of young, middle, and old age, key events like empty nest, menopause, grandchildren, and retirement are more accurately tied to understanding how associated events influence identities in the ‘middle’ life stage. Because these events are experienced differently at different middle points, and are influenced by complexities of socio-cultural context, midlife is characterized not by one ruling narrative, but by diverse and divergent paths based on experiences, location, history, and available choices.

That there is no universal identity narrative does not negate the notion that social norms inscribed on the body establish and appropriated timeline that impacts social acceptance when a critical event falls outside of the perceived ‘acceptable’ frame (Lachman & James, 1997). In addition to temporal boundaries, identity narratives centered on familial experiences are prone to interact with age as a function of constituting identity during a life course, so that family narratives are absorbed into self narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1999). In the context of shifting away from that which has been known as self-identity, transitional zones exists to create a space of liminality, that space wherein (re)evaluation of self and situation creates new awareness and eventually new identity performances. More precisely, this liminal space is a platform on which the actor’s imagination provides powerful images that influence the
direction and the degree to which previously resisted narratives are reconciled and restructured. Particularly in mid-life, multiple transitional zones occur simultaneously and “reappraisal of self and values” creates catalysts for change. (Helson, p. 33).

Transitional zones are spaces where the imagination lives in a ‘middle’ time and space, neither at the beginning nor at the end, but beyond familiar identity performances that for better or for worse, culminate into a “transformation of consciousness” (p. 197).

The impact of rapidly changing technologies propels many mid-life adult workers into a “radical shift,” whereby transitional zones embody relationships with computer technologies and subsequently, with “virtual lives” and situated literacies (Riggs, 2004, p. 104). In the current research, transitional zones that are experienced while negotiating identity performances and situated literacies, occur at the interface of online and offline environments, namely Lingua MOO and Second Life. Ongoing advancements in computer technologies will continue to impact workers as skills (i.e. literacies) required to ‘keep up’ will continue to change at a rapid pace. Techno-(il)literacies contribute greatly to the context in which identities are transformed and performed at the human-computer interface. As I question and blur boundaries between, ‘place’ and ‘space’ and ‘virtual’ and ‘real’, I negotiate immersive online learning spaces that reflect offline material ‘placement’ of bodies.

**Place and Space – Real and Virtual**
Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms ‘space’ and ‘place’ interchangeably to emphasize an ongoing interaction between the two. Geographic locations (places) and socio-cultural practices (spaces) interact to produce cultural identity, power, and capital (Zukin, 1991). Places “are always constructed out of articulations of social relations,” and characteristics of particular events and locations extend beyond the confines of distinctly bound physicality (Massey, 1995, p. 182). For example, meanings applied to the ‘place’ of ‘home’ are created through ‘spaces’ of social, cultural, and familial interactions and imaginings. Blurring the sharp lines of mind/body and virtual/real dualisms recognizes this coexisting interconnection. That the imaginary and the physical have the capabilities to reciprocally name and identify each other significantly contributes to the blurring of these boundaries (Sunden, 2003). In the current context, the relational aspects of place are considered while juxtaposing offline and online practices. Therefore, the virtual worlds of LinguaMOO and Second Life are “viewed simultaneously as a mediated social space online as well as a place inhabited through the human-machine continuum of the avatar” (Gajjala, in press, p.3).

Techno-literacies and Aging Trends in the Workforce

As I have stated, this research explores text-centric and visually-centric virtual worlds as platforms for observing and understanding how constitutive identities and
situated literacies might be constructed, resisted, and reconciled through linking online and offline identity narratives. Emergent and pervasive computer technologies are changing the ways in which local/global communication is accomplished, which in turn affects how society produces and consumes information. Because computers are used in various aspects of daily work inside and outside the home, technical skills must be updated regularly for job opportunities that demand a higher degree of literacy and comfort with computer mediated communication.

Though computers are pervasive in many cultures, they are neither accessed nor adopted universally by all populations. This inconsistency contributes to a digital divide that can (dis)empower based on who is and who is not fluent with computers. Furthermore, as computers continue to be an integral part of daily communicative performances in many occupations, obtaining work becomes more dependent on ever-changing techno-literacies. For an aging workforce that may be unfamiliar with computer technologies, this creates a challenge as they compete for available jobs. Currently, the U.S. is expecting a demographic shift as the largest percentage of the population is projected to be 55 and older by the year 2035, and those 65 and older will represent 20 percent of the U.S. population by 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Additionally, between a 30 year span, from 1977 to 2007, employment of workers 65 and older increased 101 percent with employment of women workers climbing 147 percent, nearly doubling the 75 percent climb for employment of men (U.S. Bureau of
Labor Statistics, 2008). This, coupled with the fact that people 55 and older are expected to make up 20.3 percent of the labor force in 2020, complicates how issues and interactions between technology, gendered identity, and techno-literacy will influence perceptions and positioning of aging bodies within given spaces (PewResearch, 2009). As the labor force shifts from manufacturing to predominantly technology or service sectors, outdated skills will likely be eliminated, replaced, and devalued in the transition. Subsequently higher paying positions that rely on rapidly changing techno-literacies create a competitive job market for all ages of people who need money to support themselves and their families, all of whom are living longer and consequently working longer than they might have expected.

Women and men now face similar scenarios within a shifting labor force. Those between the ages of 50-64 in the U.S. are either learning completely new skills or revising existing skills to meet current demands and to maximize their chances of obtaining and/or retaining employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Plans of retiring with a substantial pension after thirty years or more service to a manufacturing ‘family’ are doubtful for many who had seen this as a rite of passage into older age. When workers from industrialized sectors were polled about their plans for retirement, 52 percent of those who had intentions of retiring during the next ten years were reconsidering their choices (PewResearch, 2009). Furthermore, of the 52 percent who
were postponing or cancelling their retirement plans altogether, 61 percent of them were women (2009). In an already challenging economic environment, those who have not acquired the computer skills necessary for a technologically driven workforce may find it difficult to find employment outside a service sector that offers predominately part-time hours and/or low pay. In regards to gender, women still continue to earn less than men even when they are in parallel occupations; and homemakers can still attest to the compensatory dismissal of ‘domesticity’ (Wajcman, 2000). Overall, fragmentation in the labor force will continue as the two fastest and largest growing work industries projected through 2018 are professional occupations that are more computer dependent such as “education, healthcare, science, and information technology” and contrasting service occupations that are less computer dependent, such as “cooks, home health care aides, flight attendants, child care workers, cosmetologists, and police and firefighters” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009).

As the majority of our U.S. population transitions into ‘middle’ and older age with prospects of working beyond the age of 65, a wider range of ages will be competing for jobs either in the service or the technology sector. In a local/global economy dependent upon computer mediated technologies, many professional jobs necessitate a higher degree of techno-literacies. Techno-literacies vary from one situation to another as proficiencies with tools of production require different skill
levels. Adapting to different technologies is an integral part of how we function in a changing ‘progressive’ world, but in the present climate of computer dependence those with less computer literacy tend to face a steeper learning curve and a greater change of marginalization than those more familiar with computer technology. This also creates an additional challenge within a work culture that not only requires ever emergent technical skills, but also (pre) positions bodies according to gender, class, race, and age (Riggs, 2004).

So, how does a growing population of middle aging bodies enter a workforce and resist being placed along the margins of opportunity and/or possibly being ‘encouraged’ to retire before they are financially ready to do so? For decades now, a financially secure retirement has been an illusion for many women. In fact, in 1977 women were 70 percent more likely than men to be living below the poverty level after they retired (Hill, 2002, p. 40). For many who are fortunate to retire with sufficient funds, taking adult computer classes may be a way to keep the mind and body active while keeping up with a changing world. But for those who must continue to work past the age of 65, having the opportunity to ‘reskill’ matters greatly in regards to how the body is ‘placed’ in regards to income, independence, agency, and feelings of self-efficacy.
For middle-age women and men who must (re)enter a computer saturated, image-focused work culture, learning new techno-literacies will likely be necessary to compete with younger bodies and minds. With a reputation for valuing independence and lifelong learning, the baby boomer generation is generally familiar with processes of constant re)learning. In fact, many have shifted their daily performances several times throughout their lives “for career moves, for personal growth,” or for adapting to new roles in a world much different than that of their parents’ world (Palazesi & Bower, 2004, p. 45). But even though boomers are adept and eager to welcome change, the rapid pace and the degree at which today’s technologies are changing is not the type of change they are accustomed to (Riggs, 2004). As education becomes more important for mid-age adults obtaining employment, trends in postsecondary schools will likely face a shift in demographics as well.

**Situated Literacies and Aging Trends in Education**

For many adults who face an unfamiliar labor market in which they hope to enter, gaining new computer mediated skills offers hope for improving employment opportunities. To address the needs of an aging workforce, local and online colleges are fast becoming the answer for baby boomers 45 and over who, for a number of reasons, want or need to (re)tool in order to (re)enter a rapidly changing and perhaps unfamiliar technology driven labor force. Researchers for the National Telecommunications and
Information Administration (NTIC) in 2004 reported that in conjunction with age, gender, location and economic status, familiarity with computers and the Internet is linked to an older adult’s current work status and level of education (p. 27). That better educated and actively working individuals are more apt to use and become familiar with computers implies that successfully engaging in one or both of these environments could create greater opportunities for remaining in or (re)entering the current labor force (See Appendix). This, in turn, may serve to narrow the ‘digital divide’ as well as the inequities that accompany marginalization and disenfranchisement from local and global computer mediated cultures. But the operative word in the above statement is ‘successfully’.

One cannot successfully distribute an office memo, communicate with instructors and colleagues, or produce a research paper if computer skills are non-existent in a computer dependent environment. Considering that during the last decade of the 20th century baby boomers made up 56 percent of all adults enrolled in colleges in the U.S., (i.e., students 25 and older) and that they currently account for nearly 20 percent of all students enrolled in higher education in the U.S., baby boomers have become an important audience for many post-secondary institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999; Palazesi, Louis, Bower, & Beverly, 2006). If less techno-literate adult students do not gain the computer skills needed for academic success,
what are their chances of transitioning into a rapidly emergent computer driven workforce? Therefore, it benefits colleges and employers to work together to successfully implement programs that retain and retrain older adult students as they transition into more valued employees. However, there is no guarantee that access and training alone will narrow this digital divide if we continue to be a culture that reiterates socially constructed ideologies through narrowly defined identity narratives.

(Mis) Appropriating Labor

Previous practices in relation to the gendering of technologies continue to impact present and future social positions as an aging population is living longer, and for various reasons, (re) entering a workforce that requires a ‘crossing over’ into unfamiliar domains. For example, during early industrial age women were provided with machinery that kept them inside the home, while men had machinery that typically took them outside into the community (Wajcman, 1991). Most of the machines and appliances that women operated were designed by men, yet relegated to the woman’s appropriated roles of cooking, laundering, sewing, and cleaning. Mechanics were typically men, not women. Indeed, young girls in the 1950s were encouraged to become stenographers, teachers, nurses, and caretakers if they worked outside their homes at all (Wajcman, 1991). Home economics and industrial arts classes were sharply segregated by gender in the 1960s and 70s. Boys were equally conditioned into roles
through industrial arts classes that taught car repair, carpentry, and mechanics. Encouraging children to cross that gendered boundary was rarely practiced in an educational system where adolescent children learned that ‘proper’ ladies cooked, cleaned, and serviced inside the home, and ‘real’ men repaired machinery and earned wages outside the home. Women’s roles represented a softer body, a producer of passion, while men’s roles signified brute strength, a producer of money and dependency as they repaired the machines that women used (1991).

Crossing appropriated identity boundaries of any sort creates inclusions and exclusions based on socio-cultural expectations, and presents a transitional zone in which previously held identity performances are evaluated and revised to adapt to new circumstances. For those who were not accustomed to using technologies during the industrial age, the shift toward more advanced computer mediated technologies can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering, depending on personal background, location, and current context. Furthermore, constructing identity narratives based on gendered roles and tasks alongside an economy dependent upon emergent computer mediated technologies, has produced and perpetuated binaries as gender appropriated occupations and expectations produce oppressive hierarchies and inequalities manifest in material wages, labor occupation, time, and positionality (Wajcman, 1991). Indeed, as pervasive as computers have become in the daily landscape, there are still millions of Americans who feel challenged by computers; they are generally older and less
educated; without internet access at home; and represent marginalized populations that are currently experiencing the highest rise in unemployment (Johnson, 2009).

In both online and offline spaces, cultural influencers contribute to privileging particular literacies over others, and thus to producing subjectivities that result in hierarchies based on image as well as techno-literacy. This research considers how ‘real’ world attitudes about the aging body are (re) produced in the ‘virtual’ world of Second Life. Tracing ‘virtual’ and ‘real situated literacies, appropriated gendered roles, nuanced identities, and technology, I narrate my personal experiences while negotiating unfamiliar computer mediated spaces. I begin my journey in LinguaMOO, where identifying myself through text leads to a metaphoric relationship with Patchwork Girl in Jackson’s multi-directional, hypertext narrative. I then proceed to Second Life where I search for signs of middle-aged on the virtual bodies of avatars. On each of these platforms I explore how negotiating situated literacies at the human-machine interface connects to online and offline identity narratives as I reflect and (re) evaluate past and present transitional zones.

Transitioning Through Technology

The sewing machine represented a lineage of appropriated performances for the women in my family as it symbolized our status as seamstresses and our proficiencies in shared gendered literacies as homemakers, wives, and mothers. But as time passed, my sewing machine eventually drifted into the background as swatches and scraps of materials used for mending
clothes, constructing costumes, and patching quilts were gradually replaced by my own college textbooks and papers. Questions and curiosities concerning cultures beyond my quiet, quintessential, white rural setting were somewhat satisfied through a collapse of space and time that allowed me to transcend local limitations. My computer had become a personal conduit for new knowledge and a silent partner for late night solitaire. While re-imagining my proverbial representations as wife, mother, and homemaker, I considered how this choice to divorce my familiar surroundings would affect my life and change forever how I walked through the world. Transgressing all I had known for nearly three decades, the thought of ‘starting over’ when my friends were contemplating retirement was met with trepidation. (Un)willingly performing appropriated roles had defined my sense of self, my sense of security, and my sense of place as I stood at the threshold between past, present, and future, (re)viewing my new role as a woman in transition between who I had been and who I was becoming.

My personal relationship with the Internet began in the mid 1990s, with the purchase of a family computer. Unlike most tools I had accessed throughout my adult life, the computer did not help me perform my domestic duties of cooking and cleaning, nor did it contribute to my family’s hygiene, my sewing, my crafting, or my gardening. This machine, I thought, was not designed to minimize mundane chores relegated as ‘woman’s work’. Therefore, I rarely used it. From my perspective, the primary reason for having a computer was for my children’s academic assignments. On the rare occasions that I did search the Internet for information, I never ventured beyond
subjects of domesticity, health, style, and motherhood. I resisted entering sites that challenged my computer literacy. I never entered a chat room, created a blog, or played a virtual video game. A legacy of Christian dogma had taught me that a presence ‘outside’ my body was granted only in heavenly spaces after physical death. If I denied such fundamental ‘truths’ I would deny my past and my future, not to mention my appropriated purpose. I stayed (in) securely within my (dis) comfort zone, my virtual space of accepted/contested performances at the interface of self and machine.

The Internet, for various reasons, has become an integral part of daily life in many areas of the world, yet it remains a contested space where repeated daily practices influence and are influenced by class, race, gender, and age appropriated identities. For some, the Internet is an ambiguous and vulnerable environment, a dark place where identity theft abounds and childhood innocence is lost to stalkers with no identity (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), a world that tempts people to exit ‘reality’ in exchange for “uncharted territory that lies between humans and their machines” (Castronova, 2007, p.9). For others, ambiguity and vulnerability are the very catalysts for reflective thinking about self and society, for innovative learning through immersive performances that evolve into “epistemologies of doing” (Gajjala, Rybas, & Altman, 2007, p. 210), and that create platforms for experiencing hegemonic power structures, identity politics, subjectivities, and positionalities firsthand.
People enter online spaces for a variety of reasons, to seek information, to meet new people, to express voice, to play awhile, and in doing so, they fall into an exploration of middle space where ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ connect, where spatial and temporal collapse, and where visual sensory perception transcends familiar daily realities. And while the Internet opens more opportunity for exploring global and local cultures, it oppresses those who are not literate in the complexities of this vast technological space, yet must rely on it for employment in gendered divisions of labor (Riggs, 2004; Wajcman, 1991). For many middle aged and older women, understanding new technologies has as much if not more to do with age, gender, and social class, as it does with available machinery and training.

Because the Internet has become an integral part of today’s communication network, computer literacy is of primary concern for people who must secure or advance their economic opportunities in an environment that is dependent on ever-changing technology. Marginalized groups who have either lacked access to, or have little if any experiences with computers, often find themselves at a disadvantage in a job market that requires particular skills outside those encountered in more domesticating practices. Literacies manifested through appropriated gender roles, whether those skills are applied to work outside or inside the home, become familiar ways of making meaning of the world in which we live. Positions that secure patriarchal economic
Virtual Age  21

structures contribute to producing subjectivities that are dependent upon literacies focused on domesticated technologies of (dis) empowerment.

Interfacing with computers is a necessary practice for those who wish to keep pace with the rapid changes of today’s techno-culture. However, one’s relationship with communication technology depends greatly on life situations such as geographic location, cultural norms, economics, class, race, gender, and age (Gajjala, 2004; Nakamura 2002; Riggs, 2004). For mid-life women between the ages of 45-64 who are transitioning from a non-computer medicated life style to one in which computer use is vital for success, the shift can be overwhelming and intimidating as it brings into question personal issues of self-efficacy, agency, and cultural identity (Riggs, 2004). Indeed, challenges surrounding computer literacies are realized at the computer-human interface where virtual spaces collide with material places and subject positions. At the intersection of past and present online and offline performances, identity politics can be revealed, resisted, and reconciled to disclose ways that gendered and aged bodies matter as situated literacies and nuanced identities are constructed through produced narratives and patriarchal perspectives.

In the virtual world of Second Life ©, negotiating identity representation while constructing an avatar and participating in this cyberculture weaves online and offline practices into narratives that reflect life ‘realities’ in both contexts. Therefore, my research benefits the participants, designers, and the field of communication as it
extends possibilities for simulated environments to be viewed as platforms for 
crystallizing the processual and transformative relationship of self and virtual age in the 
current culture of computer mediated communication (CMC). In an auto-ethnographic 
fashion, I rely on interdisciplinary theories to weave multi-sited, multi-modal frames 
typically associated with feminist research methodologies and methods. Specifically, 
performance theories (Conquergood, 1991; Denzin, 2003; Pelias, 1999, 1998; Madison, 
2005) are employed alongside constitutive theories of identity (Butler, 1998), theories on 
age and image (Twigg, 2007), cyberculture (Bell, 2007), cyberethnography (Hine, 2000; 
Boellstorff, 2007), and autoethnography (Bochner, 2004). Experiential narratives about 
shifting identity performances and representations bring an intimate dimension to 
ongoing themes and issues that address technology, age, image, community, and home 
to name only a few (Riggs, 2004). Offline subjectivities that have been produced 
throughout a lifetime enter into all aspects of identity performances and are 
perpetuated through reiterative language that reinstates socio-cultural and economic 
positions. Narratives that constitute identities are not erased at the computer-human 
interface. Indeed, offline life narratives that produce subjectivities are virtually 
transferred into online cultures to emphasize and exaggerate offline identity 
performances based on situated literacies.

Performing Offline Subjectivities Online
What can we learn about offline subjectivities while participating in online virtual worlds? How do issues of identity politics and subjectivities intersect with issues of age and technology while participating in the virtual world of Second Life? By weaving self-narratives and theory, I explore instances wherein technology has been gendered through language, text, and practice in ways that perpetuate and privilege heteronormative values. This dissertation is a reflexive journey through transitional zones wherein performances of resistance, reconciliation, and possibility are realized at the interface of online and offline identity narratives. By exploring nuanced ways in which subjectivities and situated literacies are (re) produced and consumed in the virtual worlds of LinguaMOO and Second Life, scholars, programmers, and researchers may gain insight into how oppressive hierarchies continue to (re) position the body in today’s virtual age. Here I promote neither a utopian nor a dystopian view of virtual spaces in general and of LinguaMOO and Second Life in particular. This research is a journey of intersections viewed through qualitative performance theories and methodologies that do not promote an ideology of absolute truths, but instead encourage multiple perspectives through a prismatic lens well suited for studying human phenomenon.

Exploring a Virtual Landscape
I saw no indication of wrinkling faces, sagging breasts, or graying hair, no aging society. Identity was (in) visible here…and there, yet the body still mattered. It was a paradox. Here and there, characteristics of aging skin reflected time, knowledge, and skill—virtually an artistic achievement highly prized among artisans. So tell me, why is it that in this culture betwixt and between time and space—in this middle world—I see no middle age? Through technical wizardry here…and there, boundaries are made (in) visible as identity is transformed and erased at the interface of bodies and machines.

For those who participate in the virtual world of Second Life, performing identity at the interface weaves online and offline practices into personal narratives that reflect life ‘realities’ in both contexts. Identity co-exists with labels and positionalities that impact where or if one works, lives, or eats, and yet we cannot help but wear identity. Body matters in regards to identity, and vision remains the primary mode of identifying. In a culture of “technological feast,” visual perception “becomes unregulated gluttony” (Haraway, 1988. P. 581) through accepted heteronormative ideologies that impart value on the human body and ignore the fact that “seeing is never complete” (Elkins, 1996. p. 86). Incomplete perception that creates ambiguity challenges a fixed identity. Ambiguous identity of anyone or anything problematizes categorical definitions on which positivism establishes absolute ‘truth’. Cartesian identity resists the blurring of boundaries between female/male, old/young,
local/global, and real/virtual dichotomies through terms that categorize, universalize, and (re) enforce subject positions.

