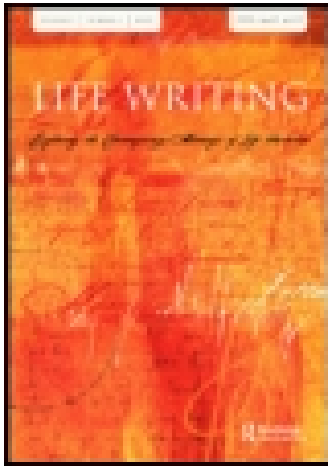


This article was downloaded by: [Tahneer Oksman]

On: 06 July 2015, At: 06:38

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London, SW1P 1WG



## Life Writing

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rlwr20>

## Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online

Tahneer Oksman

Published online: 06 Jul 2015.



CrossMark

[Click for updates](#)

To cite this article: Tahneer Oksman (2015): Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online, Life Writing, DOI: [10.1080/14484528.2015.1053029](https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2015.1053029)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2015.1053029>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

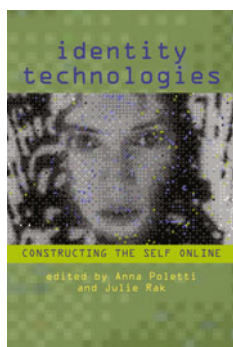
Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

## Review

---



Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, Eds. *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014. 300 pages, ISBN: 978-0-299-29644-5

Reviewed by: Tahneer Oksman

In their introduction to *Identity Technologies*, editors Anna Poletti and Julie Rak describe their new anthology as an ‘experiment in interdisciplinary dialogue’ (3). Indeed, that experimental spirit persists throughout the text, from meditations on the history of cyber-race and identity tourism to reflections on the connections between Internet writing and the print diary. The book expertly bridges together theories of identity and subjectivity as they have unravelled in auto/biography studies alongside mostly (but not solely) newer scholarship, which examines online identity and which stems in large part from media studies. How, the book asks, can we use what we have learned from each discipline to complicate the ways we think about identity? Early on, the editors analogise what psychologist J. J. Gibson originally termed ‘affordances’, the relationship between a subject and her environment, with the subgenres so often evoked in auto/biography theory. If writing in a particular auto/biographical genre, such as the diary, manages the way we think and talk about the creation of a particular identity, then writing with or through particular affordances, via the Internet, can similarly structure the way we think about the formation of ‘terms for identification and the rules for social interaction’ (5). In other words, why not use what we have learned in auto/biography studies—about self-representation, mediation, and narrative—to shape our reflections on online identities, since both lines of thinking relate to and clash against one another in interesting ways?

Of course, the discourse circulates in both directions, and auto/biography theorists have a lot to gain from paying attention to the non-narrative aspects of identity formation and representation in relation to online practices, a line of thinking that scholars of digital and new media studies already often emphasize. As the editors explain, ‘the idea of narrative may not fit what identity formation looks like in digital media, and we may have to look to other ways to think about what is happening’ (11). Focusing on the non-narrative aspects of identity

reinforces the crucial notion that identity, as it is commonly understood, is both something we sometimes feel we have agency over, a process, and something we are not always in charge of, a product. It is important to recognise and differentiate between these two ways of regarding identity, and to begin to think through the implications of this divergence.

The editors of the collection readily describe the book as ‘speculative’ and ‘tentative’, and their arrangement of the essays into four distinct sections expertly frames and shapes the (unavoidably) tenuous connections that can be made between various argumentative threads. The opening section, ‘Foundations’, is especially helpful for those looking to lay the groundwork for investigations into online identity, or for those looking to incorporate the book into introductory courses. The first two important essays, reprinted here, are Helen Kennedy’s ‘Beyond Anonymity, or Future Directions for Internet Identity Research’, a piece that lays out the history of identity theory and then problematises it, and Lisa Nakamura’s ‘Cyberrace’, an essay that lays out, and then dispels, the myths and fantasies of online spaces, both in Web 1.0 and 2.0, as racial utopias. Robert Cover’s essay reads Facebook through the lens of Judith Butler’s performative theory in order to reinforce the coded nature of online identity, how it is neither simply essentialist nor constructed, ‘neither a site for identity play nor for static representation of the self’ (55). The opening section ends with a catalogue of issues and considerations presented by auto/biography theory pioneers Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson—‘preliminary comments’, as the authors term them—which are meant to prompt and shape future discussions of online identities.

