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Playing with Boundaries: Posthuman Digital Narratives in *RealSelf.com*

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Abstract

Studies in digital humanities are often embedded in the theory of posthumanism. N. Katherine Hayles described the posthuman as “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles, 1999, p. 3). Enmeshed in scientific advancements in communication technology and bio-technology, this posthuman body or cyborg is always in a state of perpetual becoming, with or without its own agency. Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (1991) celebrated the un-gendering potential of human-machine couplings. Internet theorists like Sherry Turkle (1997) have also expressed optimism about the self-changing capacity of digital communication.

In this context, the paper interrogates, through a posthumanist lens, the digital narratives constructed through text and images on *RealSelf.com*, which is an online social media forum for those seeking (and finding) the correct cosmetic surgical treatment for human-enhancement or metamorphosis. The paper will attempt to read the website, especially selected transformation-stories from the “Reviews” section, where those who are undergoing/will undergo/have undergone cosmetic surgical procedures post their experiential narratives and photographs before, during and after the procedure in a blog-timeline format, often eliciting comments by supporting readers. These diverse narratives on the site may be unpacked to see how posthumans are playing with the boundaries of their bodies to reconstruct their selves, and whether these transformation-stories break away from earlier gender stereotypes, or whether they replicate them: old wine in a new, virtual, surgically-enhanced bottle?

Keywords: Cosmetic surgery, cyborg, digital, human-enhancement, narratives, posthuman, social media.

Introduction: Becoming Posthuman

“Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that.” (Braidotti, 2013, *The Posthuman*, “Introduction”, p.1).

“As you gaze at the flickering signifiers scrolling down the computer screens,... you have already become posthuman the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman” (Hayles, 1999, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, p. 2).

Posthumanism is not a deferred state or a science-fictional concept. The ubiquitous presence of the internet in our lives makes us live through posthumanism. If I confess that I am in a committed relationship with my laptop, or that my mobile phone is a prosthetic extension of my arm, I am articulating my posthuman becoming. N. Katherine Hayles described the posthuman as “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles, 1999, p.3). As we enmesh our offline and online existences in more and more imbricated ways, we can witness our own continuing self-construction and reconstruction.

Posthuman theories and praxis are embedded not only in cyber-technology but also in recent developments in biotechnology. The scientific advances in biotechnology has enabled humans to reconstruct the biological human body into bionic bodies with artificial insertions and additions. Biotechnology also engages with other practices like neo-eugenics, artificial reproductive techniques and surrogacy. By fracturing long-entrenched binaries like nature/culture, biotechnology ventures into terrains that have evoked mixed responses, especially from critical posthumanists. Francis Fukuyama, for instance, controversially advocated state control of biotechnology, although one defining feature of these new participatory and/or embodied posthuman technologies is democratization of access (Fukuyama, 2002, p.181).

In this paper, I will attempt a posthumanist interrogation of *RealSelf.com*, which is an online social media website for those seeking (and finding) the correct cosmetic surgical treatment for human-enhancement. Located at the intersection of cyber-technology and biotechnology, the website archives multiple transformatory self-narratives that are communicated and shared. The paper aims to read the website as text and to focus on randomly selected transformation-stories published in the “Reviews” section, where those who are undergoing/will undergo/have undergone cosmetic surgical procedures post their experiential narratives and photographs before, during and after the procedure in a blog-timeline format, often eliciting comments from empathetic and presumably similarly-intentioned readers. Many of these narratives intersect and reify each other’s, and the paper will attempt to unpack these diverse narratives to see how posthumans are playing with the boundaries of their offline bodies and online subjectivities to reconstruct their selves. Grounded on posthuman and feminist theories of Donna Haraway, RosiBraidotti, N. Katherine Hayles and others, the paper will interrogate these digital narratives to find out whether they resist or reify earlier gender stereotypes, and also explore the issues of agency and anxiety that are performed through these transformation-stories.