As a matrix that transcends space, the Internet engages us in a kaleidoscope of communicative behaviors that result in a sense of connecting and belonging to a ‘real’ community; all while remaining physically present in a geographically located place (Sunden, 2003). But time-space compression is not the same in all spheres. Societies are complex and vary in layered degrees of assistance in systems that oversee mobility and communication (Massey, 1994). The notion of locality and place in the Internet is stretched and collapsed into time and space for a sense of ‘reality’ and paradoxically, a ‘sense of place’. However, having a ‘sense of place’ infers security and fixedness, which contradicts a fluid, fragmented, emergent, and dynamic personhood (1994). Cyberspace is neither granted to, nor desired by everyone equally across the globe, and that text is a prominent communicator further excludes those with little or no access or limited literacy (Conquergood, 2002). Indeed, while computer use becomes more prevalent in daily practices, the number of people meeting at the interface still depends greatly on life situations such as geographic location, culture, economics, status, class, race, gender and age (Gajjala, 2004; Nakamura, 2002; Riggs, 2004). But experiencing a sense of belonging rather than a sense of exclusion more likely happens when communication moves across social relations to produce a collective performance of camaraderie.
Relying on Communication and Performance Studies, I rely on theories that are interdisciplinary in nature and that appreciate multi-sited, multi-vocal frames typically associated with feminist research methods. Specifically, performance ethnography (Conquergood, 1991; Denzin, 2003), performative writing (Pelias, 1999; Pollock, 1998), and the performance of possibilities (Madison, 2005), are used throughout the study since each aspect of the process is considered performative; from observing and participating in the performances, to writing the final document in a performative style. This approach in conjunction with constitutive theories of identity will be discussed in Chapter Two.

I am a storyteller, a woman, perhaps not unlike others from different landscapes, who has crossed bridges and transitioned through life narratives – knowing that they matter – knowing that a story is never ‘just’ a story.

Gleaning from cyberfeminist epistemologies and unconventional ethnographies, the methodologies I put forth in this study are cyberethnography and autoethnography. With roots in anthropology, these two methodologies are interwoven in the trajectory of feminist ethnographic practices proclaimed in the works of Ruth Behar, 1996; James Clifford, 1984; Dwight Conquergood, H.L. Goodall Jr., 2000; George Marcus, 1998; Renato Rosaldo, 1993; and Soyini Madison, 2005 to name a few. A primary feature of cyberfeminist ethnography is the emphasis on making visible those embedded sociopolitical structures that perpetuate subjugation and marginalization based on class,
ethnicity, race, gender, age, and location (Nakamura, 2002; Wilding, 1997).

Cyberethographers enter any number of online cultures where they then engage in, contribute to, and write about life in that space. Throughout this study I consider a variety of works from cyberfeminist scholars, namely Nancy K. Baym, Radhika Gajjala, Annette Markham, Lisa Nakamura, Jenny Sunden, Sherry Turkel, Faith Wilding, and others who critically engage subjectivities and interwoven socio-cultural concerns in online spaces.

Autoethnography and cyberethnography coexist throughout this project to recognize that I too am part of the cultural context as I influence, and am influenced by a new virtual age of which I am an outsider/insider. Autoethnography is a way of “writing and conducting research that connects the personal and the cultural by placing the self within a social context” (Holt 43). Consequently, while I explore the nuances of identity representation in Second Life, I do not ignore how I negotiate identity at the interface. This marriage of methodologies recognizes that a reflexive ‘I’ is present throughout the research process and that my own narratives add a dimension that is significant to the findings and the analysis.

During this qualitative study I will explore personal narratives written while experiencing LinguaMOO and Second Life. Because this likely will lead to multiple inquires while in the process of analyzing text, I cannot predict my exact journey nor can I presume to know what I might unveil along the way. Therefore, I also employ
textual analysis as a hermeneutic method to gain insights into images an texts that highlight various issues of subjectivities and situated literacies. I enter Second Life for the purpose of collecting online conversations, coding and recording themes therein, and analyzing how those findings intersect to related social structures in order to highlight cultural influences in offline/online performances. More specifically, I am interested in how it is that past appropriated roles have influenced the negotiation of literacy and identity at the interface of computer mediated virtual environments.

**Intersecting Virtual Identities**

When I was first introduced to the virtual world of Second Life in June, 2007, my mind’s eye wandered back in time to capture images of my last and only experience with a virtual world three years earlier. During a qualitative research methods course in 2004, my classmates and I were required to enter the three dimensional online world of LinguaMoo², where multiple users claimed online personas and manipulated their surroundings by typing coded language into a computer (Sunden, 2003). Here, representations of objects, rooms, personalities, and appearances were produced by

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² MOOs (MUD Object-Oriented), are the offspring of MUDs (Multi-user Domains) and both represent virtual worlds accessed in the internet. MOO refers to an online space where multiple users can be present at any given time and where meanings are made primarily of coded text rather than visual perceptions. By typing commands on the keyboard, objects, emotions, and identities are named and represented through the text. Knowledge and agency are acquired in the skill of ‘doing’ language at the human/machine interface. There are a variety of related MOOs, such as Lambda Moo, Water Moo, and Lingua Moo. My classmates and I resided in the now defunct Lingua Moo, a text focused, synchronic (real time) virtual environment created by Humanities scholars in 1995.
writing and consumed by reading coded language on the computer screen. Through specific commands, student creations simultaneously influenced positionalities and represented identities. As a former self-proclaimed Luddite, I had rarely used computers for anything beyond sending e-mails (relational), surfing for answers (informational), and writing essays (functional), so my lack of literacy in online spaces at once limited by ability to keep pace with more technically proficient classmates. It was very frustrating.

Consequently, my MOO character, Patchwork Girl, often wandered aimlessly while I struggled to map her journey in unchartered territory. Despite the fact that I spent much time tripping over mechanical aspects, the repeated ritual for wading through hesitation had become an autoethnographic performance of observing myself throughout the process of exploration. I reflected on how I was performing my own identity at the body/machine interface of new technology. What influenced those performances? How were online identities influenced by, and an embodiment of, sociopolitical issues of difference such as race, gender, sexuality, and particularly age; issues typically associated with ‘real’ world identity politics, subjectivities, and socio-cultural inequities?

Although LinguaMoo produced uncertainty and insecurity at the interface, it provided new insights into a wired world in which I performed (a) part. In LinguaMoo, the marginalization I felt was a result of my own illiteracy and lack of
cultural capital in this unfamiliar environment. For 23 years I had performed appropriated gender roles of homemaking, motherhood, and wifery before returning to academic life. When I returned as a student after a thirty year hiatus, I knew just enough about computers to complete class assignments and research. That was all I expected or desired from computer technology. However, it was soon evident that for better or for worse, I had entered a new age of communication mediation that would surely infiltrate the second phase of my life.

As I entered the computer lab in University Hall three years after the LinguaMOO phenomenon, my apprehension told me that my neophyte status in regards to computers had not changed much. Paradoxically, it was my neophyte status in MOO that channeled self-reflexive moments as I observed my ‘self’ performing at the interface. The process of creating identity representation in LinguaMOO had prompted questions about online and offline subjectivities precisely because I was experiencing the marginalization while simultaneously narrating and analyzing the journey. The possibilities for a rich auto-cyberethnographic study were clearly within reach. For this reason, on the evening of June 26, 2007, I (re) cast myself into yet another virtual age performance; this time as a visual avatar named Audry who was draped in Second Life skin.
Embodying the Avatar

Throughout this project I refer to a virtual embodiment that occurs when a person I represented as an avatar. The ancient Sanskrit word ‘avatara,’ originally referred to the incarnation, or embodiment of the Hindu god, Vishnu. I envision avatara in the image of a goddess passing through space, weaving ethereal and material identities, extending the mind/body connection from “virtual to actual” and back again (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 128). An avatar as an entity that passes beyond life forms characteristically blurs a line that attempts to disembody the self apart from its journey. In computer mediated virtual worlds, the shortened term, avatar, is now more frequently used in reference to embodiment as a quality or concept relating to a person. However, the initial concept of incarnation and embodiment that characteristically defined an avatar as inside and outside the physical body as we know it has not been omitted from this newer meaning. According to the more contemporary definition, passing through time and space is not only a quality of gods and goddesses, but also of humans, so that the interplay of “virtual to actual” and “actual to virtual” is recognized beyond absolute binaries and are in fact interchangeable (p. 128). Such blurring contributes to a multifaceted, fluid, and dynamic self representation at the interface. In an “epistemology of doing,” women can perform identity in myriad ways throughout their second life experience (Gajjala, Rybas, & Altman, 2004).
As virtual representations of offline identities, avatars oftentimes replicate the visual aesthetics of the human body and are highly valued for their replication of offline ‘beauty.’ My avatar in Second Life is Audry, a visual representation that resonates from the computer program’s default menu of available ‘physical’ attributes to produce a human-like image on the screen. Second Life participants choose from a number of programmed options that alter an avatar’s body shape and overall physical appearance. Options for ‘customizing’ the original avatars are basic. Facial features, height, weight, hair, skin, gender, and various ‘physical’ attributes give the avatar a sense of location within cyberspace where representation is constructed at the blurred boundaries of ‘real’ and ‘virtual.’ Virtual accessories and clothing for avatars, like virtual items for ‘in world’ homes and land, are either free or purchased at shopping districts throughout Second Life.
The moment the human body offline is affected by and through experiences online, a convergence of ‘virtual and ‘real’ world narratives overlap to create a feeling of bodily presence, i.e., embodiment (Turkle, 1984, 2005; Sunden, 2003; Boellstorff, 2007). Though there are numerous studies regarding the Internet, the most common thread that links them together is the notion of embodiment. Embodiment occurs at the interface where users are simultaneously inside and outside ‘reality’ as the mind/body distinction blurs (Sunden, 2003). Indeed, to omit the phenomenon of embodiment from
studies that focus on human interaction with computer mediated spaces is to remain ignorant of the internet’s influence on individual lives in particular and society in general.

Literature addressed on the following pages considers issues of age, identity, technology, and transition as they might apply to the context of women interacting in virtual worlds. Scholars from various disciplines such as cognitive psychology, gerontology, rhetoric, religion, anthropology, education, theater, art, and law to name a few, join communication and technology scholars to explore a variety of issues regarding how technology is impacting on and off line identities, communities, and cultures. In the next section, authors display diverse methodologies for exploring online spaces. Some studies rely on data from offline sources to argue online subjectivities, while others like me, employ feminist epistemologies alongside cyberethnography. Rather than taking propositional stance, which proposes an answer before beginning the quest, I am guided by a processional attitude that focuses on how the production of subjectivity came into being for older women interfacing with the virtual age. Thus, unexpected questions will likely arise from participant/observations, and issues will materialize from the margins as departures and junctures emerge between age, identity, technology, and culture.
Passing through LinguaMOO

Patchwork Girl, a character created by Shelley Jackson, is an online performance in the non-linear form of hypertext. Both the Patchwork Girl character and the hypertext style are similar in their forms of fragmented pieces culminated into a “body” of work that resists and reconciles a predetermined course. As a hybrid construction of Mary Shelley’s fictional male character, Frankenstein, created in 1818, and Frank Baum’s 1913 character, The Patchwork Girl of Oz, Jackson’s post-modern Patchwork Girl is the embodiment of multiple pasts. Distinct features from previous authors are described in diverse life narratives that plot her seamed body. Patchwork Girl is made mostly of randomly recycled ‘female’ mind/body parts; hence her naked body clearly represents the female sex. Realizing she is not the original author of her ‘self’, she searches for authenticity amid discontinuous discourse and multiple identities that situate her in time and space. Understanding that her position is part of her maker’s strategy, she invokes tactics to negotiate cultural margins as she remains a monster of difference. Searching through others’ narratives, Patchwork Girl explores the lives that have constituted her identity, and that now wear their remnants on her body.

Negotiating and absorbing identities from the time we are born, we construct being through the lived experiences and narratives of those around us. We are an embodiment of what has come before us as we incorporate past into present realities, and other identities into self identities. As we continue this cycle of meaning making through generations, we keep in place the accepted, the familiar, the safe spaces within
our personal and public cultures that serve to reiterate the narratives that sediment
roles within hegemonic norms. What happens when we choose to break free of others’
narratives, to forge a new identity against the grain of what has been appropriated
through another’s voice, through what has been socially accepted and expected through
generations of women performing a responsibility for traditional roles for family
community, and nation, with question? How then, do we define “self”: during the
transition, when our foundation is on shifting ground between one definitive position
and another, between the familiar and the taboo? Jenny Sunden (2003) describes a
search for identity alongside an awareness of marginalization within a situated space as
Patchwork Girl

...struggles endlessly for connectivity and a sense of wholeness, and even though
she is never able to leave her position as an outsider, she manages quite easily to
create transitory connections with other women and monsters on cultural
margins (p.30).

In January, 2004, I was introduced to the virtual world of MOO, a text based
computer program wherein users create identities by typing themselves into being, and
gaining access to various levels and locations by using computer commands created at
the hand of a computer programmer, (whom I imagined to be male). I had no idea
what to do, but I knew how to type, and since text was the way through which I would
find my identity, I typed myself into existence, and entered the MOO with
apprehension. I felt inadequate in this unfamiliar (sub) culture. If only I could contribute, if only I had known. However, in the cyber culture of MOO, I was aware of differences as I sat in the midst of what I perceived to be a generation gap. The patriarchal society I had grown up in did not encourage a feminist epistemology where women easily explored machines and new technologies, that is, unless it was a sewing or a washing machine strategically produced for an appropriated gender role, in which case expertise was commendable. So although I had certainly interfaced with machinery, it was in relation to specific machinery that served to secure ‘gendered’ feminine (and masculine) performances.

Through the body’s physical presence and interaction with its surroundings, identity narratives are co-constructed, repeatedly performed and extended into time and space. That is, while I as actor simultaneously perform all of the necessary mechanical and cognitive functions to dwell in and between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ spaces, I (un)consciously build personal, social, and cultural narratives from overlapping online (virtual) and offline (physical) phenomena.

Moving from a traditional lifestyle to a non-traditional one will most often result in some points of blurred identity, creating an uncomfortable shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar; from the secure to the insecure and back again. It is the nature of self-narratives to shift as each layer either reifies or redefines the narrative before it. This auto-cyber-ethnographic exploration into new situations serves to show the spaces in
life where significant shifting has occurred. The actual moment is not as significant as the space between the moments, or in some cases, years following a specific moment when self-reflection leads one to a new awareness, an epiphany that result in sometimes subtle and oftentimes drastic shifts in identity performances. It is in those luminal spaces of uncertainty and ambiguity that we take time to reflect on our surroundings, to determine if what we are experiencing makes sense to us. Here we sift through past narratives deciding which remnants of time to discard and which ones to keep. More importantly, how far do we turn away from dominant traditions, and who has the agency and the position to do so?

**Performing Traditions**

Tradition: historical convention, unwritten law, mores, custom, practice, habit, institution (Oxford, 2004, p. 939). Throughout this dissertation, I engage in performative writing in an attempt to highlight invisible layers of appropriated identities constituted through traditions of familial, societal, and cultural narratives worn on the body. Exploring layered identities and discarding particular ‘skins’ represents those narratives I reconcile and those I resist as I realize the uncomfortable shift found in relocating self in a virtual age of constant changes and cyberspaces.

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3 The term ‘cyberspace’ was first coined by William Gibson in his revolutionary 1984 science fiction classic, *Neuromancer*. He describe cyberspace as a “matrix” wherein “disembodied consciousness” leads to “consensual hallucination” (p. 5).
In the virtual worlds of Second Life, Lingua MOO, and Patchwork Girl, texts and images come into view when I physically press plastic buttons on a computer keyboard to co-create a personal experience between subject/object, human/machine. Similarly, in the ‘real’ world of reading a book, viewing a film, attending a theater performance, or playing dolls and dress-up, experiences that contribute to personal narratives are derived from the relationship between subject/object, actor/spectator.

Throughout this research, I also consider Victor Turner’s (1987) social drama theory that underscores how situated literacies might be conceptualized in offline and online spaces. In Turner’s spaces of liminality, an actor remains “held between” opposing views in an act of self reflexivity (p. 41). When a rupture, or a breach of sorts creates a crisis that disrupts familiar ways of practicing everyday life, actors necessarily negotiate available choices. In the midst of this disruption, (re) evaluating life narratives may result in transgressing traditional performances. This turn from past ways of being to new ways of being creates an emergent course for resituating life narratives accordingly. Questioning coherent and recognizable life narratives in which daily performances have been sedimented, becomes in a sense, “showing ourselves to ourselves” (Myerhoff, 1980, p. 7). A crisis then, leads to redressing and reflecting on a situation and the actor therein resists and/or reconciles a choice either to reintegrate
back into the former status quo, or to resolve the crisis by moving into the unknown through an initiation of uncertainty and change. However, the ultimate goal while passing through phases of social drama is to redress and question social norms that influenced the ‘crisis’. Indeed, the goal through transformative spaces is ultimately an “individual peace of mind” (Turner, 1987, p. 39) found in the “flow” (p. 55) of a narrative without beginning or end; a redirected luminal narrative that reflects an ongoing negotiation at the threshold of personal awareness.

At the intersections of communication and culture, bodies become immersed in daily performances as part of appropriated, rehearsed, repeated behaviors that alter identity narratives accordingly (Madison, 1999; Turner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 2004). As complex socio-narrative constructs, we are a culmination of language, text, and performance within everyday emergent (re) presentations of gender, race, sexuality, and age, negotiated within constraints of socio-economics, cultural norms, geography, class, positionality, and technology (Gajjala, 2001, 2004; Nakamura, 2000, 2002; Riggs, 2004). Alongside perceived possibilities and actual choices (Conquergood, 1991; deCerteau, 1984; Denzin, 2003), these inseparable entities are threaded and woven in the places bodies occupy and in the spaces narratives evolve. This dissertation explores identity performances and politics that intersect with situated literacies, age, and technology while participating in hypertexted narratives and the three dimensional virtual worlds of LinguaMOO and Second Life.
Content Overview

This dissertation houses six chapters. In chapter two, I present constitutive theories of identity that support my use of performance theories and performative writing to explore and narrate experiences in virtual spaces. Specifically, I present identities as social constructions and performative acts. Chapter two contains research questions that guide this journey. Chapter three establishes the methodology and method applied throughout this study. Foundational principles of feminist epistemology support my use of autoethnography in cyberspace, which is referred to here as auto-cyber-ethnography. Applying textual analysis to personal narratives, hypertexts, and images highlights the connections found at the interface of online and offline cultures. Chapter four explores situated literacies at the interface of gender and technology through in-depth analysis of narratives and autoethnographic experiences in hypertext virtual environments. Narratives focus on specific past events that influenced a gendered relationship with various types of technologies. Themes such as difference and marginalization emerge while negotiating literacies at the interface of LinguaMOO. Chapter five continues my autoethnography journey into the three-dimensional virtual world of Second Life where issues of age and technology are considered through the intersections of material and virtual bodies. In conclude this journey in chapter six by summarizing and reflection on the significance of studying identity in virtual worlds
through the theoretical and methodological frameworks I’ve applied. The final chapter also includes limitations of this project and suggestions for further research possibilities.
Chapter Two

Framing Theory and Reviewing Literature:

Conceptualizing and Situating Identities in Real and Virtual Worlds

To ‘frame’, a group must cut out a piece of itself for inspection (and retrospection). To do this it must create-by rules of exclusion and inclusion- a bordered space and a privileged time within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be ‘relived’, scrutinized, assessed, revalued, and, if need be, remodeled and rearranged (Turner, 1987, p. 140).

Attention has been given to a variety of phenomena related to and occurring in practices. In this chapter I prepare a framework from which to view identity representation through constitutive and performative theories of identity that emphasize the constitutive nature of language, body, technology and narrative. I join scholars from various disciplines to conceptualize embodiment in the context of ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ spaces, specifically the virtual worlds of Lingua MOO and second Life. Finally, I align cyber scholars, gerontologists, linguists, and psychologists to explore selected issues of women, age, and technology that underscore shifting identity narratives, intersecting subjectivities, and situating literacies while transitioning into a computer mediated self/society.

Constitutive Identities

Constitutive theories of identity rose from a social constructivist view point in which identity is constructed and built upon social and cultural interpretations. The
body repeatedly performs and reinforces this socio-cultural script through everyday language and familiar practices. Socially constructed identity in regards to gender, race, class, and age is a result of reiterative acts sedimenting identity as ‘real’ through repeated “actions, interaction, and relationships” within a given context (Butler, 1993: Schechner, 2002, p. 24). Whether the context for an ongoing behavior, or ‘rehearsal’ is a proscenium stage, a cyberspace, or a home-place, identity and embodiment are inseparable as the body inscribed upon and the body as inscriber, as one, clarify reality through the “focusing powers of performance” over the course of a lifetime (Conquergood, 1983, p.29). Constitutive theories of identity also argue that strict binaries are socially constructed within a patriarchal hierarchy in order to appropriate bodies into being according to heteronormative standards. As such, the body continues to be (re) constituted through repeated practices within ongoing power relations, so that identities are sedimentations of contextualized discourse and lived experience. Viewing constitutive identity as performative underscores the physical body as a primary site where gender, race, and age are named, punctuated, and rehearsed again and again in accordance to (pre) appropriated language and (pre) sanctioned social norms.

In The Archeology of Knowledge (1972), Michel Foucault addresses the constitutive nature of identity through analyzing forms of discourse. Discourse functions to construct identity into categories that have been historically unquestioned and thus socially normed. As a co-production of past and present phenomenon, discourse has
discontinuous meaning through different interpretations and in relation to various social contexts. However, if discursive practices that appropriate identities are modified as culture shifts through time and space, and if the original context and each context thereafter changes how discourse is interpreted, then the subject of the discourse is in a (dis)continuous, transitional, and modifiable state of identification. Subsequently, as culture undergoes change influenced by advancements in technology, individual and cultural identity performances reflect those changes (Marvin, 1988).

Technology, in one form or another has always been part of our everyday lives. Crafted to meet current needs, wants, and curiosities, new tools soon become outdated and replaced by more innovatively ‘improved versions (Marvin, 1988). Subject positions are manifested within individualized actions and application of changing technologies. For Michel Foucault (1985), social identity constituted through ‘techne’ is the ability to craft oneself intentionally and creatively in relation to specific situations by using available tools and technology in pragmatic ways. Whether it is a computer or a ruler, negotiating its use for a specific purpose requires particular techniques to advance a condition for new possibilities. An example of humans’ innovative interactions with technology, or ‘techne’, can be seen in the evolution of communication. From drawing hieroglyphics on a cave wall, to writing with pen and paper, or typing at a computer keyboard, each method builds upon another and serves to convert internal thoughts into text through accessing and using specific tools that
offer new possibilities of self functioning as well as self expressing (1985). The ability for humans to craft new tools changes how we perform everyday functions as we interact with ever changing devices. In the past century, many regions of the world have experienced ‘progressive’ technologies at a very fast pace (Marvin, 1988). The introduction of computers has created multiple environments in which the interface between humans and technology is required for daily practices. Computers have become the tool by which many of us extend our sense of presence and convey our thoughts to others. From the earliest writing tools to electronics, emerging technologies, including virtual worlds, have extended possibilities to change cultures and cultural identities (Marvin, 1988; Rheingold, 1991).