The following two sections of the book—‘Identity Affordances’ and ‘Mediated Communities’—are enhanced by these introductory essays, and each piece explores, generally through case studies, the ways that technologies mediate individual and communal identities and expressions. In ‘Adultery Technologies’, Melissa Gregg argues that technology ultimately offers us opportunities, often underexplored, to rethink and experiment with middle-class subjectivity and particularly sexual and other relational interactions between people. Aimée Morrison too focuses on the ways that affordances shape how we envision and express ourselves both on- and off-line. Bridging together ideas culled from auto/biography studies and new media studies, she focuses specifically on the Facebook status update to show how life narratives are moulded not only by genre conventions but also by the material and/or digital structures that frame them. Courtney Rivard turns to online archives in order to better understand why two projects constructed in much the same way—the September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank—produced very different results. Rivard concludes that offline factors, such as structural inequalities of class and race in the US, as well as the media’s related portrayal of each disastrous event, affected the public’s ability to identify with victims and, subsequently, to participate in these projects. Each of these essays reinforces the notion that we cannot understand what happens online without incorporating related offline contexts, and Laurie McNeill reinforces this point as she connects the explosive popularity of the Six-Word Memoir site to late twentieth and early twenty-first century self-help culture.

Mary L. Gray's reprinted essay, 'Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires', aptly kicks off the section of the anthology focused on communal identities, arguing that media is 'the primary site of production for social knowledge of LGBTQ identities' (170). Like the other authors included in the chapter, Gray contends that certain online sites can function as counterpublics, offering alternatives to online and offline communities that fracture and damage an individual's sense of self, visibility, and belonging. Olivia Banner explores certain patient-networking sites as one set of such counterpublics, while Alessandra Micalizzi discusses virtual communities that connect women who are mourning the loss of a child during pregnancy or before the second month of life. As Micalizzi compellingly argues, the Internet becomes a space, for the women participating in these sites, for 'social recognition'—a site where they can fully acknowledge an identity that is often otherwise left unrecognised, both by others and even by the self. Suzanne Bouclin's 'Homeless Nation' ends this section by presenting yet another counterpublic, one that 'can operate as a corrective that showcases individual lives rather than caricatures embodied in legislation' (232). While each of the essays contained in this section highlights the potentials available in certain online spaces, for visibility, connection, and community, they also note possible limitations, recalling Nakamura's acknowledgement of the adamant connection between the Internet and 'its outernet' (52). The Internet may offer new forms of visibility and expression, but it also reproduces plenty of the problematic formats and frameworks of the world offline.

The book concludes with two exciting, exploratory pieces. Philippe Lejeune's 'Autobiography and New Communication Tools' examines the ways that new technologies have shaped established auto/biographical genres. Lejeune argues that the Internet has changed not only the ways we write about ourselves but also the ways we think about identity. Nevertheless, he also reveals, specifically in relation to diaries, that, surprisingly, 'the landscape is changing, but less than one might think' (253). Citing a 2008 analysis of a survey done by the French Ministry of Culture, he notes how many people continue to maintain diaries on paper. Lejeune's observation of the strong influence that auto/biographical genres, including the diary, have had on Internet writing is especially compelling, and bodes further analysis. The book concludes with a delightful interview between its editors and affect theorist Lauren Berlant, who discusses the blog that she has been keeping for a decade, *Supervalent Thought*. Describing blogs 'as part of the expansion of life writing genres', Berlant establishes hers as a space where she has been able to explore 'the becoming-event of something' (270). As she reflects on her online encounters, via the blog, as 'genres that induce aesthetics', she explains: 'aesthetics is the place where a certain kind of encounter with form is the scene when you're open to the possibility of becoming different' (272). Certainly, as the essays contained in the anthology reflect, rethinking the relationship between identity, technology, and auto/biography means acknowledging and examining the many possible ways we can become different.