The Irony of ‘Reality’

Reading *RealSelf.com* as a text, what engages us first is the deceptively ‘human’ homepage or ‘cover’. The visual image of the smiling, blonde woman dressed in white with a muted green-grass background invites the reader to “Find the right cosmetic treatment” (*RealSelf.com*, Homepage). The normative good looks of the model, her careful positioning in front of a natural background and her easy smile conceal the un-‘natural’-ness and pain of these cosmetic treatments. The wholesome image acts as a palliative to the fear of surgery that most seekers of cosmetic surgery would feel.

Ironically, the text is an invitation, not just to a journey of self-transformation, but to fracture the pretty façade of the homepage, to break its boundaries by clicking on the links leading to the multiple participatory layers which rhizomatically open up the posthuman hypertext for the reader to enter. This shift from text to hypertext parallels and metaphorises the fracturing of human bodies into posthuman selves concealed within the homepage.

The other irony, of course, is of the name: “RealSelf”, especially in the context of the fragmented, fluid, contingent and contested categories of ‘reality’ and ‘selfhood’ that posthumanism posits. What is the self in posthumanism? Is it, as robotics theorist Hans Moravec suggested in *Mind Children* (1988), an embodied action or an informational pattern, or both? Is it what Sherry Turkle (2005) called “the second self”, created by the agency of the first self through the medium of technology? Again, what is ‘real’: the embodied self, the desired ‘fictional’ self that the body is be(com)ing, or the virtual representation of the self? The publicity images for the different surgical procedures always follow the semiotics of the Before/After binary, each procedure cleaving the self into two, the pre-op and the post-op. This again raises the question, which is the ‘real self’: the natural, ‘given’, ‘before’ or ‘pre-op’ self, or the desired, constructed, ‘after’, ‘post-op’, implanted, hybrid self? Does the surgical transformation ‘make’ or ‘erase’ the real self?

In posthuman theory, the unified subject is thus broken apart and reassembled as a multiplicity (Hayles, 2005, p. 151). The selves we encounter on *RealSelf.com* are what Hayles termed “Embodied Virtuality”: “material objects ... interpenetrated by informational patterns” (1999, pp. 13-14).

The Fragmented and Reconstructed Posthuman Self

RealSelf.com offers around 254 “treatments”, mostly invasive procedures that promise and, presumably deliver, self-transformation by re-shaping the boundaries of the human body. These narratives of transformation are constructed through multiple perspectives: the expert advice of the plastic surgeons, the “overview”, “procedure guide” and “lexicon” written by the website’s in-house team, galleries of images and the reviews and discussion forums by the ‘patients’, usually documenting the entire pre- and post-operative experiences.

On *RealSelf.com*, posthuman bodies are constructed and reconstructed through self-chosen, invasive surgical procedures on various body parts, which become material fragments re-designed and amalgamated to form the post-human state. Secondly, as we see in the confessional narratives of the site members, their identity construction is contingent on the near-obsessive documenting and displaying (through text and image), and circulating the posthuman self-as-process and self-as-product through the web.

As material-informational bricolage, the posthuman self can, literally, shape-shift, blur boundaries between body and machine, between private and public. The marked body (where the surgeons actually draw lines to segregate the unwanted parts of the body—the subcutaneous fat around the waist, for instance) is an iconic image of cosmetic surgery. This marked body becomes a metonym for the posthuman process: a process

that fragments the body into changeable and erasable pasts to construct a new future. A similar emphasis on cutting and sewing up is seen in Shelley Jackson's montage hypertext fiction, *Patchwork Girl* (1996), a key posthuman text, where the recurrent motif is of taking apart and stitching together of narratives, bodies, sexualities and selves.

Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" states, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, 2013, p. 149). The selves we encounter on *RealSelf.com* are posthuman cyborgs: because of the presence of non-biological components and because of the shared construction of subjectivity through cyber-technology (Hayles, 1999, p. 4).

RealSelfCyborgs: Dystopia or Utopia?

The cyber-feminist Haraway chooses to be a cyborg rather than a goddess because it is "a creature in a post-gender world", because of its potential for resistance and detachment from gendered, racist and capitalist codes (2013, pp. 70-71). In this context, the paper will now read some reviews posted on *RealSelf.com* as sites of resistance to, or reification of, gender stereotypes.