It is within these ongoing dynamics of societal change that Michel deCerteau (1984) questions how the relationship between society and its people work to establish the terms that determine how that relationship operates to constitute identity. He considers the conditions in which particular relations are formed and negotiated through every day practices like cooking, talking, walking, reading, writing, and the like. According to deCerteau, society is represented by/through the practice of consuming and using products that are “imposed by a dominant economic order” (xiii). Uneventfully we contribute to the everyday practices of consumption that simultaneously absorb and deflect the dominant power structures that establish various degrees of difference and sameness. Similarly, ‘common’ people, by using what is
available, tend to co-construct a culture that is produced and imposed by those in power, thus (re) appropriating dominant everyday practices through the use and consumption of language as well as material products.

Negotiating how and what is consumed as well as how language is used, is practiced in subtle ways to fit one’s particular needs. This tactic, rather than overtly opposing dominant strategies, produces an ambiguous resistance to “mechanisms of discipline” in an attempt to evade them (xiv). For deCerteau, the question was, how are everyday tactics of those in less powerful positions applied to the consumption of everything including ideas and language, in order to “compose the network of antidiscipline” against dominant strategies imposed by those with more power, i.e., the producers (p.xv)? Tactics are those everyday practices used within the domain of established order to subvert the rules without changing the status quo. However, everyday social practices cannot be separated from narratives as they are interconnected through language wherein one influences the other.

Social and personal identities also are dependent upon whether or not tools and skills to communicate particular languages are available to us. Access and literacy are not distributed or desired equally. Yet everyday life narratives that express human realities are deemed acceptable or not according to structures of language proper. In this way, discourse is strategic. Hence, a 'common' narrative is accepted as ‘truth’ insofar as
it adheres within the normed narratives of a 'proper' theory, pre-established according to those in a position to advance those theories. This, according to deCerteau is exemplary of how power works strategically to constitute identity in everyday practice.

Judith Butler, in Bodies that Matter (1993), addresses identity through gender differences, and contends that gendered identity is neither fixed nor static; rather it is fluid within the contexts of various reiterative performances in which everyday practices are produced by the language embodied therein. Rather than seeing identity through the already constructed Cartesian binary, Butler promotes a body that has no name, no history, no sex, and no social definition that would make it accessible to representation apart from anything outside itself performing. For instance my being constructed through my doing, and my doing is regulated in part by the conditions of my reality as I make meaning through repeated language that names and reinforces my relationship to the world around me. In other words, if I perform it enough, I become that which I perform.

As a component of identity-making Butler suggests that we not consider ourselves in delimiting terms of this or that, but instead, that we regard ourselves as fluid and transitional, realizing that how we once perceived ourselves to be is no longer what we believe to be true (1993). In effect, through accepting the inevitability of change, we performatively (re) identify who we are and who we are not within and
against prevailing social and cultural norms that are also neither static nor fixed. Identity is a process of becoming, and in this context, the identity of the body appears fixed only because it performs accepted binaries within heteronormative constructs (Butler, 2004). Gender as constitutive identity is a reiteration of behaviors, a way of 'doing' gender anew, over and over again, therefore making gender 'real' insofar as it is repeated by performing within accepted and familiar codes. Paradoxically, socially appropriated bodies whose performances become 'reality' necessarily rely on fluidity to perpetuate the production and consumption of the very social/cultural change that results in a modified performance. However, if identity is deemed 'real' as a result of normed categories, then identity as fluid, while it problematizes the notion of fixed identity, maintains a “body impossible to interpellate” and thus impossible to appropriate (Sunden, 2003, p. 164).

In Second Life, my avatar body appears visually on a computer screen, felt through fingertips stroking keys; blurring the line between fluid and fragmented. In the between, there is a pause, like a dash in a sentence sure to resume. My identity representation on the screen is also fluid – transitory, yet subjectively appropriated by/in codes and norms rehearsed performances.
Performances as Constitutive

Performance theories explore and illuminate facets of communicative behavior that generate the very social realities they enact by writing the actor and the actor’s reality into being (Schechner, 2002). When Conquergood (1989) stated that, “performance takes as its subject and method, the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history,” he staged ‘performance’ as both experiential and situational, weaving personal and collective narrative identities into socio-political and cultural influences on/through the body (p. 2).

In the context of everyday phenomena, performance is viewed as “a way of knowing” wherein actor, audience, scene, and text contribute to perceived realities (Conquergood, 1983; Pilias, 1999). Performances, as “twice behaved behavior,” highlights the body performing textually, spiritually, physically, and dialectically as place and space, audience and actor, person and persona (Schechner, 1985, p. 35; Turner, 1987). The performing body, in multiple states of feeling and being, becomes convinced that the present behavior constitutes reality and that identity within the performance is ‘real’ (Goffman, 1959). Mastering appropriate cultural and social codes in everyday life mimics a rehearsal as actors with various motives practice appropriate (re) actions, negotiate how to (re) present themselves, and often interact from opposing vantage...
points in an arena of people who are “performing all the time whether or not they are aware of it” (Schechner, 2002, p. 174).

The notion of performing identity’s reality into being resonates with constitutive theories of identity that believe reiterative acts of language and experience construct gender, race, and age on and through the body. From the theoretical perspective of life as performance, “doing life” constitutes a “make belief” that intentionally blurs the boundaries between performance and reality (Schechner, 2002, p. 35). Rather than privileging a particular system of knowing, performance theories emphasize the interwoven relationship between private and public spaces wherein daily phenomena underscore a myriad of intersecting systems and structures. Identity as performance is an action, a doing of life, a subjunctive narrative fluidly woven by and into multi-sited, multi-dimensional, reflexive and contradictory spaces of possibility (Conquergood, 2002).

Daily routines performed and interpreted in manifold ways can construct cultural realities and emphasize alternative identity performances that often result in transformed individuals and/or communities (Schechner, 1997). In The Anthropology of Performance, Victor Turner relies on “social dramas” to describe how transformative spaces are made manifest within pensive, processual phenomena that produce new circumstances, and hence new identities therein (1987). In Turner’s social dramas, conflicts overlap in a generative process to create single and multiple breaches that
problematize familiar norms. As a result, collective and individual crises occur that propel actor(s) to contemplate a crossroad of intersecting oppositions through redressive scenes of events that influenced the conflict. In this redressive phase, actor(s) consider the desire for continuity within the discontinuity of change. The actor remains in a non-definitive space; a space of ambiguity at the threshold of confusion and clarity until choices regarding future identity performances are realized.

Decisions made within this contested liminal space determine whether actors resolve the conflict by accepting the circumstances originally created by the breach, or rejecting the circumstances by seeking other possibilities. The final decision then becomes a distinguishing factor in a person’s or a community’s identity performances. Ideally, the ultimate goal in a social drama is for all actors, individually and collectively, to reach a satisfying peace with the ‘final’ decision. Social dramas focus on performances of resistance and reconciliation wherein the act of negotiating questionable space between constancy and change can produce individual and communal transformation (Conquergood, 1983; Schechner, 1977; Turner, 1987).

Negotiating emergent situation throughout a lifetime necessarily involves a degree of personal choice as “restored behavior” is “always subject to revision” in order to address a variety of familiar and unfamiliar contexts (Schechner, p. 35). Identity performances constructed within cultural and social norms cannot, by virtue of their constitutive underpinnings, be static or fixed in a changing world. As evolving layers
of electronic technologies enter and alter everyday socio-cultural practices, realities are increasingly performed, produced, and consumed through the body’s ‘placement’ in a variety of mediated spaces (Marvin, 1988). Indeed, the body remains a “convenient touchstone” by which the unfamiliar and the ‘other’ are determined, explored negotiated, and interpreted (p. 109). As changes occur, performances that had appeared fixed are at once restored, revised, repeated and embodied (Schechner, 1985) within processual life narratives that have been built within liminal spaces of entries and departures (Turner, 1987). When scholars from various disciplines aligned everyday communicative behaviors with theatrical/ritualistic experiences of identity transition, transportation (temporary change), and transformation (permanent change) (see Conquergood, 2002; Goffman, 1968; Schechner, 1977; Turner, 1987), it opened future possibilities for cyberspace to be viewed both as culture(s) and as new performative stage(s) where body/performer and text/script co-construct “new revolutionary embodiments” through ongoing “cultural rehearsals” (Diamond, 1995, p. 156).

**Narrative and Identity**

Liminal spaces influence identity performances and life narratives. In those intermittent spaces we can experience potential possibilities and radical revisions throughout the “expressive process of human existence, whose form is narrativity” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 151). Paradoxically, the creation of a cohesive life plot is the sum of discontinuous events negotiated throughout a lifetime of emergent social
phenomenon. (Conquergood, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1991). Narrative performances are
inseparable from their transitions, their liminal spaces. So that when life situations
drastically shift, personal authorship is questioned and problematized within a desire
for consistency (Bruner, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988). To maintain a form of continuity in
the face of change, narratives are anchored on the body for continued connections with
self, community, and culture in past, present, and subjunctive forms (Carr, 1997;
Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Kerby, 1997). Shifting from familiar to unfamiliar
identity narratives is resisted and reconciled in proportion to the degree that past
memories, present situations, and subjunctive possibilities can be cohesively bridged
over a lifetime (Carr, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988).

When narrative (a textual/symbolic space) engages the body (a physical/sensory
place), the melding of the immaterial and the material challenges the notion that space
and place are totally separate entities (Hayles, 2005). This blurring between concepts of
space and place is made even more apparent in cyberspace where spatial terms like
house, table, body, and skin, are typically used to reference concrete items that in
virtual worlds have no substance, weight, mass or boundaries in place (Rayner, 2002).
When material bodies and representative narratives coalesce, the ensuing performance
then becomes an “act of embodying” and a “condition for being embodied” (Diamond,
constitute embodiment, for without the presence of bodily interaction and mentally
immersive images, embodiment is impossible, particularly in the hypertext style of the internet. So how does that moment of connection happen, and where?

Experiencing temporal and spatial immersion is necessary to create narrative embodiment as “narrative immersivity” depends greatly on one’s familiarity with and negotiation of the medium and the text (Ryan, 2001, p. 259). Whereas interaction occurs at the interface of entities, for example, between actor/audience, human/machine, or author/reader, immersion on the other hand, occurs the moment a text resonates with personal memories that have constituted lived narratives from /in time and space (Ryan, p. 121). Identity narratives are co-constructed and maintained within situated literacies, social norms, and cultural capital that (re) surface at the intersection of “digital codes and human desire[s]” in ‘virtual’ spaces of everyday life (Rayner, 2002. p. 352).

James Paul Gee explores *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy* (2007) by highlighting the act of balancing familiar (‘real’) and unfamiliar (‘virtual’) semiotic domains. Internal and external design grammars, or literacies, embedded in semiotic domains work in conjunction to form relationships of meaning making by “making bridges” between familiar and unfamiliar spaces. Whereas “internal grammars” are representative of the principles we use to guide our interpretation of space and place, “external grammars” are representative of the outside forces that influence how these principles are performed, or put into praxis (pp.27-29).
The degree of literacy we encounter within changing domains is determined by the congruency with which we recognize and understand particular internal characteristics and how we connect and relate these characteristics to external influences. In other words, literacies are co-constructed from within and without the inter-actor(s) lived narrative, and are co-connected to social norms that become the embodied presentations of everyday life.

Viewing cyberspace as an overarching concept that embodies multiply layered structures allows a distinction to be made between narrative structure of the ‘internet’ and narrative structure of ‘virtual reality’ (Ryan, 2001). According to this distinction, the hypertext structure of the Internet in general does not allow enough time between bits of information to ‘hold’ a viewer’s attention long enough to become immersed. Unlike narrative structures that follow a more linear text with a distinguishable (and familiar) beginning, middle, and end, the “labyrinthine structure of hypertext” (p.260) interrupts narrative flow while the user explores and negotiates an electronic map of multiple links and messages. Conversely, the narrative structure in virtual reality, albeit still in a hypertext-hyperlink structure, is visually perceived as a more continuous and cohesive environment wherein “virtual narration” invokes/emotes “real narration” (p.241) and virtual “walk-through[s]” resonate as “lived experience” (p.73).
Living Bodies/Virtual Identities

Since the 1980s, an increasing amount of literature surrounding Internet use in everyday life has emerged from mainstream media as well as from various academic disciplines. Some of the most recent work regarding online spaces deals with virtual realities like those found in the virtual world of Second Life. From visual screens to academic discourse, the ‘frightening’ and ‘fascinating’ aspects of virtual worlds in everyday life have been produced and popularized by television shows such as *CSI* (October 24, 2004; April 2, 2008) and *Law and Order* (October 2, 2007). However, both portrayed virtual worlds and virtual realities, in general, as a space where fear, rape, and murder resulted from cyber-social encounters.

Self perceptions in virtual worlds such as LinguaMOO and Second Life are explored across an interdisciplinary map of qualitative and quantitative research. Measuring subjects’ perceived embodiment while donning electronic head and hand gear, neuroscientists Henrik Ehrsson and Valeria Petkova (2008), quantitatively problematized the notion of a mind/body split when 70-80 percent of their participants “very strongly” experienced perceptual illusions of “owning another body” (p.1). Additionally, the researchers believe that with the ‘right’ technology, people can indeed “have the full-blown experience of being the avatar” (p.6). From neuroscience to performance art, student actors in *The Kent Second Life Ensemble* utilize Second Life to analyze staging strategies, body movements, and prop placements before building a
physical set. In addition, they also rehearse roles and scripts offline, and then transfer
and perform their production through avatars online, again blurring the line between
‘real’ and ‘virtual’ mind/body performances (Wenger-Polosi, 2009).

As research in and concerning virtual worlds becomes more accepted within
academics circles, scholars explore topics that include, but are not limited to:
conducting research on the internet (Markham, 1998; Markham & Baym, 2009), entering
online spaces for pedagogic practices (Gaijala, Rybas, & Altman, 2007; Silver, 1996;
Zacharis & Arthurs, 2007), exploring generational differences in computer literacy
(Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Riggs, 2004), and examining issues of identity and power
relations that blur online and offline socio-cultural inequities (Braidotti, 1996; Gaijala,
and subjugating race gender, sexuality, and class cannot be over emphasized as similar
ideological structures run throughout oppressive practices within ‘real’ and ‘virtual’
worlds. Throughout this dissertation, I ponder how do mid-life transitions (re) present
themselves in a virtual environment where discourse and behavior are performed
through three dimensional representation(s) of the ‘self’ inside/outside the context of
situated literacies. How have particular situated literacies come to be, and how have
these literacy/identity narratives shifted in light of this virtual age?

In Performing the Digital Body- a Ghost Story (2004), Teresa Senft discusses a wide
variety of personal narratives that address the connection between female bodies and
technology. Technologies as political strategies constitute exactly what a body is. This embodiment of text and technology with (in) the female body has resulted in ambiguous definitions of what a ‘true’ body is. Consequently, the body as ambiguous problematizes a fixed definition of body identity. Questioning what makes the body (in) significant in a given context of intersecting sites rather than insisting on absolutes, exemplifies the underpinnings of feminist epistemologies that for centuries have been dismissed by patriarchal systems of knowledge and positivist perspectives (Alcoff & Potter 1993; Dalmiya & Alcoff, 1993; Grosz, 1993).

Online spaces of hyper-text designs and multi-functioning environments are said to resemble multi-tasking qualities that women tend to perform on a daily basis, and are therefore seen as apt sites for women to free themselves from conventional values and appropriated gender roles (Braidotti, 1996; Plant 1993). Advancing the notion that women are well suited for techno-spaces, cyberfeminists encourage the creation feminist e-spaces as sites of resistance, social activism, and reconciliation within the hyper communicative style of the Internet (Riggs, 2000). However, while hyper-textuality may feel familiar to women’s primitively practiced epistemologies, the vast majority of online content and programming is based in patriarchal hierarchies constructed by/through hegemonic structures (Silver, 2006). Furthermore, the hyper-reality that virtual space provides privileges visual media and sensory perceptions of vision, which then impose and reinforce a “gaze upon the visualized subject” (Braidotti,
The notion of the gaze being as omnipresent in cyberspace as it is in ‘real’ space, supports the belief that virtual realities emanating from technologies do more than represent reality, they (re) create it (Braidotti, 1996).

Virtual online space were initially believed to be utopian worlds of anonymity and autonomy as people explored facets of themselves and their identities disconnected from all social constructs and conventions (Ferandez, 2002; Munt, 2001; Sunden, 2003). However, critical cyber studies have shown that many social norms online correspond with, rather than contradict offline identity constructions and subject/object relations. For example, in the online virtual world of LinguaMOO, the user types the text that defines their online character; but the user does not have total autonomy over the text because the program, and/or the programmer has already determined available options for selecting an online identity, thus restricting personal autonomy online through strategies of control and socio-cultural practices offline (Nakamura, 2002; Sunden, 2003).

In the current study, issues related to body politics and situated literacies are conjoined to address how perceptions of age and gender are represented in virtual reality. In the context of constitutive identities, attention to social constructions of race, class, gender, and ethnicity cannot be separated from the same socio-political structures that discriminate and oppress all marginalized populations. In Cyberfeminism, Racism, Embodiment (2002), Maria Fernandez notes that ‘difference’ is read as alien and
dangerous primarily by relying on visual perceptions of “epidermal schemas” (p. 31). “Racist practices” online and offline are “legitimizing performances” supported by discourse and manifested through non-verbal “social habits” that serve to accompany, reinforce, and validate ‘difference’ in an ongoing narrative of power and privilege (p. 39). For example, when I first entered Second Life, there were so few options for older female avatars, that many residents reported having never seen an ‘old’ avatar. Avatar bodies were typically pale skinned with young shapely contours, because, as I was often told, ‘everyone here wants to be young and beautiful’. The visibility of ‘white’ ‘young’ bodies privileged these categories in part because of the desire for eternal youth, and in part by the design of the heteronormative options programmed into the Second Life system.

Social habits that reinforce power relations can be observed on many levels, including the long standing tradition of appropriating machines according to gender at home and at work. Perceptions that online spaces were utopian cultures free of socially constructed binaries resemble older beliefs that domestic machines were rescuing women from time consuming chores so they might participate equally in the workforce outside the home. Such utopian views that claim cultures of technology to be emancipating spaces are for the most part, as passé, as feminist research has shown this view to be far from factual.
Bodies of Technology, Gender, and Age

When Judith Wajcman addressed issues and implications regarding male influences over domestic technologies in *Feminism Confronts Technology* (1991), she aptly stated that women were not the main beneficiaries as a result of this technological innovation. In fact, because of cultural norms that reinforced man’s innate competency with machines, the use of domestic machinery was not seen as valued work or skill. Furthermore, although domestic machines were touted to shave time off of home labor, in actuality, chores that had previously been shared within the family were relegated primarily to women who had the ‘advantage’ of new domestic technologies to lighten their obligatory burden (1991). Because men were regarded as ‘experts’ when it came to repairing machines, and women were regarded as ‘dutiful’ users, when utensils and household tools broke down, women were again placed in a position of dependency within the male/machine marriage. However, Wajcman does not purport a pessimistic view of women’s futures in the world of technology. Indeed, in *Technofeminism* (2004), she cautioned against universalizing subjectivities based on past appropriations, noting that women’s experiences with computers are diverse, and although particular subjectivities have no doubt been produced within predominately male social networks, they are nonetheless “sociotechnical networks” in which non-experts might engage in new discourse to produce new performances and possibilities.
Labels that serve to privilege one or the other by constructing divisive dualisms such as masculine/feminine, global/local, and personal/political, often omit the oppositional young/old dichotomy, even though age in general, and categories of ‘middle’ and ‘old’ in particular, are considered social constructs that produce subjugated positions of otherness and difference. Cyberfeminists have begun to address how the aging population in general is represented and redefined in virtual spaces; how, for digital neophytes with aging bodies, technology can create spaces of inclusion and empowerment, as well as spaces of exclusion and insecurity; and how women baby-boomers in particular negotiate identity in today’s computer mediated society.

In the midst of diverse topics that overlap issues of identity, embodiment, and virtual reality, Karen Rigg’s *Granny @ Work: Aging and New Technology on the Job in America* and Danielle DeVoss’s *Formidable Females: Pink-Collar Workplaces, Computers, and Cultures of Resistance*, focus primarily on affects and the effects of computer mediated communication for the aging population of women who are negotiating an unfamiliar work culture. Rigg’s (2004) focus on blue collar workers in a factory setting, and DeVoss’ (2009) study of female workers in white collar workplaces critically engage how rapid changes within a computer driven society can both delimit and empower women who wish or need to remain employable beyond the typical sixty-five year old retirement age.
While interviewing working class women, Riggs found that although computer technology has become an integral part of their everyday workplace, boomers (45-64) and matures (65+), are less likely to establish a co-extensive presence with computers or related technologies in the way the “joystick generation” did (p. 104). Computers were associated more with work than with home. That the baby boomer generation is in the midst of adopting new technologies while shifting from a society limited by time and space to a society hyperlinked to transcend it, is no surprise. We experience change and flux with each day. But because technology is influencing women’s midlife trajectories, attention to how social constructions of age and gender have influenced women’s relationships with computer technology is significant for recognizing local/global subjectivities produced at the interface of online and offline spaces.

In her article, Restructuring Women’s Work, Teresa Amott implicitly addresses situated literacies and subjectivities produced through “occupational segregation” that occurs when divisions of labor maintain socio-economic hierarchies (p. 238). Highlighting the gendering of job categories, Amott considers the degree to which segregation in the workforce affects women during times of local/global economic crisis. The shift from manufacturing jobs to increased service and technology jobs has been evolving over the past 40 years, and the ways in which women have been affected by this shift have been largely dependent upon how they have been ‘placed’ within a socially established occupational hierarchy influenced by location, education,
unionization, and marketable skills (p. 239). When corporate profits fall off and downsizing occurs, minorities are generally hired and paid lower wages as they replace whites and males who, according to a socially constructed division of labor, had previously earned more than the company can now afford to pay. That women and other marginalized populations are retained or hired at lower wages, reinforces the notion that divisions within the workforce still exist and discriminatory hierarchies are based upon categorizing the gendered, raced, classed, and aged body. Nonetheless, women continue to be excluded from male-dominated jobs as companies capitalize on gendering work in an expanding service sector that offers predominately part-time positions such as “nurse’s aides, child care workers, or hotel chambermaids” already held by laborers with fewer technical skills, namely minorities with fewer technical skills (p. 241).

A body depicted as *old* ushers in a host of descriptors that have been appropriated through history, patriarchy, and media, and that view the aging body in fearfully burdensome contexts (Andrews, 1999; Gergen, 2000; Morell, 2003). In the patriarchal work force, bodies that are visually marked and inscribed with undesirable meanings of ‘*old*’ will likely be viewed as characteristically incapable and unqualified (Twigg, 2007). Cyberfeminists know there are no sweeping generalities or universal narratives that can culminate the relationships between midlife women and computers, but we also know that women’s relationships with machines have been socially
constructed, gendered, and appropriated through a diffusion of technologies; which sets a strong stage for performances of resistance and reconciliation in an unfamiliar computer mediated environment (DeVoss, 2009).

Identities are transformed and performed anew in situations of (dis) continuity, of change and transition, and of resistance and reconciliation. Rosi Braidotti (1996) considers the merging of technology and embodiment a social agent for situated subjects to perform multiple sets of discontinuous interactions in time and space. By transgressing one reality, the concept of multiplicity expands the idea of transformation from one way of becoming to multiple ways of becoming, thus creating a possibility for multiple agencies. From this perspective identity emerges as a result of numerous intersecting sites that necessarily acknowledge and affirm a wide range of differences that include sex, gender, race, and age at the interface of everyday performances. Affirming multiple sites of agency involves exploring how various layers of technological, political, and social networks create a dynamic interaction for various intersections within ongoing multiplicity (Braidotti, 1996). Within multiple states of fragmentation and cohesion, and in the “in-between interconnections” of a split subjectivity, sites for new possibilities and transformations are realized (Braidotti, 2002, p. 7).

For transformations to reflect and affirm a harmonious yet discontinuous relationship between technology and humans, a shift in perspective is needed; a shift
towards inviting technology to intermingle with and co-extend humans as yet another “symbolic apparatus…a semiotic and social agent among others” (Braidotti, 1996, p. 1).

In this way, transitions of self that are influenced or aided by technology create an appendage, a ‘virtual’ dimension to ‘real’ life experiences of transformation through the adoption and revision of new multimodal sites of possibility in the virtual age (Braidotti, 1996; Riggs, 2004).

**Aging Virtually in the Middle**

By virtue of the term ‘middle’, mid-life themes illustrate a situatedness between here and there, between young and old, between beginning and end, between inclusion and exclusion. Middle is also a time of intersections where multiple possibilities operate simultaneously during what appears to be a time of looking back and forward to assess “how things are going and what is left to do” (Lachman & James, 1997, p. 4).

In actuality, *midlife* is a relatively new term that was voiced when medical technology began extending life spans (Lachman & James, 1997). Due to increased longevity, the concept of “midlife” emerged to identify a population that defied traditional static and oppositional categories of young or old (albeit by making a new category in which to place the body). However, in contrast to categorizing age in fixed stages, theories of (dis) continuity that explore midlife cycles focus not on a set of destinations, but rather on a journey through non-linear, multiple, diverse, and fluid acts of adaptation to changing circumstances (Atchey, 1999).
While researching patterns of discrimination affecting working women in Australia, Paula Mckonald and Kerriann Dear (2008), found that “women’s vulnerabilities change according to developmental or lifestyle stages [as] older women may find themselves excluded from labor market opportunities based on their age…” (p. 42). That hierarchies exist between women, between men, and between women and men is not in question. But when the ability to earn wages becomes dependent upon operating computers for daily communication, literacies needed to maneuver and negotiate the interface of that machine are factored into the productive worth and value of the body. As skill acquisition that affects employment is embedded in constructions of identity politics such as gender, age class, race, location, and position; subjectivities that place bodies on the margins are produced so that appropriated roles within everyday practices of ‘home’ and ‘work’ eventually appear ‘natural.’

Like the construction of a cohesive self narrative, continuity during life transitions incorporates fragmented and repeated practices that are compiled on/in the body. Throughout a life of adaptive changes, transitioning into unfamiliar spaces involves (de) construction, observation, evolution, (in) coherence, analysis, reflection, and (re) negotiation, all in the face discontinuity, social expectations, and age appropriations (Atchey, 1999). Midlife cycles are certainly not uniformly experienced, yet categories that distinguish age are framed and represented through social, cultural, and mediated processes in the same way race, class, and gender are strictly categorized
Like race and gender, age is also recognized and defined through material markers on the body, thus identification that relies primarily on visual perceptions of the body, normed behaviors, and appropriated roles, creates a limited definition of the object (Ainworth, 2002; Braidotti, 1997; Bytheway, 2005). Representations based on hegemonic norms further delimit midlife characteristics to specific behaviors or time appropriated events such as retiring and grand parenting (Lachman & James, 1997). While midlife has unique challenges, it is not so different from other adult stages that are affected by change. Transition, resistance, transgression, reconciliation, and realization bring about reassessing and revising a previously accepted (and expected) life narrative.

**Conclusion**

Past/present narratives of self and society are neither universal nor mutually exclusive. Indeed, self and socio-cultural narratives that are built during a life span create overlapping contexts as private and public identity performances are restored and revised to negotiate various situations in ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ environments (Goffman, 1959). Constitutive and performative theories of identity are recognized and accepted perspectives from which to critically explore race, class, ethnicity, positionality, gender and age as social constructs both on and off the Internet. In this chapter, identity has been viewed through a social constructivist lens that views
language, narrative, and performance to be constitutive elements that identify the body in ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ worlds.

In particular, the category of age is added to a list of socially constructed identities to highlight subjectivities produced at the intersection of technology and women in transition. Though conceptualizing age as a constructed identity may seem somewhat difficult to accept because we visually witness the physical body changing, here I have considered how subjectivities are produced and inscribed on the body through reiterated performance, citational language, and appropriated gender roles, all of which are fundamental in issues related to (il) literacy and (in) visibility in today’s computer mediated environment.

Through theories of constitutive identity we see the common thread of language, text, performance, and appropriated bodies of knowledge that intersect with the strategies and tactics negotiated in everyday practices. As we produce and consume (un) familiar cultures, socially constituted identities are neither static nor universal. Indeed, our identities are as fluid, as dynamic, and as generative as a hypertext with multiple authors, entries, pauses and possibilities.
Chapter Three

Performing Methodology and Method

When I explore identity representations online and off, I ask how particular subjectivities might have come to be and how production and consumption of these subjectivities might be understood. I realize my experiences are not your experiences, yet through various levels of familiarity and similarity we share in (dis) connected narratives that evoke emotion and expose tension in transitional moments (Ellis, 2004). Constitutive theories discussed in Chapter Two inform the ways in which I approach and explore social constructions of identities as narrated experiences of resisting and reconciling new and unfamiliar ‘virtual’ worlds in ‘real’ time. First-person narratives that depict individual experiences and personal understandings of particular events are vital to a process that “takes as its object of investigations the story itself” (Reissman, 1993, p. 1). Narratives of negotiating situated literacies tend to reveal that “private constructions typically mesh with... deep structures about the nature of life.” (p. 2).

The methodology most appropriate for this dissertation has evolved from a trajectory of resistant paradigm shifts in which the practice of anthropology has been critically evaluated. Sometimes considered ‘alternative’ methodologies when juxtaposed against more positivist and seemingly ‘objective’ approaches that privilege ‘scientific’ ways of structuring and acquiring knowledge, this processional feminist ethnography explores transitional moments in which marginalizing (il) literacies are
evidenced at intersections of situated subjectivities. Toward a narrative understanding of identity performance between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ worlds, I forge a path towards methodologies suited for (re) searching an emergent self in body and in text. Body and text are emergent not only in my physiological self changing, but also in my process of analyzing connections while simultaneously becoming (con) textualized with/in them. Because “cultural identity is not stable or given, but must be performed again and again, and more urgently in situations of displacement, exile, and erasure” this inquiry into liminal spaces calls for a methodology that recognizes the complexities of bodies performing in multi-layered systems (Fine, Speer, 1992, p. 15).

Characterized in part by self reflexive field work throughout both ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds, feminist epistemologies appear most fitting for a study that explores women’s identity performances in online and offline spaces. Accordingly, I emphasize autoethnography as a way of “writing and conducting research that connects the personal and cultural by placing the self within a social context” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). Autoethnography as epistemology and as methodology simultaneously guides this research journey through lived experiences.

Because this autoethnographic journey is performed within cultural dimensions of online and offline phenomena, cyberethnography necessarily contributes to a hybrid methodology I call cyber-autoethnography. This chapter discusses characteristics of feminist epistemologies and methodologies that inform cyber-autoethnography, it
reviews work that employs similar methodologies in real and virtual spaces, and it clarifies the method of textual analysis as it applies to this work of ongoing narrative revisions.

**Embodying Ethnography**

Exploring and writing about newly discovered spaces ethnographically is a performative act in which perspectives shift in the midst of critical observation. In the trajectory of ethnographic practices, the anthropological gaze is particularly relevant to this work as it is through the dominant gaze that language is inscribed on the skin, and labels are worn on the body. By privileging the eye of the ‘observer’ through myopic (mis) representations that objectify and textualize bodies and silence an ‘other’ voice, traditional ethnography has been scrutinized for its colonizing role in speaking for, rather than with, ‘others’ (Alcoff, 1993) and for producing subjectivities according to Western measures and “parallel perspectives” (Holt, 2003, p.11).

In opposition to disempowering ethnographic practices, feminist epistemologies that inform feminist ethnography highlight the influence of intersecting subject/object sensory perceptions while seeking to understand how particular subjectivities, coded identities, and personal narratives are produced in situated socio-cultural contexts of past/present hegemonic norms. Overlapping characteristics of feminist epistemology and ethnography encourages multiple modes of understanding personal ‘truths’ through experiential narratives while emphasizing a self reflexive component. Within
those reflexive performances, researchers look at and dissect their own nuanced subjectivities and self perceptions in relation to the issues in question. Stories in the form of oral histories and personal narratives have much to reveal about life within cultural and societal contexts. Feminist ethnography considers how “identities are multiple, contradictory, partial, and strategic” within “unequal relationships of power” (Visweswaran, 1994, p.50). Indeed, that the situated researcher is inseparable from these interrelationships cannot and should not be minimized.

Highlighting the researching self in ethnography, Conquergood (1991) stressed the need for ethnographic practices to shift toward a multi-sensory experience wherein identities resemble “performance in process” through which both the subject and the object intersect with time, history, and place to co-perform “the intricate and nuanced dramaturgy of everyday life” (p. 187). Performance ethnography does not separate mind and body perceptions, rather, the researcher’s quest is best performed as “an embodied practice” that results in “an intensely sensuous way of knowing” through an immersive process in which “the embodied researcher is the instrument” (p. 179). Performing feminist ethnographies in ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ environments, I consider situated literacies that inform and are informed by representative texts.
Autoethnography

Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (2000), define authoethnography as a “space [where] as communicating humans studying communication, we are inside what we are studying” (p. 743). A keen awareness of the researcher’s presence is considered significant in autoethnography (Ellis), as it is a way of seeing the public face through the private I and the private I through the public face. In autoethnography, a performance ensues, reflectively and notably overlapping subject/object perceptions throughout the quest. Living and writing the phenomena contributes to constructing the very narratives and daily performances that this methodology deems part of its subject.

Alongside critical feminist ethnographies, I emphasize the importance of personal narrative in understanding lived experience through a performative genre. The processual manner of ethnographic inquiry and its immersive quality as it relates to cultural surroundings and narratives, compliments my method of textual/narrative analysis within an “epistemology of doing” in Second Life (Gajjala & Altman, 2006, p. 6). As a collaboration of autobiography and critical feminist ethnography, autoethnography is both methodology and epistemology. Learning about self, other, and self as ‘other’ happens throughout an unfolding process of inquiry that challenges the research to reflectively question what is hidden between the “cracks, fissures, and shifts” (Marcus, 1998, p. 205). As methodology and epistemology, autoethnography takes as its subject the audience and the actor participating, producing, observing,
consuming, and narrating together, a journey wherein subjectivities are formed at the intersections of social structures and personal experiences.

Autoethnography recognizes that knowledge gained primarily through vision is limited and limiting, “because we cannot see what we do not understand or use or identify with, we see very little of the world- only the small pieces that are [perceived] useful and harmless” (Elkins, 1996, p. 201). (Un) consciously, we limit our sight to what fits best into ‘known’ categories that have been formed within the confines of appropriated hierarchies, social structures, and hegemonic norms that embody heterosexist values and preordained power structures. Exploring intersections of language, identity, and marginalization are part and parcel when embarking on and documenting a journey of feminist ethnography, because language constitutes women’s positions within various contexts and discourses (Trinh Minh-ha, 1989). Critically observing the surroundings in which I participate, I see how generations of socially normed, seemingly innocent stories can perpetuate and underwrite further marginalization and discrimination. Whether traditional stories are told or written, they are done so with a weight of power that is capable of contributing to ongoing inequities.

Through nuanced performances and intersections of history, place, socio-economics, power, language, text, race, gender, age and technology. By entering the online three-dimensional spaces of LinguaMOO and Second Life, I explore how offline cultures blur and make visible “the constructedness of identity categories” (Sunden,
(Sub) cultures, ‘real’ or ‘virtual’ influence and affect our identity performances and our acquired literacies within multiply layered, yet specific spaces where subjectivities are in part, produced by associating men with masculinity and machines, and women with femininity and passion. Autoethnography can be unpredictable in its discoveries. “In conversation with ourselves as well as with others, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values, “and if we reflexively push through the discomfort, we will eventually grow to, “make measure of our uncertainties, our mixed emotions, and the multiple layers of our experience” (Ellis & Bochner, p. 748). During a personal exploration or transitions and possibilities within LinguaMOO and Second Life, I reflect on personal narratives that surface at the interface of technology and situated performances of identity.

**Cyberethnography and Epistemologies of Doing**

Cyberethnography is ethnography performed in online spaces. While it encompasses the wide range of socio-political issues mentioned above, the issue for this study is the production of subjectivities that materialize in ‘virtual’ spaces as a result of ‘real’ world hierarchies. Whereas conventional ethnography places the body in a physical place with corporeal bodies, the cyberethnographer enters a ‘virtual’ online space and studies it as s/he engages in the production and consumption of that space. Rather than traditional ethnography where the researcher as observer enters and consumes information, cyberethnographers recognize their influence on the
environment as they enter online spaces not only as consumer/observers, but participant/producers as well. Online computer mediated spaces present an opportunity for the researcher to engage an ‘epistemology of doing’ where s/he is “doing and being self-reflexive while doing” through fully participating in and producing the ‘site’ while exploring ways in which that production creates structures of inclusion and exclusion within that space (Gajjala & Altman, 2006, p. 8).

Similar to the ethnographic work in MOOs by Sunden and Turkle, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2008) has made a significant contribution to ethnographic work in the three-dimensional virtual world of Second Life. In his book, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff makes a case for studying virtual worlds separate from ‘real’ world descriptions. And indeed, studying one culture by comparing it to another repeats patterns of traditional anthropology, and although ‘virtual’ cultures are influenced/controlled by external forces, they are not the same. However, the differences between these environments do not erase the fact that ‘virtual’ worlds are created and controlled by offline ideologies and hegemonic structures, and that these overlapping, multifaceted spaces converge in such a way that their reciprocal influence is significant.

Ultimately, the goal of any dissertation is for findings to culminate into writing. However it must be given conscious consideration, thinking about all its possible meanings, and its (re) constitution of knowledge and power through what/who is
omitted, and what/who is privileged in the text. Just as we have valorized vision, we have also allowed the text to override contextually embedded cultural performances of embodied social beings to the point that “textocentrism – not texts – is the problem” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 151).

Textual Analysis

Analyzing text is a central feature of ethnography, but the transition from personal stories to text is complex and “requires different forms and styles of exposition” (Marcus, 1986, p. 16). When writing “new ethnography” a process of reflexivity in documenting personal experience weaves a narrative of connections as subject, object, participant, and observer are simultaneously juxtaposing (dis) connected reflections of living in private and public spheres (Goodall, 2000, p. 9). Back and forth between local and global spaces connections are vague yet effectively representative of private and public relationships. A prismatic view that illuminates complex intersections in a process and style suited for a postmodern world is both transitory and messy, both far and near as it creates for the ethnographer, “a keen awareness of being within the landscape, and as the landscape changes across sites, the identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation” (p.97). In The Object Stares Back (1996), James Elkins describes these points “in the between” where we uncover what we did not expect; and where we address hidden meanings amidst the layers (p. 44).
Textual analysis is a method used for exploring a variety of layered themes through texts and artifacts. Though textual analysis has been primarily associated with bound texts (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), McKee (2003), notes that textual analysis reflects “a huge range of methodologies” (p. 2). Hence, there is no single way to perform this method, nor is there a limit to what can be analyzed, provided it produces the most accurate picture possible. A wide array of insights can be gleaned from focusing on different aspects of a text, so by gathering and analyzing narratives that have been constructed throughout the ethnographic process, I expect repeated themes to emerge.

It is important to note that textual analysis, like all research methods, can never tell the whole story of any given topic, culture, or people. The researcher is cautioned against entering into a study of human performances with a preconceived notion of the outcome, as such an approach will close doors instead of opening them and will leave important facets of the story unquestioned. All research is, to varying degrees, subjective, and by virtue of our humanness and our historical trappings, we bring preconceived, socially, and historically constructed ideas to the research field. For this reason, it is vital that the text as well as the research site be entered and analyzed self-reflexively in order to let the story unfold unadulterated through the process of inquiry (Startt & Sloan, 2003). Findings may not result in what was originally considered the focus, in fact, entries and departures will certainly reflect challenges and transitions throughout the research process as the object/subject relationship is continually
redressed through a multifocal ethnographic lens (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Indeed, it is through the process of conducting textual analysis that we are better able to see the advantages and limitations of our own and others’ sense making practices (McKee, 2003).

All texts are not equally important in any research, but the most fitting texts can produce a path of useful evidence. Exploring issues surrounding identity at the interface of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds opens the door to a number of texts and artifacts that are relevant to topics linked to a woman’s representation of self through an avatar. In particular, skin and body serve as the visual markers of identity in ‘real’ worlds and ‘virtual’ worlds. Representational identity is central to studying the body as text, because a (con) textualized body is the surface on which subjectivities, perceptions and meanings, contribute to personal narratives of resistance and/or reconciliation within varied and forever changing situations (Elkins, 1996). For this reason, the body, the skin, and the narratives that result from conversations and personal reflections about performing/researching identity in ‘virtual’ reality will be explored through Second Life phenomena.

Through feminist research theories and methodologies, identity representation of age and aging in a virtual environment will be explored while I shop for skins⁴, and

⁴ The notion of ‘shopping for skin’ in Second Life refers to a practice that mimics offline shopping, but involves negotiating an avatar’s movements, understanding coded language in order to select particular
critically engage issues of age and identity that intersect and blur at the interface of real and virtual worlds. As I explore the visual representation of the body in this space, I will rely on conversations with women as I too engage the experience of virtual reality. When narratives and scripts are collected, I will analyze texts that are most relevant to this study. To further my understanding I will code themes that appear repeatedly in women’s narratives, and from these themes I hope to shed light on private/public perceptions about the aging female body, situated literacies, and transitional experiences of resisting and reconciling the virtual age of technology.

Admittedly, there are many aspects of Second Life that I am not familiar with, so I enter with no preconceived notions of being an expert. If anything, I enter as a curious explorer who has seen only a portion of what there is to discover. Because this study is approached autoethnographically, my actions as researcher/participant/observer, along with the actions of those I encounter in Second Life will ultimately influence the final outcome of this study. The very process of analyzing the text of autoethnography changes me as I explore various points of entry and question how to connect these multiple sites with myself and theory. By virtue of this researching cycle, I find myself growing between uncertainties. Turning again to James Elkins, he reassures me that items, as well as particular literacies for the avatar to ‘wear’ the item once it has been purchased. This is discussed further in chapter five.
“there is ultimately no such thing as an observer or an object, only a foggy ground
between the two” (p. 44).

A performance of transitional identity at the interface of actor and machine will
be a primary focus in this research; however, transitional identity is never a
phenomenon that stands outside socio-cultural, economical, and technological
influences. Situated literacies are ultimately woven into external and internal forces
within “an evolving cultural context of immense magnitude and complex scope”
(Markham, 1998, p. 25). Threading issues of age, gender, and situated literacies
throughout the process of see[k]ing the public beyond the personal, this is an unfolding
journey of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ phenomena from one woman’s perspective. Finally, my
intention is to give a coherent account in narrative form by blending scholarly text and
personal narratives. As a cyber-autoethnographer I am inside and outside what I am
studying while I am performatively experiencing and writing the text I am analyzing.
Shifting back and forth through an “ethnographic wide-eyed lens” I focus “outward on
social and cultural aspects of personal experience” that expose a “vulnerable self that is
moved by” and possibly through resisted and reconciled “cultural interpretations”
(Ellis and Bochner, 2000. p. 739).
CHAPTER FOUR

Texting Identities and Hyper Linking Metaphors

A name defines, identifies, embodies. Through it, one gains a face, a body, a voice. But your name also grants other the power to gain access to you; to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct your face, body, and voice to suit what they think your name must mean. A name then becomes a means by which a face, a body, a voice may be erased (p. 267). – Carolyn Joan Picart

In this statement, Picart reminds us that the body can be erased through the act of defining, describing, and representing identity through (re)assignment. This erasure occurs when the body is inscribed with connotations from socially written scripts. How is a name worn on a virtual body indivisible from its material self; and what becomes (un)bound through the performances of the named during the process of naming? As my name paves a path for the pages and the margins of my life narrative, my inscribed identity performs and manifests subjectivities that influence and are influenced by daily practices. The (re)structuring of my name in various contexts addresses the notion that identity associated with the represented body, the signified, (un)categorizable body, is contextually interdependent and fluid. As I shift between fragmentation and fluidity in time and space, the name that represents my identity is entangled in a performance of multiple transitions.