Interestingly, most reviewers on *RealSelf.com* give themselves pseudonyms: the act of naming the self becomes a symbolic heralding of their new bodies/selves, and also serves to splice their offline/online identities (bringing us back to the fragmentation theme). They identify themselves through their geographical locations (to make it easier for other seekers to locate the surgeons). They also identify themselves through their weight in pounds – 155, 203, etc. – verbalizing their anxiety about body image. The agency of self-naming and self-making is undermined by these revealed anxieties.

A reviewer who calls herself "the new me" and who has undergone a tummy tuck writes: "After having three wonderful kids, I finally decided it was time to give back to me." (July 20, 2014). On July 26, 2014, she posts: "Its like a[n] internal grenade and everything inside you shakes....so painful!"; On August 11, 2014, she writes, "Tummy is still numb and swollen... ..its just a waiting game from on for the numbness to go away and the scar to fade". There are many commenters who form a network of support and sympathy: one of them, Bubba, writes on July 23, 2014 that "It's like waiting for Christmas! You're gonna look great. I'm 12 days post and feeling loads better. Happy healing x"(The new me July 2014, 2014). The pain of the morphing process is detailed, but is borne for the sake of the miraculous Christmas gift of the new self.

Another reviewer, identifying herself as Ms Amor Da Body, writes on February 4, 2014 that: "Im 22 years old. I currently way 288. I plan on getting a tummy tuck, fat transfer to butt and breast. Lipo of back, arms a thighs". On July 27, 2014, she writes: "I have gained a lot of weight. I'm currently 307... Im so ashamed". On 30 July 2014, she reiterates: "Im currently 304. My body is very bad looking... PLEASE NO NEGATIVITY ABOUT HOW I LOOK NOW. I AM POSTING TO HELP". On 11 August 2014, she writes, "Thinking about not writing on this site anymore. It seems like when you keep asking ppl for help or suggestions you never get a response back." There are over 25 supportive comments to this post, for instance, this one by Ms. Love: "Don't give up, you can do it...! I'm planning on going to DR. For tummy tuck , BBL And Lipo. I would love to have a buddy to go with. And just a supportive person till our journey. You Game?" (Ms Amor Da

Body, 2014). Ms Amor Da Body's pseudonym is ironic, she obviously does not love her body. The long timeline of her posts (over seven months) reveals that she has still not undergone surgical procedures: this indicates the obsession for and fetishization of the as-yet-fantastical posthuman body of which she will no longer be ashamed.

Another reviewer, Ceraboo42, who has also undergone a tummy tuck writes: "For as long as I can remember, I have been incredibly self-conscious about my stomach. I am formerly morbidly obese and after losing more than 100 pounds I have decided it's time to take the next step in my journey so I am having an extended tummy tuck on July 22, 2014". On 30 June 2014, she writes, "On Saturday I woke up in the middle of the night with a mind flooded in thoughts, anxieties and fears about surgery". On 13 July 2014, she writes, "It's almost incomprehensible to me that I'm only going to be living in this body for another week. Again I find myself swinging wildly between the two extremes of being terrified and thrilled. Part of me wonders if I have mentally grasped what I am about to do. Something about it doesn't seem real". On 20 July 2014, the day before the surgery, she writes, "I'm proud of who I've become and the decisions I've made for myself...Today, instead of being overrun by fear and uncertainty, I'm choosing to embrace a sense of wonder and hopefulness". On 1 August 2014, ten days after the surgery, she writes: "I am loving my new figure. When I look at myself in the mirror now I see a woman and not just a stomach" (Ceraboo42, 2014). Like the others, she reiterates the tropes of morbid, depressive anxiety, fear of pain, and a sense of empowerment at choosing to make a new, embodied self. The ironic ambivalence of the post/human self being limited to only its embodiment (stomach as signifying woman), of the whole self being reduced to body parts, escapes her, as it does the other narrators.