Chapter four is decidedly different from previous chapters as I write narratively about shifting identity performances related to issues of (dis)empowerment within
‘virtual’ and ‘real’ environments wherein subjectivities and situated literacies are realized at the interface of woman, machine, and text. Throughout this chapter, in addition to personal narratives, I invoke personas from Shelly Jackson’s 1995 hypertext character *Patchwork Girl*, its predecessor, Frank Baum’s 1913 *Patchwork Girl of Oz* and my own Patchwork Girl in LinguaMOO to illustrate “inter-linkages between text, body, and machine” that are “always present in acts of writing/reading,” and that are becoming even more intimately interwoven in and through digital texts (Sunden, 2003 p. 158). Hence, this back and forth performance allows a diffusion of synchronized selves as snippets from their stories highlight similar issues in relation to gender, situated literacies, and technology. As is characteristic of performative writing, overlapping performances from multiple times and locations emerge in this autoethnographic exploration of scripted identities. The reader may not distinguish between voices entwined throughout hyper-text-centered environments where nuanced identities are challenged and (re)negotiated. In ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ transitional zones, we are mixed metaphors. This is a journey of (dis)locating (un)certainty and (dis)empowerment through “The Ethnographic I” (Ellis, 2004).

*When I (re)entered the academic arena in my mid-forties, technologies for writing had evolved into machines far more advanced than the electric typewriter that had embossed my thoughts onto a page by pressing raised metal letters into ink soaked ribbon. Although the keyboard format was the same as I’d remembered, I clearly needed more than typing skills to*
‘keep up’ in this culture so far removed from ‘home’. Though I had mastered fairly well the leisurely act of surfing the internet and sending emails when I was married, the computer was now a tool I needed for everyday communication, consumption, and production. In this new space, computers were everywhere. In these machines that connected local and global lives on a daily basis I saw both obstacles and opportunities. Past and present performances were (re) viewed through my struggles with computer literacy, and I knew that without this knowledge, my position in any computer dependent culture, academic or otherwise would be severely limited.

**Welcome to LinguaMOO**

In spring of 2004, I entered my first qualitative methods class as a ‘post-non-traditional’ graduate student. Here I was introduced to and entered LinguaMOO, a computer generated virtual world that exposed power and privilege through the act of performing inside and outside margins. Initially I had no idea why we were required by Dr. Gajjala to participate and observe in this space. Participation and mobility was in direct proportion to understanding the language in this culture, a culture in which I was not familiar, not a digital native. But I was excited, thinking naively that if I could gain access, I would certainly triumph.

Journal Entry: January 27, 2004

*I think this is where everyone went, to Diva’s Hut. I look for entry points, but instead I find lists of places where people are gathering with no knowledge of how to get there. A list on*
my computer screen shows me the names of my classmates that are indeed having fun at a party in LinguaMOO. The computer lab is filled with voices connecting across the room, sharing their adventures as they perform inside and outside their computer screens. They’re having lots of fun… without me, at a virtual party. Where is the entry point? Staring at the screen in front of me, I feel like I’ve been rendered invisible. Why do I feel excluded? This isn’t even real, or is it?

My challenge was to navigate the text so that I could gain cultural capital, produce objects, explore the landscape and have a sensation of being ‘somewhere’ inside this three-dimensional ‘virtual’ space where “people achieve status by building… by mastering the programming language in which the world is built” (Sunden, 2003, p. 21). Here, representations of material objects were produced by typing, and consumed by reading coded language on a computer screen. My absence, my presence, my silence, my (in)visibility, and my sense of belonging depended on how (in)correctly I performed at the interface.

Journal Entry: February 24, 2004

Patchwork Girl, you are an elusive character that cannot be categorized or materialized. You are a collage of connecting codes, codes that constrain and complicate identity at an uninviting interface. New acquaintances applaud your tenacity in tackling this new space, but you feel misplaced. Perhaps an earlier introduction might have prepared you for this adventure, equipped you with more skills… perhaps. But this is a different world entirely than the world you left behind. In the cyberworld of LinguaMOO, you are aware, almost painfully aware, of
your shifting social position and your changing cultural identity. The patriarchal cultural in which you were born and bred did not encourage you to explore ‘outside’ domains. You remain distanced.

While Patchwork Girl stumbled through this ‘virtual’ culture of uncertainty, she found camaraderie with Y, a young Chinese woman who was also negotiating multiple identities and (il)literacies in this online culture as well as in her offline culture. Both women were in unfamiliar landscapes; one in a culture outside the borders of her far away homeland across continents, the other in a culture outside familiar/familial borders of appropriated roles. Literacies that had been successfully acquired and implemented by both women from girlhood to womanhood were now in question as they observed their ‘otherness’ in a computer-generated environment. Aware of their locations and their positionalities, they viewed themselves at the juncture of here and there, standing at cross roads. But the marginalization and lack of self efficacy alongside the otherness they both experienced was not solely from their unfamiliarity with the mechanics and the coded language of LinguaMOO. Indeed, this research endeavor was about their perspectives in relation to the rest of the world, a real and virtual world in which they pondered their own sense of (be)longing while (dis)locating themselves inside and outside past and present narratives. Research lesson number one... connections are found in the margins.
Journal Entry: March 8, 2004

*I received Shelly Jackson’s Patchwork Girl in the mail today and discovered that it is a CD that must be viewed on a computer. I was not aware of this when I placed the order, but perhaps I would not have ordered it if I had realized this. It appears to be somewhat like the MOO in that it is in no particular order. The order of the story depends on the link I choose, so that I decide how the story will be told. However, the identities that characterize the protagonist are not negotiable, only the arrangement of the journey. There are no instructions to guide this path, no numbered chapters or pages, which is frustrating and at the same time formative. As I travel from link to link, I (re)search my paths. (Dis)connections expose hierarchies within the margins, and possibilities resist essential ideologies within universal narratives.

Patchwork Girl(s) at the Interface

Jackson’s hypertext character, Patchwork Girl, is a culmination of pieces and plots from Mary Shelly’s 1818 monster character in the iconic science fiction, Frankenstein, and Frank Baum’s 1913 vivacious character, Patchwork Girl of Oz. Shelly’s legendary male monster that was constructed from recycled corpses and brought to life through electronic devices represents not only a projection of life extending technologies, but more profoundly as necessary appendages to human identity. As the story goes, Dr. Frankenstein attempts to create a female companion for his socially outcast monster, but halfway through the process, he dismantles her, fearing that she might reject her
male counterpart, exceed his superiority, and eventually become “a thinking and reasoning animal” (Shelly, 1994, p. 160).

Through such an iconic representation of pairing male bodies with machinery, women associate with spheres outside that which is perceived to be man’s domain (Sunden, 2003). But *Patchwork Girl*, as a representation of multiple possibilities, challenges a lineage of male/female dichotomies that attempt to place her predictably as essentially gendered in a sequentially patterned text. A combination of parts, her whole identity is an embodiment of metaphoric narratives that have positioned her within social and political structures. Her goal is to blur static boundaries. Complicated by intricately hyper-linked memories, she remains tethered to the past while (re) negotiating and pondering present obstacles and opportunities.

While *Patchwork Girl* travels from one location to another, from one role to another, from one perspective to another, she experiences her ‘self’ within spaces of ongoing transitions and revisions. Through these transitional zones, *Patchwork Girl* (re) views particular narratives that have, at various times, placed her as an ‘other’ residing in liminal spaces and cultural margins. Metaphorically we are all patchwork beings, as female and male identities are constituted from generations of transferred subjectivities that were/are formed within social constructions and cultural contexts embodied by issues of race, class, location, economics, positionality, and age, alongside constant innovations in technologies of everyday life. Performances from LinguaMOO reflect
how much ‘real’ self complicates ‘virtual’ experiences and vice versa. Realizing
particular subjectivities and situated literacies while tackling various transitions can be
at times empowering and at times disempowering as identity is explored through
entries and departures.

Situating Identity

In Lingua MOO, identity was represented in a text-based world of (un)defined
boundaries and intersections. To transcend the threshold into this new domain, I (re)
named myself, (re)defined myself, and as a consequence, (re)discovered myself in a
computer generated world. How would I define and describe myself textually in a
culture where, due to my lack of literacy, I felt (dis)placed? When had this disconnect
from technologies happened, and how? Why was I so hesitant? I had always
considered myself rather fearless when it came to new adventures, but this adventure
was noticeably different as I struggled to participate. This seemingly simple task of
representing my ‘virtual’ self through coded key strokes involved more than symbols
and syntax. Without warning, the process of (re)naming my ‘self’ redressed
subjectivities and identity performances, which throughout a lifetime had produced
material and virtual positions within private and public domains.

Reflecting on past experiences that have in part constituted my own relationship
with technologies in general and with computer skills in particular, I recall reiterative
performances of resistance and reconciliation that tend to make visible particular
technological (il)literacies in situated spaces (Selfe, 1999). Entering into a ‘virtual’ age, I ponder the implications of performances that (re)produce subjectivities at a body/machine interface. I stress here that repeating performances within socially and historically constructed hegemonic norms must be considered when addressing issues of age, technology, machines, work, and school; and that a ‘digital divide’ based on computer access alone, or for that matter, age, gender, class, or location alone is problematic. Indeed, issues surrounding gendered relationships with technologies are confounded within complex legacies already bound to layered narratives and situated literacies that have traditionally produced multiple subjectivities within shifting spaces.

In similar fashion, indiscriminate moments in time contribute to the construction of a ‘whole’ story that cannot be told without its ‘pasts’ that exist as part of, yet independently of the whole story. Like scraps that converge into a recognizable quilt, a narrated life is seamed from both random and patterned events.

**Entering (Hyper) Texts**

Hypertext narratives cannot exist outside of digital spaces. They rely on a computer, a keyboard, and a screen through which software programs provide a format for the reader/author to make multiple choices. Hypertexts do not provide a conventional beginning, middle, and end like those fashioned in linearly shaped novels, fairytales and fables. Rather, hypertext narratives favor a non-linear plotline co-constructed by mapping fragmented spaces of text through (dis)jointed points in time.
Though hypertext is not a new idea in regards to virtual imaginings, reading and consuming knowledge through hypertext in a computer mediated space differs significantly from reading traditionally structured narratives within materially bound pages. In printed texts, there exists a structure of interlinking multiplicity that can be found in the allusions they co-crate with the reader, “through their intertextual references to one another, and through the linkage of footnotes” (Sunden, 2003. p. 156). While hypertext embraces fragmentation with no definitive boundaries, its non-linear structure reflects both limits and opportunities in the process of (re)constructing narratives from episodic moments.

Opportunities exist in all hypertext environments through the multiple ways in which a text might be intercepted, and how we as readers might be able to rearrange and revise the story. However, that all texts are, to some degree, hyperlinks, and that readers can and do interact with the text on a virtual level is through the imagination, does not erase the fact that limitations are more apt to exist in non-sequential electronic hypertexts than in the conventional ‘material’ print texts. In electronic hypertext, beyond reading the narrative, there exists a mechanical device that a reader must negotiate in order to consume the text. Thus, the boundaries between text, human, and machine, while distinct, are fluid and interdependent at an interface that heightens “sensitivity to the material specificity of the medium and the performative dimension of textuality” (Sunden, 2003, p. 157)
Indeed, all of cyberspace is a mechanically mediated environment where the user must negotiate ambiguous spaces in order to make sense of disparate texts and images that appear and disappear at the click of a mouse. This, in addition to pre-programmed codes, creates an unfamiliar space where agency is dependent upon specific expertise. For this reason, cyberspaces are internally and externally embroiled in socio-cultural issues of hierarchy, patriarchy, positionality, power, literacy, and identity, although they were initially viewed as utopian structures that escaped such constraints. Exploring how situated literacies influence ways of consuming and producing knowledge is a defining factor in feminist epistemologies that characteristically recognize interrelationships of seeming disconnected social/political/cultural/ and personal issues surrounding the constitutive nature of identity through everyday performances (Alcoff & Potter, 1993).
Figure 4.1 Various windows in Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* display multiple entries and departures. The reader/navigator can have numerous sites open at the same time.

**Reading Literacies**

*Patchwork Girl* wears numerous subjectivities and serves as a fascinating metaphor for multiple selves suturing together disparate intersecting parts of past and present ancestral performances. “One thing so presupposes another that whichever way you turn your patchwork, the figures still seem ill-arranged” as “thoughts are the limbs of [her] composition, and must be surgically excised from their contexts” in order to realize connections and possibilities between and outside the lines, the text, and the author (Jackson, 1995). The option to click on various links that interweave segmented
experiences into a “whole” story, at first appears to offer multiple possibilities, like an unfolding “game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits” (Foucault, 1997, p. 142). Through spaces of text with multiple points of entry and no clear direction, I follow a different path each time it is opened.

To form even a semi-linear narrative depends upon the route I take, which in turn is based on the choices I make when I click any one of the 462 links displayed on the screen (Sunden, 2003). Designs mapping paths through various connections are preprogrammed into the software and act as constraints and possibilities at the interface. In addition to pre-coded pathways within the program itself, equipment and skills are needs to operate within the networked system. Preconceived notions of acceptable composition persuade perceptions of (dis)empowerment and self-efficacy while traversing unfamiliar terrain. With no preexisting pattern, new relationships materialize within performative acts that resist expectations and appropriations.

In contrast to digitally mediated hypertext, when I read Patchwork Girl of Oz in a bound book, I hold the physical eight of a material object. I feel the texture of the paper on my fingertips as I turn each page. I hold the pen that transfers my thoughts and interpretations into margins as printed words resonate with meanings made through linear, sequential chapters. I know when I have finished a chapter mid-way through, that the next one is clearly indicated, and the story will resume from a particular point in time. Mind and body, as virtual thought and physical performance, work in
conjunction to produce coherent meanings as imagination and text intersect. My mind’s eye is inseparable from my body; indeed, “the virtual does not automatically equal disembodiment” (Sunden, 2003, p. 1). When I dream, I dream in hyper-narrative, incoherent, random scenes from which a story can be (re) constructed when I awake. I dream about material objects and events where boundaries between material and ‘virtual’ become blurred as my dreams appear ‘real’. So, though hypertext resists a linear tradition, meanings can be found within and beyond (in)visible and (dis) connected passages, because “reality” is always structured through narrative” and “narrative dwells in the mind and on the body” (Sunden, 2003, p. 18).

As a metaphoric agent unveiling issues of identity performances and (il) literacies in an unfamiliar world, *Patchwork Girl* of LinguaMOO spends much of her time (re)negotiating boundaries of officially recognized cultural units, but also at less formal intersections, such as those of gender, age, status, and distinctive life experiences” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 29). Entering (un)recognizable cultural units, *Patchwork Girl* in Hypertext, and *Patchwork Girl* in LinguaMOO disclose past experiences to understand new spaces and performances. In contrast, *Patchwork Girl of Oz* pays no attention to pre-established standards. She writes her own story as it unfolds through various locations. Her personality is birthed solely from magic powders stirred and sprinkled by a magician whose seamstress wife needs a servant girl for everyday chores. Her skin is a result of mismatched, multicolored and recycled scraps of
discarded garments that were once new. A skin that represents technology, work, gender, race, and position are seamed tightly to shape and contain her mind/body parts. Her position in life is a measure of ‘properly’ balanced personality traits determined by her master’s values. But unbeknownst to her maker, Patchwork Girl is unknowingly given an overdose of curiosity and cleverness, and optimism overtakes her.

**Shadowboxing Boundaries**

Narrated experiences identify us with our surroundings, and locating ourselves within them offers an opportunity to investigate personal subject positions and situated literacies in various spaces from personal perspectives. This is not to say that there are no limitations in self telling as memories can be selective and random, incomplete and partial accounts of past events (Riessman, 1993). Nonetheless, that memories may produce incomplete identity narratives is less important than the process of exploring underlying subjectivities between the limbs of narratives that extend connections outside the self. The process of interacting with a self narrative presents opportunities to understand how social, cultural, and economic power structures have influenced personal voice and positionality. Specifically, personal narratives that chronicle material performances in ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds help make visible certain intersections of gender, technology, and situated literacies (re) viewed in luminal spaces of transition.

Ah, but how can the self interpreting the self be ‘valid’ you ask when it is my world against you say? Contrary to analyzing other’s narratives where the writer’s
interpretation of events may be confirmed by the interviewed subjects before transposing their voices into text, in this research I interpret my own narrated experiences. So when I say, “it is my word against my word,” I refer to the shadowboxing that occurs as I interpret my own life events wherein I am the subject/object (re) viewing my selves within various situated contexts and contested spaces. While performing multiple positions of subject/object/narrator/researcher, representational identities can become complicated and blurred as the act of telling and writing personal narratives creates a (re) fashioning of self identity (Riessman, 1993).

Online environments are extensions of a material body performing in a virtual space where culture and social interaction is an ongoing interplay between narrating the experience and experiencing the narrative. Accordingly, recalling past events and disclosing them narratively may create a shift in perception and hence in the narrative of the person who is simultaneously in process of revision during/within the very act of this retelling. In autoethnographic texts, the researcher is- I am – the subject of my own research exposing vulnerabilities before my audience as they (re) interpret the personal experiences I recall. In the (re) telling of personal events that I perceive to be influential in present performances, there are no interviewees other than myself to ‘validate’ my word.

Still, in the process of self questioning I am challenged knowing that though my interpretation is not of subjects outside myself, I still must balance and hold myself
accountable for how I negotiate power, privilege, and vulnerability throughout the research process. Unlike positivist research paradigms this blurring of boundaries resists binaries and scientific methods as daily performative acts that construct life narratives cannot be separated or placed outside subjective identities that metaphorically name me woman, wife, mother, homemaker, student, divorcee, researcher, and teacher. Indeed, each name carries with it appropriated meanings from/within past, present and future domains of resistance and reconciliation. ‘I’ is always a culmination of multiples.

While shadowboxing I wrestle my own amount of disclosure as I am rightfully obliged in feminist research to consider the well being of my subjects, to speak with them rather than for them, and to discern what is told alongside how much or how little. Through a privileged status within education that at times still feels somewhat unfamiliar and uncomfortable, I interpret particular narratives that live under my subject’s skin, my skin. To be true to my research and to myself reflects an authentic voice. So I struggle with what and what not to tell in a pursuit to tell enough authentically.
Threading Stories

In the Appalachian hills of Eastern Kentucky where I spent my childhood summers, quilts of various textures were commonly crafted by God fearing women. In the smothering stillness of August air, I often accompanied my grandmother as she and several women gathered into a cool damn basement beneath the Church of Christ. Securely seated at the borders of a rectangular quilting frame, women with domesticated hands and callused fingertips transformed scraps into winter blankets for chosen families. Young girls were generally given the task of threading needles for elderly eyes and practicing tiny stitches for future sewing skills. Whether the finished product was a quilt of symmetrically patterned artistry or of randomly shaped scraps, the outcome was and is a symbol of history, technology, and work that embodies personal narratives stitched together from/through a lineage of overlapping gen(d)erations.

From varied ‘scraps’ chosen and sewn together at the borders a quilt is constructed into a whole. A quilt’s unique identity depends upon separate pieces stitched into a mosaic of shapes and textures. Each piece of material is identifiable apart from the finished product, yet a quilt, by virtue of its definition, is only identifiable when scraps are sutured together. Quilts preconceived with properly placed designs are assigned appropriate names that reflect specific histories and cultural stories embodied in the name; but when randomness is the defining mark, they are named crazy and their histories fragmented.
Stitching together geometrically shaped scraps of cloth was common practice among the women in my mother’s family. It was a way to transform more mundane aspects of ‘women’s work’ into works of art and creative expression. But even within quilting circles, there existed a hierarchy based on a quilters’ skill level. Women who produced the tiniest stitches and the most elaborate designs were admired for their fine dexterity and their artistry, while those less proficient in this art were often producers of haphazardly stitched quilts, crazy quilts, otherwise known as patchwork quilts.

Exemplary sewing skills placed within domesticity were paralleled with the proverbial woman, and for quilters, empowerment came through mastering the tools; the quilting frame that alongside various home technologies produced proper patterns in a domain that secured both male and female positions within the context of family and community.

The longevity of traditional values that pattern our identities is dependent upon the passing down of shared meanings from generations to generation. But sharing familiar meanings generationally is informed within socio-economic powers that influence positionalities, subjectivities and situated literacies according to race, gender, sexuality, geographic location, class, and age. Indeed, identity performances dance on the stages of previous conventions, but not without (un) consciously negotiating complex issues of complicity and contestation that influence inclusion in or exclusion from a particular group. The act of resisting familiar definitions and traditions of any
sort exposes discontinuities in established norms while simultaneously producing new subjectivities of ambiguity, uncertainty, and difference.

Considering the construction of appropriated and accepted norms necessarily includes the influences of visual media. My generation of baby boomers was the first to have televised images available to us from birth, and the gendering of mediated images served as exemplars, more so for my middle-aged generation than for previous ones. It was common in the 1950s and 60s for families who owned televisions, to view repeated projections of black and white performances. Virtual characterizations of the exemplary wife and mother were reinforced through the popular TV personae of Donna Reed, June Cleaver on *Leave It to Beaver*, Margaret Anderson on *Father Knows Best*, and Harriet Nelson on *Ozie and Harriet*; all of whom made their impressions in a patriarchal home. Such proverbial characters imbued living spaces with society’s interpretations of ideal families; pairing quintessential women, wives, and mothers, with quintessential men, husbands, and fathers. The good wife’s role as performed in prime-time classics promised an illusory future of “security” that many fathers wanted for their daughters, and that many daughters sought to (re) produce after years of reiterated narratives and images. However, only in a mediated world of happily-ever-after, do we find the security of “forever.” Nonetheless, being financially secure is what my father wanted for most of his daughters, and his patriarchal design this meant following my mother’s
footsteps whereby my sister and I would cast ourselves in roles as ‘good’ wives and mothers, which we did… appropriately.

Meanings made from text and image dictate how we “ought” to act out various roles in a variety of situations. Though reiterative acts from past roles might still blur boundaries in present and future contexts, the process of redressing identity narratives can influence how we resist and reconcile transitory phases and zones. Appropriated identity is by no means relegated primarily to the “female” social role. Indeed, performing acceptable “male” has been appropriated alongside of, and as precursor to acceptable “female” appropriations. In my young narrative, “real” men were deemed primary providers for their families’ monetary needs and ‘naturally’ industriously handy with machines and tools. My father was no exception to society’s rule. His gender identity remained connected to hegemonically constructed narratives that taught him how to perform an accepted and admired role in each capacity required of him.

Because the family unit is where hierarchies are first introduced, and where we learn to take our ‘proper’ positions, performances that resist traditional labor roles often threaten both men’s and women’s gender appropriated identities that for centuries have jointly secured familiar and familial conventions. The notion of a monolithic family type serves to reinforce sanctioned structures that legitimize hierarchies as natural arrangements rather than social constructions. However, the idea of a naturalized
family unit in which women are responsible for nurturing the family’s emotional and
spiritual growth and the man is responsible for the family’s financial security and
cultural knowledge becomes problematic when the ‘natural’ heteronormative family
structure seizes to be. Under such circumstances, ‘different’ family identities are
rejected as unnatural and unwelcome ‘monsters’ that are suddenly the products of a
fallen social construct that disrupt ‘natural’ order and threaten traditional ways of being
and doing (Collins, 2000). Such “transitional zones,” that offer ‘different’ paths, are the
(in)visible borderlands between entry into and departure from seemingly fixed spaces,
and are thus, “sites of creative production that require investigation” (Rosaldo, 1993, p.
208). In familial transitional zones I (re)consider my position as I negotiate multiple
domains.

**Materializing Memories**

*Born to a family of traditional artisans I was accustomed to working with my hands to
produce ‘material’ objects such as clothing, crafts, and home décor. It was a world I understood,
*a world in which I performed admirably, comfortably. My parents, like their parents, were
proficient in constructing skills that defined positions within family and community as they
transformed bits and pieces into polished commodities. My mother, a seamstress when her hands
were young and her patience steady, and my father, a builder of houses, furniture, fine clocks,
and cabinetry, relied on their talents and manual labors for financial security. My father’s
handmade items produced family income, as did the customized garments my mother fashioned*
for Drs.’ wives who lived along the beaches of Lake Erie on the north side of town. A defining
difference between their talents however, was that dad was always very familiar with ‘her’
machines, as he had repaired them numerous times. He entered her work space daily, a space
where he had designed and built a collapsible table in the laundry room near the washer and
dryer. On the other hand, my mother rarely if ever entered my father’s shop, and when the
occasion presented itself, dad installed a telephone adjacent to his saws. This allowed him to
communicate with the women in the house… from a distance.

In a “mutual formation of class and gender” divisions of labor can be thought of
in terms of soft and hard materials that are produced from and protected within
gendered technologies (Wajcman, 2004, p. 27). Crafting wood and metal opposed to
stitching cloth secured a confidence in my father’s abilities when computers arrived in
the 1980’s that was absent from my mother’s self-efficacy in regards to more
‘complicated’ or ‘dangerous’ technologies.

**Mechanisms of Tradition**

Familiar machinery integrated into everyday performances of production rendered them
commonplace in our home, so much so that they remained (in) visibly influential in the
formulation of my own life narrative, my own classed and gendered identity. I knew well how to
command domesticating technologies for ‘women’s’ work as I witnessed my mother’s daily
rituals of cooking, sewing, and laundering sandwiched between shifts at the local factory. This, I
told myself, was a pattern I would never wear. But in the 1960s and 70s, this familiar lifestyle
among women in my working class neighborhood was admired in utopian ideals of female emancipation from inequities in labor distribution. Yet, while, my father’s woodworking skills gained reputable mention in the local community, my mother’s talents were concealed within domestic categories that remained understand and underpaid.

My father’s workshop was sacred ground, a place where machines represented clearly defined boundaries that separated a man’s technical work from a woman’s domestic duty. I was known in my family as the daughter who would talk back, who questioned authority, and protested parameters by crossing boundaries. Oftentimes I entered my father’s segregated space in defiance of his anticipated admonishment. As patriarch, protector, and principal ruler of his mechanical kingdom, his response was predictable. He tried to convince me that I would get hurt, that I didn’t really want to be there, that I ought to go back into the house, into the kitchen, into the sewing room with my mother, and hence, back to my mother’s tools. Gendered performances such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, laundering, gardening, and nurturing the ideology of family and home helped secure my position within proper patterns of domesticating performances.

My relationship with my father and my father’s machines was simultaneously contentious and comforting as he resisted and reconciled his own narratives about gender roles. I often entered Dad’s workshop out of curiosity, or rebelliousness, or both. I often found excuses to interrupt homework to rummage through saws, hammers, and drills. I remember following him as he moved from one machine to another, as he became increasingly frustrated by my proximity. I was a girl child interrupting a man’s work. One day he just handed me mismatched pieces of
plywood with a few nails and a small hammer. I was probably around 10 years old when I constructed the first wooden abstract meant to be a box.

By the time I was an adult woman with a family of my own, I knew the name of Dad’s technologies pretty well; the largest piece of woodworking machinery were the table saws and radial arm saws. I would say the jig saws, and the band saws were among those of middle size, as they still stood on their own legs, but could be more easily tucked out of the way. Then there were the hand saws, the smallest ones kept on shelves and in drawers. This was a maze of machinery, a playground of possibility. It was also his domain.

One of the most memorable moments with my father in his workshop was when I requested a saw for making my own woodworking projects. He pointed to a cobalt blue band saw that stood as tall as me and was narrow enough for me to wrap my arms around three sides. It was one of the quieter saws in his entourage of electric tools, and I was thrilled at the thought of inheriting it. I remember feeling accepted, on common ground with my father in his domain. While he showed me how it worked, he reassured me that my current literacies would be sufficient for operating his-my machine. His words were poignant, “You’ll like this one, it’s the most like a sewing machine of any out here.”

Time passed- family shifted- life changed.

Twenty-five miles from Lake Erie shores, where subtle shifts and sharp curves sculpt the land, I married, birthed, and nurtured two children, adopted stray animals, and outwardly lived a quintessential “all American life in the country.” For most of those 24 years life was secured in
dependency and domestication, and this, I’d been taught, meant life was good. Scenic views often camouflage a silent state of erosion, slowly, ultimately leaving only memories and remnants of its former image. Intuitively I knew that the upcoming millennium would present some sort new direction, and it did. In my 46th year I returned to college. Optimistically, I anticipated the thrill of completing a goal I had postponed years earlier; however, I did not expect the perceived threats that accompanied my pursuit.

“Why are you doing this? What’s wrong with you? You don’t need a degree…I’m ready to retire. You’re wasting time, You’re too old, I make enough, You’ll do what? What makes you think…? You are crazy! Miss independence… I won’t pay for…

By 48 I was divorced with accumulating student loans in a local economy that had been shifting from a vibrant manufacturing industry to a struggling service sector where more than 2,000 jobs had been lost since 1999, and 2,500 more would be gone by 2008 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999 to 2009).

At a mid-life cross road I questioned how women in similar situations negotiated shifting identities during major life transitions; how identity narratives sedimented over a lifetime were (re)visited and revised in a new ‘virtual’ age. If I no longer engaged in the daily rituals of familial performances that were so much (a)part of my identity, what was my identity? Performing past roles such as ironing and mending evoked visceral feelings of being ‘home’ in a strange sort of way. Nostalgically (mis)perceiving a (once-upon-a-time) coherent and secure life-plot provided a small sense of calm in the midst of (dis)continuity and (dis)orientation. In
liminal spaces betwixt and between past, present, and future life narratives, I shifted through ongoing transitional zones of (re)discovery and renewal.

Investigating transitional zones requires a redressing of connotative meanings and material manifestations that have influenced identity markers inside and outside the hyphenated self in its many conceptualizations” (Anderson, 1996, p. 79). Perhaps it was my lifelong exposure to handmade items in general and homespun quilts in particular that prompted me to adopt a name in LinguaMOO that would illustrate paradigm shifts from full-time traditional homemaker to post-modern academic. Representing a (re)constructed life; the quilting metaphor exemplified the notion of wearing a collection of ‘other’ life narratives embodied from past and present hegemonic norms. Identity seems fixed when it is inscribed on a body through the reiteration of past “performances that have proven most useful, most confirming, and most coherent with one another” (Fine & Speer 1992, p. 9). Daily performances find meaning in revisited and revised narratives that (re) construct and (re) interpret the self in various contexts. However, when daily performances change so dramatically that they become disconnected from familiar overarching narrative themes, a “new or revised personal plot that links together previously disparate events into a new whole” is necessary to overcome feelings of inner conflict, and to provide a “renewal of self” (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 153).
Goodbye LinguaMOO

Journal Entry: April 12, 2004

Damn you MOO… Challenges that surrounded each entry and departure brought a flood of emotions that cut to the core of my perceptions… in and out of this situated space I was made aware. Reeling between damn you thank you damn you thank you… this space called MOO…

You made visibly my invisibility, my privilege, my position, my otherness, my disjointed oneness.

Conclusion

Conceptualizing the notion of shifting identities is a complex endeavor to say the least. Cultures online and offline exist in multiple contexts as they influence and are influenced by collective individual representations that culminate into hyper-marked narratives. Just as there is intertextuality in text there is contextuality in culture. In the interpretation and representation of any culture, dismissing situated literacies whereby power and privilege are produced in everyday practices, perpetuates a hierarchy of subjectivities produced and consumed by and through the infrastructure of culture and text.

In the shadows of a dominating culture, Patchwork Girl realized how (in)visible she was. Domestic skills that were familiar and oftentimes empowering in her previous position were now unnecessary and unimportant, as her past literacies were invisible to others in the computer lab. But computer skills were visibly important, and her position
in this new space was “informed consciously or unconsciously, by the ‘invisibles’ which inhabit her psyche” (Tamara Gerard, 2000, p. 154).

Literacy or the lack thereof, is dependent upon experience, knowledge, and familiarity in a particular context. Literacy in one situation does not necessarily constitute literacy in another, thus literacies like narratives, are transitional and steeped in historical, social, and class. Acquiring unfamiliar literacies in any new culture requires an adaptation of the ways we have interpreted and disseminated previous knowledge and information. Without re-negotiating and revising familiar literacies in a global society where changes occur daily, identity and agency are left to rely on social structures of power and hegemony, especially where technological (il)literacies determine future earning potential. How is it that literacies are granted or denied, embraced or tabooed in accordance with gender, race, age, geographic location and class? Technology that extends our communicative capacities beyond local, regional, and global borders simultaneously produces possibilities for inclusion and exclusion.

Constraints are made visible when past literacies are no longer applicable to new situations at home and/or at work. Today, computers are pervasive in local, regional, and global economies, so much so that successfully maneuvering these communication technologies tends to increase employment opportunities. As technology is absorbed into everyday work worlds, an employable body is often determined by the skills displayed at the interface (Riggs, 2004).
Complexities surrounding communication technologies continue to create contested spaces wherein situated (il) literacies affect incomes and (in) equities. On a daily basis, in multiple settings, agency is in proportion to and in accordance with acquired cultural literacies, which now, through the pervasiveness of computers, includes a melding of online and offline cultures. We expect ourselves to be more skilled, more literate within techno-spaces when we have mastered literacies elsewhere, yet we resist crossing particular boundaries that will inevitably change how we once, perhaps securely and unquestionably, perceived and performed our identity narratives.
Chapter Five

My Second Life as Audry

For what is being explored is the ongoing dialectic between what has been experienced and the relationships within which she is living—Ruth Behar The Vulnerable Observer

Journal Entry: October 23, 2007

Tonight I went to a campus presentation about the trends of technology in pedagogy. In a theater designed lecture hall I listened while Sarah Robbins aka Intellagirl talked about virtual worlds as learning spaces; specifically the virtual world of Second Life. As avatars in human form resonated on the overhead screen at the front of the auditorium, she addressed the audience, “Are we ready for the changes?”

Sarah’s avatar, Intellagirl, appeared as a virtual representation of herself, complete with black glasses and red streaked hair. I was amazed at how much it looked like her. While students and instructors jotted notes, I opened my feminist research journal to the section designated ‘Second Life’. Just a few weeks earlier, I’d been in R’s class, exploring how off and online identity performances collide, connect, and meld while navigating visual cyber-simulated environments at the computer interface. As the speaker shared information about online learning environments for college students who frequently access the internet for information and social networking, I was intrigued once again. Second Life, she said, is a place where we could experiment imaginatively with identity appearances and performances through our avatars, a
place to explore the body as rhetorical text. Second Life is an educational playground where
identity is limited only by my imagination, not to mention my techno-literacy. So, again I am
wondering where an increasingly older middle-aged population is located within pedagogies and
occupations based on unfamiliar technologies. Am I ready for the changes? I can’t say that I am.
But I know they are here to stay—to shift us uncomfortably—into new possibilities.

In this chapter I consider Second Life as a platform for observing connections
between online and offline socio-cultural practices. To some degree, Second Life
mirrors a ‘real’ life society in regards to a currency-based economy and a population
that participates in and contributes to production and consumption of goods and
services. Specifically, I look at how avatar appearances, which are virtual images of the
human body, intersect with offline age and beauty standards that position bodies into
particular categories. The narratives and online conversations presented in this chapter
help to illustrate how situated literacies are interwoven with constitutive identities to
produce subjectivities at the interface of online and offline performances.

Conceptualizing Second Life as a Virtual Social World

Second Life first opened for public use via the internet in June 2003, two years
after engineers at Linden Labs in San Francisco, California shifted their focus from
exploring haptics in a virtual world to creating a virtual world that mirrored more
precisely the Earth as we see it and as we like to imagine it (Boellstorff 2008; v3image,
2007). People who participate in Second Life come from around the globe, totaling, at
last count 1,490,592 residents; and it is not unusual for roughly 60,000 residents to be online at various Second Life (and real life) locations at the same time. Though Linden Labs functions as the overarching ‘mother ship’ of authority for resolving disputes, programming issues, and money exchanges, it is the individual property owners who set the rules for their own domains.

Residents of Second Life build approximately 90 percent of all its visible content, which is intended to produce feelings of ownership and belonging to a society that allows residents as much control as they want over the content of their social world (Boellstorff, 2008). Linden Labs supplies the grid on which virtual objects are built in ‘real’ time, which means they appear on the screen as they are built through the keyboard, much like my typing words at this moment...they appear on the page in front of me as I type. Property rights are purchased and owned by residents, so you cannot build objects on or freely enter all areas in Second Life anymore than you can trespass on another’s property in ‘real’ life without permission. Social etiquette matters to residents.

Items built for/in Second Life can be purchased with currency called Linden Dollars. With tools provided by Linden Labs, residents can create businesses and barter systems to exchange Lindens for virtual items and services. The exchange rate is monitored by Linden Labs, and one US dollar equals approximately 250 linden dollars or L$250.00. In Second Life, as in ‘real’ life, supply is determined by consumers’ desires
for goods, and producers’ literacies and skills to create those goods. Virtual items are limited only by available resources, skill, and time, but objects that mimic ‘real’ items more precisely are generally of greater value. In Second Life, if an item is in high demand, and if time and skill can be fairly compensated, then creativity is as endless as the software allows. For example, because there is little demand for older skins, artists are reluctant to make them because they take advanced skill and time considering the very few customers who want to buy them. On the other hand, this allows those who do produce older skins to charge more Lindens for rare items that require technical expertise, artistry, and time. Certainly this would be more expensive for consumers, but wouldn’t it also add more value to the item itself because of the higher levels of techno-literacy, time, and artistry involved to produce it? Wouldn’t this level of mastery in effect make an item more desirable?

Contributing to Second Life’s cyber-society requires mobility and techno-literacy for building marketable items and for obtaining employment in general. Besides building virtual objects, residents can also earn lindens by offering services to the Second Life residents. Blue Fusion Jazz club is one example of the many night clubs in Second Life that hire musicians, hosts, and bartenders to play music, sing, dance with customers, and serve virtual refreshments in their establishments.

Opinions differ when it comes to characterizing Second Life. Is it a game? Is it a social network? And if it is a game, what is the end point? If not, then how can it be
defined in comparison to offline societies where hierarchical structures exist based on situated literacies and body placed values? Games are designed to have distinct winners and losers, and though Second Life has attributes of games in that there are goals, participants, and interactions, I suggest that Second Life blurs this line. Though it may be more representative of an online social environment than a game, I consider it to be both. It is a cyber-society that resembles a game because it has some preset determinants established by Linden Labs that must be accomplished for advancing and layering particular literacies, and at the same time, it is an interactive social platform with elements that function like offline environments wherein citizens are producers and consumers of that society. Second Life allows actors a degree of agency to change goals, because Linden Lab does not determine where, when, or what type of communicative and social practices from offline will be performed online.

Second Life is a ‘place’ in cyberspace where social and cultural phenomena happen amongst those who are in the moment, operating a keyboard to maneuver an avatar on the screen (Boellstorff, 2008). Online games typically have pre-programmed destinations and a landscape that cannot be altered by its players. In contrast, Second Life residents make their own decisions regarding what they will wear, why they are there, where they will visit, and to which groups they will belong. Similarly, we make decisions offline when we consider how, where, and when to work, what to learn, what to consume, and where to shop. From a socio-cultural aspect, Second Life residents
bring with them identity narratives and situated literacies from ‘real’ life that influence their online social behaviors and identity performances. It is precisely this distinctive “open-endedness of Second Life” that makes it a useful platform from an epistemological and pedagogical perspective (p. 69).

In a ‘virtual’ environment where offline life events are simulated in a cyber-society, performing identity may appear immaterial until it materializes on the computer screen. This dissertation focuses on situated literacies and subjectivities that are produced on and through the body while negotiating at the interface of transitional zones in ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ environments. Throughout this chapter I consider how dichotomous categories in the virtual world of Second Life reflect offline positions and produces particular perceptions of middle-age bodies. Therefore, because shopping in Second Life is how appearances are altered, I first show how shopping for an avatar’s identity (re)instates offline subjectivities and everyday identity performances in a place to connect, a place to shop, a place to work, a place to love, a place to explore, a place to be different, be yourself, free yourself, free your mind, change your mind, change your look, love your look, love your life (What is Second Life? 2009).

Seaming Appearances

When we were teenagers, my sister and I collected pictures of fashions from various magazines and catalogues so that our mother could replicate them. It was a way to save money, to expand our wardrobes, and to express our uniqueness. It was also a creative challenge for my
mother whose customer base normally desired basic black evening gowns for events she would never attend. Our search at the local fabric store on a Saturday afternoon involved hours of shopping, examining various patterns that could be pieced together to reproduce as closely as possible the images my sister and I had chosen. Lavishly woven materials displayed on twig straight models were available only to high-end fashion designers, and even before beginning our quest, we knew that our choices were limited by my parents’ meager budget. Mimicking as closely as possible the pictures in our minds, our virtual imaginings materialized at the interface of mom and machine.

**Shopping for Appearances in Second Life**

Shopping for clothes and various items through and for my avatar in Second Life allows me to change my avatar’s look, to love her look and change my mind as often as I like. So, if I want my representative body in Second Life to be different, to be myself, or to free myself, shopping for assorted images and accessories is fundamental to reaching that goal.

However, a shopping spree in Second Life is different, (and similar) to typical shopping offline or online ordering. Purchasing, attaching the clothes to my avatar’s image, and storing them in my virtual closet, called ‘my inventory’ requires sequential steps and a degree of techno-literacy, or at least a willingness to explore.

Where do I shop in Second Life to find a plethora of free or purchasable products? Choices are plentiful, so let’s start shopping. At the keyboard I first type
‘control-F’ to bring a window into view on the computer screen. Here, I can find numerous places, events, land, people, and groups by typing in identifiable names. Since I’m looking for shopping locations, I click ‘places’. I can type either a specific name or the general topic or item I’m searching for. I enter ‘skin’ in the search box. A list of one hundred places appears, but like any online search, the broader the topic, the more unrelated options appear, such as ‘SEXYLIFE ISLAND’ that according to the description is more about sex than textured skins\(^5\) for my avatar.

This could take a lot of time, sifting through and visiting all these places, so I modify my search. For the sake of simplicity, let me take you to one of my favorite shopping malls that a friend just told me about last week called Smart Shapes Main Store. After I type this into the search box, a description of the store appears in a window on the screen telling me that they sell male shapes, female shapes, model shapes, sexy shapes, catwalk shapes, curvy shapes, beautiful shapes, unique shapes and shapes designed to accept a variety of skin textures. No older shapes and skins, but a nice variety nonetheless. When I find an item I like, I point my cursor and right click. A pie chart ‘resonates’ with options for buying, touching, or sitting. I left click ‘buy’ and automatically another window appears to notify me that I have just paid x amount of

\(^5\) Skin as a technical term is not to be confused with human flesh that contains and protects the internal parts of the human body. Skins in computer graphics refer to the textures that cover or lay over the form or the shape of the object, which is created on a grid of intersecting lines that are manipulated into particular contours. Whether the object is an image of a body, or a book, a skin is needed to give it a ‘physical’ appearance.
lindens for a named item that has been transferred into my inventory…my virtual storage closet. Next, I need clothes, so let’s go to Bare Rose, where quality and price are a shopper’s delight, and wardrobes alter identities at the click of a mouse.

![Figure 5.1 Image of a virtual shopping area where clothing is sold to consuming residents for the purpose of altering their avatars’ appearance. The window on the bottom left displays the ‘local chat’ amongst shoppers as conversations are recorded in real time.](image)

**Connecting Past and Present Spaces**

Whereas in LinguaMOO identity was recognized through narrated text that created an avatar-like persona, in Second Life identity was recognized through a computer generated, virtually visible 3-D image of a body called an avatar. Avatars represent the offline physical body who sits at the computer keyboard synchronically controlling movements and conversations on the screen. Avatars are the embodiments of self-expression and identity (Robbins, 2007; Turkle, 1995), connected to an offline identity, an avatar is an infinite entity, a way of becoming (an) other (Rackham, 2006).
But with a visual representation of the body as an online image, comes an environment that (re)produces hegemonic norms found in ‘real’ life, where body image matters in various ways for various reasons such as regulating opportunities and occupations that affect a body’s position in society. Replicating the ‘real’ on ‘virtual’ images brings about a privileging gaze in matters of the human body, so that offline standards and stereotypes influence how values are placed on an avatar’s appearance in Second Life.

I was torn between frustration and excitement back in 2004 when LinguaMOO was the platform for exploring material subjectivities associated with virtual performances. The virtual world of LinguaMOO that relied strictly on textual representations of identity proved more difficult for me to negotiate than Second Life’s visual environment. The various ways in which information is processed impacts the types of cultures I enter and reside in, and how I experience a particular culture online and offline. Because the textocentric environment of MOO required a more detailed understanding of unfamiliar codes and keystrokes for basic communicative acts, the process was seemingly more complex for me. Finding corresponding conversations as they scrolled quickly down the screen added to interesting, but discontinuous comments that, by the time I pasted parallel thoughts, had moved to another topic. This was true as well in Second Life when multiple interrupting conversations overlapped on the screen, but compared to LinguaMOO, communicating seemed to require less
reworking of offline literacies, so interaction with other online participants was more immediate, and hence more rewarding than my previous experience.