The patterns that reiteratively emerge from the individual timeline texts focus on body contours and self-desires (which are not in consonance, there is an accompanying denial of and disgust for the given body), a quest for transformation, a willingness to bear pain for this purpose, to share anxiety, to exhibit the given and the constructed body/parts, and, finally, a sense of incompleteness: none of the narratives end with unqualified elation of possessing a new, perfect body, there are always accompanying anxieties about the healing process, weight gain, desensitization, scar marks, etc. The narratives appear as a layered, ambiguous network of embodied dystopia that is rooted in obsessive body dysmorphia, and an articulated hope for a utopian posthuman future body. The narratives of self-transformation through advances in cyber-technology and/or biotechnology have not been a triumphalist arc. Along with expressing agency, these narratives provoke responses of uncertainty and are themselves impelled by multiple anxieties.

Cyberfeminist Critiques and Contestations

When RosiBraidotti calls the posthuman body "post-naturalistic", resulting in "playful experimentations with the boundaries of perfectibility of the body", she is actually focusing on the agency of the posthuman self (2013, p. 2). Internet theorists like Sherry Turkle (1997) have also expressed optimism about the self-changing capacity of the Internet, the transformative agency of life on the screen. The *RealSelf.com* website emphasizes that all the treatments included are "elective". In the normative 'human' context, optional cosmetic surgery is a culturally devalued practice stigmatized as narcissistic, obsessive and unhealthy (unless it is reconstructive in purpose, eg. for a burn

victim). In this context, non-judgmental, supportive, interactive community websites like *RealSelf.com* are posthuman spaces where one can attempt to access and embody a “non-dualistic understanding of the nature-culture interaction” (Braidotti 2013, p. 3).

The agency of the narrators is made ambiguous by their anxieties. The narrators are often caught in a double bind: anxiety about their unloved, overweight pre-op bodies, as well as fear and anxiety about the morphing procedure. Normative ideas of beauty and body have a crucial role in engendering these anxieties: the dysmorphia is rooted in social ridicule and marginalization. The double bind operates in another way also: while the human present of these narrators are socially stigmatized, and while they want to change into the socially approved posthuman *product* of perfected bodies, the posthuman *process* of change is again stigmatized and devalued by others. It may be noted that posthuman theorists are themselves divided in their approach to biotechnological human enhancements. Francis Fukuyama, for instance, in *Our Posthuman Future*, talks of the limits imposed by nature that are morally binding and should not be transgressed (2002, p. 38).

Yet, the psychological benefits of sharing one’s transformation story, with its overlapping triumphs and troughs, cannot be discounted, especially when contextualized against the overt and covert societal disapproval of such procedures. Sharing stories, of course, comes after agency: the decision to remake one’s own self: both by altering the boundaries of the body and by writing one’s new identity online. “The notion of agency plays a central role in cosmetic surgery discourse, especially in relation to women’s power, subjectivity and choice” (Hayes and Jones, p. 100). Many of the posters choose to opt for cosmetic surgeries because they feel that “this is for myself”. The cost of the surgery is seen as a worthwhile investment that augments one’s competitive edge in professional and personal life. The pain of the procedures validates the results of surgery as ‘achievement’.

Shazza56, a reviewer who is a married, careerist, grandmother, and who will be 60 years old in January 2015, writes of deciding to go in for a facelift in Malaysia for “me myself and I”. On 4 June 2014, two days after the surgery, she writes: “today :-(woke up thinking someone was strangling me ... Face distorted big time & yes today there is pain...”. After one month, on 15 July 2014, she writes: “healing is going well... still lots of swelling... but all in all very happy” (Shazza56, 2014). Another poster, Time4me2, writes on 7 January 2014, “I am one month away from my surgery date I am excited and nervous. I started this process 2 years ago and backed out the first time because I thought I wasn't doing it for the right reasons. Now here I am two years later, my mind is set and I'm ready to do this for me. I'm looking forward to a healthier mentally and physically me” (Time4me2, 2014). By sharing the explicit reviews of surgery by the posters, *RealSelf.com* implicitly invites readers into a medicalized regime of self-assessment and intervention to achieve perfected bodies, the culturally-endorsed ‘real selves’ of their fantasies. Choosing to be bionic hypermediated posthumans is an emphatic and empowering act of self-fashioning.