As I look back, the difficulty I experienced was in part because my initial entry into LinguaMOO came with absolutely no prior practice ‘reading’ hypertexted environments. By the time I entered Second Life, I was a bit more comfortable and more adept at following a disjointed scrolling conversation. I had also, due to time constraints, become less concerned with my own techno-(il)literacies, and more interested in how situated (il)literacies wrapped in technology (re)produce subjectivities by naming the body within patriarchal norms and heteronormative identity politics, and how subsequently this intersected with labor divisions, cultural capital, and personal agency as inscribed on the gendered, aging body at the interface of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds. Both virtual environments required me to negotiate and reconcile offline social scripts as they were observed in online practices, but representative bodies were never visually apparent on the computer screen in LinguaMOO since identity was read solely through narratives and coded text.

Summer Semester, 2007

I love summer classes, walking across the campus lawn with my sandals flipping under my feet. The campus is quiet and serene compared to spring and fall. Tonight is my first class
with Dr. Gajjala since 2004. I haven’t been in a virtual world since that semester, and I hadn’t planned on it, until now. Part of me dreads walking through the door to class, knowing this is going to require hands on technology. Strangely, I’m excited by the uncertainty.

Patchwork Girl Returns

June 26, 2007

I recognized two faces from three years ago. Quick paced clicks of overlapping key strokes reminded me of my absence from online spaces and from this intimidating yet enticing world of uncertainty that resulted in deeper insights. I anticipated a journey where new experiences would place me inside and outside myself. I knew that by the end of this course I and others would be virtually transformed through an ongoing, unfolding embodiment. So, when R introduced the concept of second life, my mind’s eye traveled to my experience with LinguaMOO in fall 2004. These thoughts were not altogether reassuring. I recalled the frustration that accompanied my curiosity as well as what I learned about myself while negotiating identity within unfamiliar technology and academic territory. (Re) entering a virtual world after a three year hiatus meant I would again be a newbie, illiterate in comparison to those who had remained in cyberspaces. Issues of agency, immobility, knowledge, and marginalization resurfaced. Listening to the course introduction I realized how removed I had been from qualitative and critical studies. Once again, it was time to resurrect Patchwork Girl and to
introduce her to her visual counterpart, Audry in Second Life. But this time I felt more prepared to cross new boundaries, to challenge and to merge the fine line between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’.

Figure 5.2 Initial steps for acquiring an account with Second Life. Residents first create a user name and choose from the default avatars for their online persona.

Walking around the computer lab, I watched other students who appeared to know exactly what they were doing. I was relieved to see that not everyone did. Taking my seat at an unoccupied computer, I listened hesitantly as Dr. Gajjala instructed students from across the room to log into the Second Life web page. In unison we entered http://www.secondlife.com. Before I could
resonate, or ‘rez’ into this virtual landscape I had to ‘join’ Second Life. Like Lingua MOO, I first had to assign a ‘user’ name to an online ‘self’, an avatar through which I would experience my “virtual selfhood” (Boelstorff, 2008, p. 129). I could select any first name I wanted without limitations, but my last name had to come from a preprogrammed list supplied by the owners and engineers of Second Life. I scrolled to view the program’s list of names. I pronounced each set slowly, coupling them according to how smoothly their syllables rolled off my tongue. Tired of the unappealing choices and my own indecisiveness, I quickly pointed my cursor to the name Choche out of frustration, thinking I would change it later. After nearly twenty minutes, my Second Life avatar, Audry Choche was officially named on June 28, 2007. Yes, I had resurrected the name Audry from memories of Audrey Hepburn, my mother’s and consequently my inherited and media reinforced childhood ideal of the quintessential woman.

Subjectivities that inform identity construction and body commodification are interwoven into each decision I make regarding my avatar’s skin, clothes, and general appearance. I realize my choices to create a ‘beautiful’ avatar are informed through the very heteronormative values and patriarchal structures that I resist and reconcile offline. The process of choosing a virtual persona that is seen by other residents reflects how closely I conform to offline identity performances. Staring at the available ‘default’ avatars that I could choose to represent me in my Second Life, I am surprised at how

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6 To ‘rez’ or resonate online means to virtually materialize on the computer screen so that the image is visible for viewers to see.
many questions I ask myself, as if this were of any ‘matter’ at all. But oddly it is, and it seems that choosing a visual version of me brings more inquiries about image and imagination than I expected. I was reminded how in ‘real’ life and in ‘virtual’ life I find myself repeating ageist issues. For instance, how young is too young, how sexy is too sexy, and do I submit to accepted standards of appearance, or do I resist?

In an auto-cyber-ethnographic performance of shopping for skin in Second Life, this researcher finds herself in (un) familiar settings, resisting and reconciling material technologies in an (in) visible virtual age. Here, selected events that spanned over the course of two years, from 2007 to 2009, are presented as they were recorded in ‘real’ time during and after Dr. Gajjala’s feminist research methods class.

Sitting at the computer screen with other graduate students, I begin the process of logging onto Second Life, never quite sure what I will find. As everyone gets (un) comfortable, we discuss topics of production and consumption, and how the ideology of difference is used to appropriate bodies into mainstream standards. How do we perform identity? How do we as feminist ethnographers locate ourselves within various contexts where familiar performative acts risk reinstating certain practices that (re) appropriate subjectivities produced in patriarchal social structures. Economy is attached to everything we do as feminist researchers, because cultural capital is intimately stitched to the body in a world where clear demarcations between male/female/young/old/rich/poor/literate and illiterate are preferred regardless of their
misconstrued notions of a fixed identity. Questions can be easily addressed if bodies are viewed as either this or that. The politics of cultural capital work alongside the politics of sexuality and acceptable gendered performances, particularly at the human/machine interface where hegemony has established it as a masculine domain. In Second Life, we perform practices and collaborations in a space where real activities result from the connections we make...so that virtual and real bodies matter. The class engages in critical discussion, and after connecting course readings to our online experiences, we turn to our screens for further exploration.

Audry oftentimes enters this virtual landscape naked, vulnerable, and possessing only those items given to her. She struggles to walk in this new space, but continues the journey. Avatars walk past, narrowly avoiding collision, and then she sees others walk through her. She is visibly invisible.

My feeling of ‘invisibility’ and vulnerability when Audry’s naked virtual body was seen by others on the screen, reflects my relationship not only with computer literacies, but also with particular subjectivities wrapped in offline performances that are brought to the interface. Narratives that (in) formed gendered performances in which I once was very skilled were from past patriarchal ideologies that taught me machines were for men, not women, and games were for children, not adults. In addition to mechanical (dis)comfort at the interface, the possibility of my contributing to a networked global society was doubtful as more advanced skills were yet to be
acquired. I could interact insofar as my skill level allowed. Encountering new cultural contexts offline and online, while learning new computer literacies reflects struggling, stumbling, and learning new “way[s] of being” (Markham, 1998, p.8). In this space of perceived marginalization, I was both subject and object, embodying a blur between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ through converging offline/online narratives.

**After Class Ponderings**

**July 12, 2007**

> Classmates ran ahead and I crawled, yet I am in awe of this pedagogical dance that brings me into new awareness—performing—observing self and others through a prismatic lens.

Tonight Heather and I sat at adjacent computer screens in the computer lab in University Hall. I watched her closely as she changed her online identity with ease. Her avatar glowed in blue and green opalescent wings that fluttered like wheat grass in the wind. I coveted her avatar’s appearance as well as her familiarity in this space. As she shared her knowledge I found new skills. Her generosity helped me gain a sense of agency. My new, albeit still limited literacy enabled me to move about more freely, to search for new identities. The hypertext identity of Patchwork Girl from LinguaMOO was morphing into a visible body that transcended previous lines and limitations. As Audry, she represented a woman shopping for comfortable skin in this middle space called second life.

In trying to locate ourselves within any culture, thinking somewhat dialectically may be helpful. Butler (2001) suggests that a subversive element of identity-making
occurs when the subject perceives her/him self as always changing, so that the self that
was perceived in particular ways is no longer believed to be so. This dialectical way of
viewing identity is emphasized in transitional spaces, especially when the subject’s
performative identity shifts into new and very unfamiliar situations. Uncategorizeable
bodies in ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds surface when accepted and expected identity
performances are in question. Identity erasing, as a tactically subversive component for
identity-making, extends a notion of transitioning from previously fixed ways of
perceiving the self to new fluid ways of seeing the self, yet, in the very process of
erasure paradoxically recreates another category.

When I initially entered Second Life in 2007, default⁷ categories limited ‘race’ to
primarily white complexions and age to primarily young shapes and skins. Gender
could be changed easily with a few quick clicks, so I knew my avatar, Audry, could
‘pass’ for male, however I chose my offline gender, female. But gender is never static,
here or there, and the social constructs of identity became even more evident as I began
shopping for older, ‘more mature’ female skin. It was during this process that I
discovered older skin in a male persona, and because I found nothing that resembled

⁷ Default categories for skin color, and skin characteristics have been modified since I collected this data
in 2007. Diverse options now include ‘gravity’ for a sagging appearance, ‘jowls’ for an older looking face,
and other attributes that were not available at the time of this entry. In addition, I have of late, seen more
skins created for residents who want an older avatar, however, predominance still remains on the side of
the beau body ideal.
attractive middle aged women avatars, my quest continued, day after day, week after week. Finally, after countless hours of searching, I realized that no matter how many ‘places’ I shopped, avatars were primarily images of young females and male bodies with very few exceptions for male avatars, and even fewer for women avatars. The few older avatars that were available took age to the other extreme, creating a polarization of age. My avatar could either one or the other, but nothing in between to represent a middle aged society. I cursed the Second Life program for echoing offline social constructs of binaries and beau ideal bodies.

As a primary body marker, skin receives a great deal of attention in ‘real’ life and in Second Life as text and technology inscribe and influence perceptions of identity. Whether it is in a ‘virtual’ or a ‘physical’ realm, “the body of the text, the body of the narrator, the body of the narrated I, the cultural body, and the body politic all merge in skins and skeins of meaning” (Smith, 1993, p. 4). Metaphorically, skin can be thought of as the outside layer of any animate or inanimate object. However, as I noted earlier in this chapter, ‘skin’ in technical terminology is not to be confused with human flesh.

I don’t typically enjoy shopping in ‘real’ life. I find that looking for nothing in particular leaves me wanting everything in general. I’ve been shopping tenaciously for weeks without success, and I’m still looking for that one special item that remains (in) visible, middle-aged avatars that I can purchase. Finally, I find the item in a remote corner of a clothing, body, hair, and skin store. All of these items are as highly commodified in Second Life as they are in ‘real’
life. But again I am disappointed with my findings. Here I am, staring at older skins of men with scowling foreheads, tired eyes, and unshaven faces, I continue searching excitedly for mature/character lined/middle aged female skins. I’ve searched, and now I feel so close. My pace quickens certain that if aged skin is offered for men it must be so for women. But there are none, not even one display that offers middle age female skin as an option. I return to the male skin display staring up at the posters to consider my choices. They have demos to try for $L1. Again, I am reminded of my newbie status and limited skill as I fumble to purchase a temporary face that I naively plan to alter…into a woman. I acquire the temporary body, but now am tattooed across my scowling forehead with the word DEMO in bold caps. The following days are met with disappointment as I embody embarrassment. I could neither alter Audry’s appearance, nor delete it from her/my being. Transforming again, I became a walking demonstration of impermanence as DEMO covered my head, neck, and both my arms. In addition, my attempts at alternation had left me, well, they left me very unappealing…downright unacceptable in this place where “beauty” dominates. This was certainly not the image I desired, nor was it one I planned to keep…or so I thought. I have located men’s aged skin, but I have not found a store that sells middle aged female skin…yet.

Although Audry has visited countless virtual stores shopping for skin, there are many more that she has not found. As I described earlier in this chapter, shopping takes time. That Audry cannot locate middle-aged female skin, yet men can, indicates that younger women and men in Second Life are a more desirable commodity. In fact,
middle-age is virtually invisible here and even more so for women than for men. Since I first entered Second Life, default options are more diverse. Though there may be interest in older women as community members, the prevailing preference is to remain young in appearance. The irony is that it will cost me $L 4,000.00 to purchase aged skin in Second Life and nearly the same amount in US currency to erase visibly aged skin in real life. My options are limited only by my imagination…and level of techno-literacy. If I were a skilled coder, I could sell avatars, but alas, I do not presently have such skills, and thus, my avatar is positioned as a consumer of what is provided by those who have the skill and time to do so.

In Second Life and in ‘real’ life, dualisms value the body as subcategories within gender, race, ethnicity, and age, and underlying cultural classifications that serve to stabilize attention on matters that reify dominant norms and classes. Material and virtual bodies matter in regards to obtaining and recognizing cultural capital. Perceptions of gender and age are embedded in hegemonic and heteronormative values and ideologies, and set perceptions of identity are produced within social context.

The following script is one representation of many conversations I had with various stylists and store owners as I continued my quest for second life skin.

You: I have only located men’s older skin, that’s why I have this demo.

Z: ;)

Z: you look like somebody has tried to tattoo your face ;)
You: yes, this is because I am only renting this skin for now. I’d like to create a beautiful “older” woman.

In reflection, I notice my use of the word ‘beautiful’ which falls directly into a categorical opposition, a dialectical way of seeing ‘not beautiful.’ As a feminist ethnographer I question myself as I continue, knowing full well that I had fallen into what I was specifically trying to subvert, namely, reinforcing the cultural binary.

Z: but they do not have anything special for older woman

Z: I think I better bring you in contact with a friend of mine

You: I appreciate your help.

Z: do you speak German by chance?

You: no, I’m afraid I only speak English

Z: no problem, she speaks English

You: I’d like to offer friendship, but don’t know how.

Even with limited skills, the program offered opportunity to reach across continents and converse with people who were, at that moment, sitting in front of their computers with any number of language translators electronically engaged. I pause to consider how this opportunity to cross borders in a collapse of time and space would not have been possible had I never entered this cyber-techno-space culture. The “computer technology [that] mediates between the embodied self and the ‘she’ simultaneously present in the virtual realm” is nonetheless a political landscape informed by inclusions
and exclusions of knowledge and privilege (Sunden, 2003, p. 9). In Second Life and other social networks, communication is not dependent upon geographic location, but through electric connections made at the interface. A collective group doesn’t require physicality, but rather a sharing of interests and tastes that make all local/global communities neither any more or less real. I don’t know everyone in my town, my state, or my country, yet I identify myself as a member of these communities in one aspect or another.

You: I live in Ohio USA, and you?

Z: I live in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands

Z: L is from Germany

Z: you have some bits of shawl hanging from your shoulders

Z: I have a nice Asian dress, but I am not sure if it is transfer

Z: ok, I’ll see if I have some shoes for you

Z: oh, would you either take or delete that box, to not litter this shop?

The blurring of social etiquette boundaries between online and offline spaces is noted here as I was reminded that I left a box on the floor of Z’s shop, and that littering was considered quite rude. I guess I just expected it to vanish on its own.

You: I’m sorry, I didn’t even think of it. These things are good for me to know.

Z: I can gie you a ln to a store

Z: they have a box of very good freebie shoes
Z: and the color will go with tis dress

Z: this male skin is good, except for the moustache ;)

You: yeah, I can’t get rid of it, that’s why I need female skin...without the beard.

Z: ;)

Z: If I find anything I will let you know

Figure 5.3 Audry wears Sam’s skin in a virtual shopping area where avatar bodies and skins are purchased. At the right of the screen is an open folder where my ‘things’ are stored. It is referred to as ‘my inventory’.

Unfortunately, I had not acquired the capital (cultural, technical, or economical) with which to purchase the altered skin I desired even if it were available. Therefore, the signifier ‘DEMO’ stretched across Audry’s face, announcing her newbie status to all
who saw her. Through modifying body parts I was able to make gray hair, but only to a man’s image, and only insofar as the program allowed me. I wandered in virtual space for weeks donning gray cropped hair, a beard and mustache, and an angry scowl represented by deep lines across my avatar’s forehead above ‘Sam’s’ sunken eyes. On the occasion that I did see an older body on display, they were wrought with real life stereotypes made even more obvious in the fantasy landscape of suspended youth. When subjectivities are produced as a result of identifying the body according to socially constructed binaries of gender, race, and age, then class, positionality, and literacies are situated (in)securely within predicated (dis)empowering and dominant structures.

Second Life adds a critical dimension to social issues as the value of visual appearance attaches techno-literacy to heterosexual norms and body commodification. A participant’s value in Second Life generally corresponds with their avatar’s level of artistry in regards to fashioning a visible body, so that the status of the avatar becomes entangled in more complicated proficiencies that actually require additional literacies as the body at the keyboard must understand how to manifest a desired look through technology. Similarly, offline body identity is regarded as a signifier of position, aesthetics, and value. How do we want to look? What is available? How much are we willing to pay for our desires in regards to time and money? Altering visual identity happens through increased literacy and cultural capital online and offline. The value of
virtual appearance in Second Life parallels the commodification of bodies’ offline as “technologies of the self” that interact with physical bodies through cosmetic surgeries that alter body contours, smooth skin, and subsequently shape perceptions of the self’s identity (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

In a similar vein, a post industrial economy in which available jobs are either technology positions that require computer literacy, or service positions that render low wages, the body is assigned to categories that influence opportunities in a sharply divided labor force. Women, the aged and marginalized populations in general continue to experience a wage gap along with higher levels of unemployment and poverty (Hill, 2002). And all of this is made more problematic with the role physical attractiveness and beauty play in positioning the body in the workplace, where research suggests that attractive employees earn more money (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994), and middle-aged bodies are often overlooked in the process of hiring new employees (Riggs, 2004). Though both women and men report a belief that age influences their job opportunities in a technologically driven work force, women appeared to be more vulnerable to socially imposed body politics (2004). In Granny @ Work, Riggs’ study of online discussion boards emphasized that ageist practices persist in spite of the Older Americans Act of 1965 that was enacted to address age discrimination. At the intersection of work, age, and new technologies, is a “radical shift” facing those who
find it necessary to retool and revise previous literacies and to adapt to new multi-modal and computer mediated ways of communicating (p. 106).

As I mentioned above, the distinction between consumer and producer in Second Life is determined by technical skills for making virtual objects that can be sold for linden dollars (L$). Although services offered at various establishments in Second Life do not require building skills, these jobs do require an ability to move your avatar in realistic ways with scripts that are programmed and purchased for more human-like qualities such as motility and gesturing. Scripts incorporated into an avatar can (insofar as the program is capable), mimic human and non-human behaviors, sounds, and gestures and are used to personalize and give unique qualities to one’s avatar. Scripts can imitate such actions as sipping wine, winking, kissing, having sex, shaking hands, adjusting stance, and making noises.

Another means of employment that requires far less technical skill than building or modeling, is writing for various theme centered blogs owned by Second Life residents. On two separate occasions I wrote for a blog that featured articles about fashion, image, and shopping on Second Life. I was in Rs class at the time and had been looking for more mature skins when she introduced me to CC Jewell, a Second Life resident who invited me to observe a skin show8 and report my observations on her

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8 A skin show in Second Life is like a style show in real life, only virtual. The purpose of selling designer items is the same, but whereas an offline show uses human bodies to display fashions for potential
blog, http://slsobserver.blogspot.com. She would make the necessary arrangements to pay me in lindens. I was flattered to have been asked, so I immediately accepted. But not having seen my avatar, she was unaware of the visual identity dilemma I was experiencing while trying to modify Audry’s appearance. I was surprised by the sense of urgency I felt, and the importance I placed on finding a new image; preferably one that would be more ‘acceptable’.

This new found position posed another problem. I had been on a quest for older, more mature skins, and I found myself deliberating over what to do. If I appeared as an older reporter where everyone else was young and ‘beautiful’, would I be out of place? Would it affect my opportunities for more Second Life ‘work’? Was it occupational sabotage if I looked older than anyone else at a fashion venue? The skin style show was only two weeks away, and I had to prepare Audry (my avatar) for a skin debut. I was perplexed by my reaction. I found myself wanting Audry to look drop dead gorgeous for this event, and because of my lack of literacy in regards to modifying images, I had no idea how to achieve the appearance I thought I needed…and that I wanted. Indeed, I was in parallel compliance with what Rosi Braidotti (1996), cautioned me against; the perpetuation of a beautiful body ideology that had been prioritized, produced, and

buyers, in Second Life, avatars donned in virtual bikinis walk on a runway and mingle with the audience to advertise a skin designer’s skill and artistry. Avatar models in Second Life adhere to the same visual standards as human models do for offline fashion shows.
consumed through a Western capitalist culture that had commodified the body and left its impression on the collective imagination.

In Second Life, socially constructed clocks that would normally be attached to the offline body are nonexistent since avatars that stay forever young appear to subvert ageist categorizing. But through this invisibility of categories, preference to particular bodies reinforces the absence and lack of appreciation for multiple identities, multiple ages, classes, and literacies. Socially constructed timelines worn on the body produce particular subjectivities that influence and support determinate ages for entering/departing school, marriage, and work. An offline, ‘ideally’ linearly constructed Western life narrative would likely include middle-age milestones marked by grand parenting and retirement. But in Second Life, these markers are rendered (in)visible as the visually designed forever-young avatars produced through programming possibilities and designs are preferred and consumed by residents.

**Virtual Vaginas**

It was not uncommon to find students seated in the computer lab long after class had ended. One night in particular, when everyone else had gone home, a fellow classmate offered to help me shop for the elusive skin I had been searching for, and in the process I could practice skills that would increase my mobility, my cultural capital, and thus my agency. This narrative was written directly after the ‘incident’, and is included here as an example of how illiteracies can produce unpredictable and
sometimes vulnerable situations. In addition, this experience exemplifies how materiality and virtuality overlap as issues of embodiment surface in surprising ways.

**Journal Entry: July 26, 2007**

Heather and I stayed in the lab for nearly two hours after class tonight searching for skin at various recommended sites. In one very large shopping area where everything from furniture, to clothes, to sex was sold, I practiced sitting. While I realize this is an elementary movement for most, I had just recently learned to walk without running into walls, so repeated practice was necessary. The area we teleported into was clearly marketing a number of items, including sex and sex toys. I found a seemingly harmless chair promoting a complimentary gift to whoever sat in it. I was thrilled at the notion of collecting new items for my inventory and practicing my new sitting skills at the same time. ‘What a great deal, a shopper’s dream’ or so I thought. After sitting for barely a second, I received a notice that read, “Congratulations, you have a new “pussy.” I was more than surprised, I was mortified, blushing with embarrassment as I looked around the computer lab to see if anyone other than Heather and I were there. I was certain my mother would appear at any moment to scold me for entering into tabooed territory and for transgressing ‘proper’ terminology. I tentatively…rebelliously type a word onto the pages of my ongoing narrative that ‘ladies’ dare not speak...pussy.

I personally didn’t think Audry needed new genitalia. I felt perfectly content with what she/had. But they, whoever programmed this script, obviously preferred tauter and thus younger vaginas. Indeed, this was not the type of skin I was looking for! Immediately following
my scripted revision I stood up, prepared to walk as far away as possible, but instead, a naked
man/avatar seemingly blocked my path and invited me on various erotic adventures. I sat
motionless at the computer—my eyes widened as they remained fixed on the screen—my mouth
gaped open—my hands froze at the keyboard. Heather had to tell me to click the keys so that
Audry could leave the area. In that moment my emotions were real; not pretend, not fake, not
unauthentic, and I felt virtually victimized, violated. But I also felt as though I had done
‘something’ wrong, that I was at fault, and that I had I ‘asked for it’ by entering this space
willingly, unaware, and unprepared.

When Jullian Dibble referred to perceived violations that occurred in MOO in
1993 as “a lucid illusion of presence,” he was describing a visceral feeling that defines
embodiment as a breaching of the dualistic boundary between mind and body.
However, in contrast to the text-based environment of MOO where this action would
have been viewed as a texted monologue across the screen, in Second Life, the user at
the keyboard watches as a visual body suggests sexual favors against another visual
body. Though this experience was the result of a coded script in a ‘virtual’ world, it was
nonetheless an act that evoked ‘real’ feelings of infringement, a violation of proximics.

I initially entered this online space thinking it was a world where imposing
categories to the physical body would be ‘virtually’ non-existent; where online and
offline restrictions would be totally separate. I have since found that differentiating
between online and offline power structures can be blurred. For instance, my research
interest on Second Life looks at the skin options that are available for, and worn by
online characters (avatars), which in actuality, are chosen by the physical body at the
keyboard through the original authorship of the programmer and the constraints of the
program. Through a feminist perspective, I’ve observed that homogeneity exists within
the category of age and that it parallels society’s offline obsession with youth and
‘beauty.’ An ideal age, and the image that represents it is indeed commodified in both
online and offline environments. This standard was reinforced and sustained in Second
Life by the default command that at that time only offered young, lighter skinned
avatars. To obtain darker skin, modify lips, eyes, nose, ears, height, and a host of other
‘physical’ characteristics, residents could adjust a range of sliders on the appearance
menu. ‘Gravity’ was not an available option on the slider during most of my research,
although it is now.

Skins are highly valued in Second Life because of the skill and talent it takes to
produce them, so it isn’t difficult to find shops that offer new skins and bodies. And
although ‘mature’ skins have a higher worth in one respect because of the technical skill
and time necessary to produce them, they are still rare in this space because they are not
in demand and not of aesthetic value. This was made apparent when I met Z while
shopping for skin.

You: hello, I’m new here, and I’m looking for older women skin, do you know where I
might find it?
Z: hi

Z: 高

You: nice to meet you.

Z: oh wait, let me switch my Chinese translation off

Z: oh 等待, 让我交换我的中国翻译

Z: ah, better ;)

Z: older skin may be difficult, since everybody wants to be young and beautiful here

Youthful bodies were pervasive as the predominant choice in Second Life. But even in the shops, I could not find anything beyond the standard youthful skins. In ‘real’ life, if the market looks promising, and more people demand something, producers will most likely supply it for consumption. The paradox lies in the fact that in ‘real’ world, the culture production of valorizing youth over age has resulted in millions of dollars spend on ‘anti’ aging formulas and cosmetic surgeries. The question becomes one of (re) positioning. If old themes of identity in new technologies are established within postmodern femininity, then are we not experiencing a sort of re-colonization by the producers whose strategies have limited the visually mediated body to a ‘body beautiful’ ideology? In a way, we might say that the proliferation of plastic surgery is an example of Foucault’s (1986) notion of techne as tools and technology have been advanced specifically to accommodate the ‘desire’ for an altered ‘reality’ which
becomes an extension of self. When technologies and humans interact to “shape self-
hood,” the possibilities for change are multiple, limited only by the latest technological
innovation and the direction it takes through society’s desires (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 120).

The fact that mature, middle-aged avatar bodies are rare in Second Life, certainly
has something to do with the technology skills required to produce them, however,
when I was directed to a place that created older characters, the ‘old woman’ mirrored
the stereotypical grandma in the young/old dichotomous way of categorizing
connotations of age. Her hair was in a tight bun atop her head, she wore a colorless
loose fitting calico dress, orthopedic shoes, and held a cane that wobbled as she shuffled
along ever so slowly. Clothes are vitally important to how the older body is
experienced, represented and perceived within culture, so that clothing forms a major,
yet overlooked aspect of the constitution and (mis) understanding of older bodies
(Twigg, 2007).

Because of the technical expertise involved in making aged skin in general, and
realistic looking aged skin in particular, the grandma avatar undoubtedly takes
technical talent, artistry, and time, all necessary skills for producing virtual/visual
digital/art, but a skill I do not presently possess. The production of avatar appearances
transpires through the combined capabilities of human programmers and their
machines, and through limitations and possibilities at the interface of the two. The
consumers want younger bodies, which in turn reinforces socially constituted binaries
and a cultural list for categorizing ideologies of difference and power formed offline. In addition to the constraints of mechanical formatting, subjectively assigning body types in technologies privileges the few who have the jobs of programming representative identities in Second Life.

**Conclusion**

I would venture to say that my struggle with computer literacy is not unlike others who find themselves lacking in particular skills, and consequently find themselves in disenfranchised positions. Within virtual spaces I ponder my own and others’ (il)literacies with computer technology. At the interface I realize it is not only a present lack of skill and access that marginalizes or excludes a potential user. Indeed, this present lack is (in)visibly complicated inside patriarchal systems that appropriate roles to align with heteronormative power structures. I think perhaps many of us who have performed accepted narratives, resituate our literacies while transgressing boundaries into domains that have been promoted and/or perceived as tabooed and unwelcoming.

The concept of multiplicity expands the idea of transformation from *one* way of becoming, to multiple ways of becoming, and thus, develops a possibility for multiple types of agency. From this perspective, identity emerges as a result of numerous
intersecting sites. Transitional zones that result from radically shifting everyday performativity create transformations that can be understood as initiating “new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter” (Butler, 2004, p.30).

I find useful connections between offline and online identity performances while participating/observing in Second Life. In particular, the material results of situated literacy as technology progresses, the role that skin plays in our aging identities, and the desire to erase middle and older ages via technology (in real and virtual spaces) will become even more complex as our society ages in labor force that is shifting from familiar to unfamiliar skills, especially if employers mark a body’s abilities on the skin.

As this paper progresses, so shall I, because “sometimes dormant or unknown emotional and cognitive structures within oneself are activated through participation… when they are activated, all of a sudden understanding occurs in a far more profound way” (Shweder, p. 162). As I (re)identify my image in real life by chemically coloring my hoary head, I engage in a passing of age. Identity is clearly inscribed and worn on the body in ‘real’ life as well as in Second Life, and as worth becomes affirmed or negated by the granting or withholding of certain privileges, the body is positioned in various roles of appropriation.

For those whose voices are privileged within dominant norms, my body matters to their positions as well as to mine. Wearing identity on the body introduces consequences such as where one works, lives, socializes, and yet we cannot help but
wear identity. Therefore, the body matters in regards to socio-cultural capital and agency. When an identity is different from dominant social and cultural ideals of acceptability, disenfranchisement often follows to dislocate those who are marginalized by the imposed norm. Ambiguous identities appear threatening for those who posit absolutism since an ambiguous identity of anything or anyone defies knowing in fixed terms. In addition, language used to define identities is set in dualisms, and therefore lead to categorizing and universalizing identities that are again constrained by the norms and the restrictions of language itself. Again, tensions open doors to possibilities for transformation, but only insofar as those with authority and power allow. So, I continue shopping for Second Life skins that resist dominant structures of mediated identities, and in doing so, I learn, and grow, and enjoy the multiple transformations that accompany the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ performances of transitioning through uncertainty.
CHAPTER SIX

Embracing Loose Ends

Throughout this research journey I engaged in three different virtual worlds; the hypertext narrative, *Patchwork Girl*, the (hyper) text-centric world of LinguaMOO, and the visual-centric world of Second Life. Narratives from past and present “real” life performances, which include my experiences in each of these spaces, have been presented to illuminate how sociocultural issues intersect constitutive identities in regards to gender, technology, and age. Weaving and interpreting past/present, offline/online phenomena while negotiating the interface of ‘real” and ‘virtual’ environments accentuated new ways of observing multiple positionalities and subjectivities that have influenced and have been influenced by repeated identity performances.

During this research I have oftentimes simultaneously resisted and reconciled my own gendered relationships with machines and technologies in spaces of uncertainty and (dis) comfort. For performance scholars, spaces of uncertainty are opportunities for transformation through virtual liminalities. As actors/researchers we enter transitional zones pondering possibilities and constraints, bringing about new awarenesses while transgressing performances that are no longer useful and that no longer represent who we perceive ourselves to be in a changed situation. In doing so,
we interpret and come to understand experiences of personal transition through the embodied performances of everyday encounters within (un)familiar and (un)comfortable social contexts.

Subjectivities are produced in a collection of economic, political, socio-cultural, and aesthetic practices, mixed into performative acts of resistance and compliance. Whether or not these acts are given more priority in either a material or a virtual space has not been the focus here. Indeed, this research focuses on the nuanced similarities of these environments as they impact the ‘placing’ of bodies in situated spaces online and offline. Patchwork Girl’s anxiety in LinguaMOO initially stemmed from her illiteracy with unfamiliar meaning making codes, which lead to transitional zones wherein she reflected on (un)comfortable (dis)locations at various intersections of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ materialities.

That situated literacies are unavoidable and happen whenever we make dramatic shifts in which we enter into new and unfamiliar tasks is not in questions here. But in a world of computers mediated communication that is ‘advancing’ at warp speed through structures of power and ‘progress’, this digital divide compounds subjectivities based on class, gender, sexuality, location, economics, and age. Indeed, these particular identities matter in terms of securing employment and engaging in local and global conversations channeled through a technological interface. The notion that access to
technology will also bridge the digital/class/communication divide, is only part of a complex puzzle that pieces together multiple social, cultural, and historical factors.

In chapters four and five I stressed that availability alone did not guarantee automatic success in the hyper-text virtual worlds I entered. On the contrary, entering these worlds produced and consumed a recognizable divide that emphasized differences, conflicting identity performances, and subject/object positionalities.

Reflecting on my own relationship with past and present situated literacies, I juxtaposed and analyzed personal narratives that highlighted issues of difference. I observed and participated in a mirroring of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ socio-cultural norms that influenced my (in)visibility and my (il)literacy as meaning was found at the intersections of seemingly disparate structures, patterns, and codes that situated my ‘self’ as ‘other’ in unfamiliar performances.

Limitations

Dialectically, limitations can only be placed where possibilities exist. So, when I consider the limitations of this cyber-auto-ethnographic journey, I cannot disregard possibilities that inherently embody limitations. Biases in scholarship that value certain methodologies over others may disregard an account in which the researcher is (co) author, actor, audience, subject, object, reader, interpreter, and narrator of self in various social contexts. Those who believe in strict ‘absolutes’ might disconfirm the
value of researching personal experiences through self narratives. On the contrary, I welcome feminist epistemologies that engage the socio-political through the personal. This is the limitation I face in the halls of academia, but thankfully this path has been forged and I am encouraged by feminist scholars who value identity narratives as legitimate ways of knowing. I am reminded that there are no universal narratives or fixed views from which to understand how constitutive identities perform in situated spaces. Life narratives, when approached reflexively, offer possibilities of what can be through what was, as they prompt us to question how particular identity performances come into being in the first place.

The fact that while I was writing this dissertation, countless new technologies were launched indicates that my research very quickly becomes ‘dated’ because technology changes so rapidly. Since I began this journey, Second Life has added numerous options for more ‘realistic’ avatars, which can be a limitation and a possibility as I continue to enter this virtual platform for pedagogical purposes and for exploring identity performances in various contexts. Undoubtedly, by the time this is finished, there will have been many new applications programmed into Second Life. Furthermore, I entered only three very different online spaces during my research, and there are again, multiple three dimensional virtual worlds on the internet; the now defunct LinguaMOO and the still active Second Life are the only ones I have
experienced thus far. I expect to find more as time allows. Exploring subjectivities that affect an aging workforce in a changing techno-culture, I focused primarily on trends in the United States. However, this country is not the only one experiencing ‘growing pains’ as mid-life positions shift in unfamiliar ways.

Through acts of resisting and reconciling perceived limitations we are propelled into transitional zones to ponder new literacies and new possibilities. However, what remains to be answered is how these limitations can be (re)addressed, and situated to become otherwise. How can virtual worlds be used to further explore intersections of gender, age, and technology in an ever changing computer mediated society that produces an ongoing learning curve in both academic and work spaces? How can educators and employers foster an appreciation for the vast experiences older bodies bring to the table?

**Future Possibilities**

As a researcher and teacher, I continue to ask how it is that negotiating virtual environments might create empowering or disempowering moments throughout the course of interrogating and dis-re-locating subjectivities and situated literacies. Pedagogically, virtual worlds can introduce students to numerous local and global cultures. Second Life in particular, is a platform for exploring situated literacies, subject/object positions, and identity performances. Performing identity in unfamiliar
communicative environments positions the material body in spaces wherein secure narratives are disrupted, and where self perceptions are questioned by connecting personal/private issues to political/public structures of power, privilege, marginalization, and (in)visibility.

Indeed, if my goal is to emphasize how hegemonic practices function in establishing oppressive social structures beyond the confines of the classroom, then placing my students in an environment where such mundane communicative acts occur, I believe, will help to accomplish this. Future research can branch into pedagogical applications as an effective way to more fully comprehend how constitutive identities influence and are influenced by current communication technology, socio-economic structures, situated subjectivities and literacies, and acts of resistance and reconciliation. This dissertation serves as a foundation for designing communication courses that utilize online hypertext spaces in general, and Second Life’s virtual world in particular.

Along similar lines, this research lays fertile ground for feminist ethnography that focuses on women returning college to retool their skills and their literacies in order to secure employment in today’s technological driven workforce. In addition, oral histories narrate how women who worked in manufacturing during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s are reconciling new roles that simultaneously empower and disempower
marginalized populations. Issues connecting gender, age, and technology are illuminated through women’s shared experiences, as those who were gainfully employed in blue collar sectors, or were full-time homemakers now witness unfamiliar situations that propel them into transitional zones and liminal spaces of growth and change.

Through text, through performative acts, through performance ethnographies, through seemingly disparate narratives stitched on/through the body, I am, we are embodied with multiple perceptions and subjectivities that are connected to our material and virtual experiences. As researchers, our observations include self analysis as we asked ourselves, how has this come to be? What social phenomena can be addressed through our personal experiences online, and how do particular negotiations at the interface of human/machine produce or reinforce subjectivities and vulnerabilities in ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ spaces? Specifically, how do overlapping identity performances inform (in) visibility at the intersections of gender, age, and technology, and what can these connections teach us about ourselves and about the world through which our bodies are transitioning into a virtual age of emergent technologies?

That computer technology is pervasiveness in everyday practices in many places throughout the world is not in question as this has been well established on numerous stages of production and consumption. Furthermore, technologies in general have
always existed as an integral part of everyday life, influencing and being influenced by positions of power and privilege. From needles to quilting frames, from sewing machines to band saws, and from printing presses to computers, the appropriation of technologies and their uses has played a key role in naming and (mis)identifying gender, class, location, economics, culture, and age, which in turn has contributed to divisions, inclusions, and exclusions through situated literacies.

This research journey has explored how in situated spaces, I experienced various levels of literacy that parallel past and present heteronormative power structures. Literacies are not limited to local everyday practices, sequential texts and predicable narratives with universally defined linear structures that rely on clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Indeed, computer mediated communication has produced (and consumed) a culture in which time and space collapse into hypertexts and images that connect multiple minds within minutes of click ‘send’. And though it may appear to be a space void of hierarchies, patriarchy, power and privilege, it is steeped in subjectivities based on class, age, gender race, location, position, economics, and sexuality. In my native Western culture, our workforce, our educational institutions, our homes, and our social networks are for the most part, busy with computer mediated communication that identifies us by/through the particular historical and situated literacies we bring to the table, or, to the interface.
Shifting drastically away from familiar performances that have reinforced ‘identity narratives of knowing and doing’, to experience other ways of practicing everyday life presents simultaneous moments where learning occurs through risk, vulnerability, and possibility. This dissertation has been a reflection of such a journey. I would never have entered these spaces on my own; probably wouldn’t even know they existed. Before entering academia, I was among the population who, by choice, or by circumstance, were on the margins of computer technology in a world immersed in it. Nowadays my umbilical cord to cyberspace stays connected day and night as I engage social networking sites, information portals, and teleconferencing events.

Emergent computer technologies continue to play a central role in today’s world as time and space are compressed at the interface of human communication. Regardless of our utopian hopes of techno-space that has no representations of difference and no boundaries for identity performance, it still does not offer us a world without categories. Exploring situated histories and literacies through identity narratives in ‘virtual’ and real’ world environments, emphasizes that we become virtual when we engage in technologies. Virtual and material overlap, incoherence and disconnectedness in the familiar narrative requires a new or revised personal plot that links together disparate events into a new whole that not only reintegrates the past in
new ways, but communicates an act of moving forward toward a renewal of self...always questioning ...always seeking.

A conclusion is never really ‘the end’. Indeed loosed ends are stitched together in the margins, and if you look long enough you will see blurred lines and disjointed transitions that bleed into multiple performances and possibilities found within herstory...
APPENDIX

The catalyst for this topic grew from my own experiences of transitioning from homemaker to academic. As a member of an aging workforce, and as a ‘post’ non-traditional student whose computer literacies were nearly non-existent at the beginning of my undergraduate program in 2000, I often felt inept and insecure, more so because of the unfamiliar technology than anything else. I understood course content, but because I had few techno-skills before entering this new work space, I struggled in an environment that required me to use Blackboard and ever-changing word processing programs before being instructed how to do so. Since becoming an instructor at a regional campus, I have watched similar scenarios with many of my own students. Regardless of their abilities, their limited experience using computers often puts them at a disadvantage as they struggle to reconcile new literacies.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics stated in 2005 that “from 2006-2016, the number of workers ages 55-64 will increase by 36.5 percent, while the number of workers who are 65 and older will increase by 81 percent.” Because baby boomers are increasingly turning to education for answers, I am convinced that this is a timely issue that educators must be sensitive to for an aging population that has much to offer and deserves to be included in a changing technological labor/learning force. What follows
is a general overview and some suggestions that would help our students to success so that they may retrain and institutions may retain valued learners and workers.

Who is the target audience? ‘Post’ non-traditional students who take college classes often do so for several reasons.

- They are entering the workforce for the first time since computers became so pervasive, and they have had little if any experience with them.
- They are (re)entering a workforce after having lost a manufacturing or service job and must now retool their skills to meet the current market requirements.
- They are not seeking another occupation, but must update existing skills to remain in their current positions.
- They have been downsized from a professional position and must find another career path that will require. Generally, these workers have been involved with computers to a greater degree than non-professional workers.

In many cases, baby boomers are changing from occupations that have been physically taxing to occupations that will be less detrimental to their bodies as they are either too young, or not financially able to retire. This likely involves engaging new technology.

“Half the number of highly non-traditional students left college within the first 3 years, compared with just 12 percent of traditional students” (Rodham-Clinton & Graham, 2004).
What current issues are impeding their progress when they enter our classrooms?

- Online classes and communicating through Blackboard are becoming more the norm than the exception, and colleges are capitalizing on offering this option to students who cannot, for a variety of reasons, attend face-to-face classes. However, this approach requires online students to be even more skilled in computer mediated communication as they do not have the convenience of walking to instructional services for help. Therefore, it is imperative that the instructor know the skill level of the students, and also, that the instructor can guide them through the processes necessary to participate.

- The computer lab and the learning center at the campus where I teach are wonderfully staffed with student workers willing to assist those in need. However, depending on their entry level, some of our older students require more one-on-one time. As Karen Riggs (2004) pointed out in her research, older workers/students feel that they benefit and have a better chance of retaining information when computer training is presented in a more immediate fashion where their questions can be repeated and reviewed with an instructor at hand.

- Oftentimes students enter my own classes with little if any of the basic computer skills necessary for creating a document, organizing folders and
researching topics. Their computer illiteracy is reflected in their written work and very quickly puts the student at a disadvantage as assignments become more time consuming as they struggle to produce papers and presentations. Post non-traditional students typically have much more on their plates than attending classes. Many of them have job and family obligations alongside the stresses of coursework. The more time spend on creating a document because of technical difficulties, the more likely students are to become frustrated with the process. Consequently, the anxiety often attached to basic requirements can be factored into low retention rates than then result in a potential worker with limited opportunities in the workforce.

What can institutions of higher learning do to help students increase their techno-literacies?

- First and foremost, don’t through the baby boomer out with the bath water. In other words, if the student/worker is eager to learn (which is usually the case if they have sought out these work spaces), then take into consideration that baby boomers are willing to adapt to new situations and new ways of doing things. Older students and workers are eager to learn and serious about advancing their literacies, as they understand the importance of retooling their skills in order to be an asset to employers who have younger workers vying for the same positions.
• That we have in place laws against age discrimination is telling. Colleges and corporations alike would benefit by changing their perceptions about aging workers and students. This may require employers to reconsider previous misconceptions that an aging population is no longer useful to society. One way of accomplishing this is by setting up programs that couple more computer proficient students and workers with those who are less proficient with computers. This could go a long way to bridge any generational tensions and misconstrued ideas.

• College advising is not to be taken lightly. Students who enter classes that require writing and research need first to take a ‘mini’ course that will equip them for this task. Designing such a course for students to take will undoubtedly give them more confidence when attempting to complete assignments in a timely manner. This will require some type of entry evaluation for computer literacies much like the ones already in place for reading and writing proficiencies.

• Communication amongst instructors is vital in targeting students at risk due to computer illiteracies. This too will require that instructors have a record of students’ entry evaluations in order to assist them in finding the appropriate program.
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