However, feminist posthumanists like Anne Balsamo critique these “biologic-machinic complexes”, which, although they “alter the limits of corporeality”, are still limited in their “disruptive possibilities” because of the “persistence” of gender codes and hierarchies (1996, p. 55). The posthuman bodies on *RealSelf.com* experience pain,

violence and fear to (mostly) replicate traditional gender patterns of masculinity and femininity. Others like Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf have also opined that women's surgery choices are overdetermined by larger patriarchal, advanced capitalist structures, and that plastic surgery patients are victims of the beauty myth, of the politics of normative, colonizing categories such as whiteness, slimness and youth (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1990). As we have seen, the decision to opt for plastic surgery is often preceded or accompanied by dysmorphia, which is pathological anxiety about body image, the desire to hide or fix the body boundaries, often symptomized by intrusive, pervasive and obsessive thinking about the body. Goaded by this anxiety, the posthuman bodies in *RealSelf.com* perform gender, as Judith Butler states, "within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (2010, p.45). Shopping for the perfect body through surgery and medical tourism becomes a kind of perverted posthumanism produced by advanced capitalism.

Yet this insistence on the victimhood of cosmetically reconfigured posthuman selves is in itself prescriptive and non-inclusive. Classifying the posthuman bodies on *RealSelf.com* categorically as either agents or victims runs the risk of valorizing or pathologizing the posthuman discourse. This ethical debate limits the radical transformative potential of self-fashioning that posthumanist technologies, bodies and spaces make possible.

Deferred Posthuman Perfection and Potential?

However, some of the radical bio-technological ways in cosmetic surgery can potentially challenge or erase gender boundaries are mostly unrealized on *RealSelf.com*. Only 24 reviewers have narrated their experiences with gender reconstruction surgery, pointing to a continuing hegemony of gendered discourse of the body, even in the present-tense posthuman condition. Yet, even those 24 reviews indicate that the writing of a radical posthuman future is emerging at the margins.

It must be emphasized here that *RealSelf.com* is a space for experiential narratives, and that the narrators have little interest in theorizing their posthuman condition. To insert a cyberfeminist dialectic, we may interpolate the *RealSelf.com* narratives, which are ultimately embedded in gendered desires, with the narratives from the consciously-theorized *World of Female Avatars*, which is a curated, collective "artistic online survey of the female body in times of virtual reality" (Stermitz, 2008). Articulating the potential of female cyborgs, Stermitz and her collaborators aim to "liberate the body from compulsory prescriptions" and "put the body in a flexible controlling position": (2008). But curated, conscious, feminist projects such as these are only part of the multiple identity projects being constructed on the internet. Digital spaces like *RealSelf.com* give voice to less theorized and more embodied and gendered experiences: but being gendered and ambiguous does not necessarily erase the agency, resistance and empowerment of posthuman self-making. It is just that, as a collective discourse, the radical code-breaking potential of posthumanism is yet to be fully negotiated on *RealSelf.com*.

In conclusion, studying these narratives as texts, another deferment strikes the researcher. Just as the posthuman potential for radical restructuring of social and gender stereotypes is as yet unfulfilled on *RealSelf.com*, the posthuman bodies constructed

therein are also often incomplete or deferred. The images posted are usually of body parts, both pre-op and post-op. We almost never see the restructured posthuman product, only the process. Like Shelley Jackson's hypertextual monster in *Patchwork Girl*, which is a "Stitch Bitch", the corporeality of the bodies on *RealSelf.com* are also "banished bodies": "a hybrid of thing and thoughtIts public image, its face is a collage of stories, borrowed images, superstitions, fantasies. We have no idea what it 'really' looks like" (p. 523). The embodiment of the self as assemblage never attains completion or perfection, it is forever deferred, forever chimerical. The playing with the boundaries of the self, whether as bionic body or digital subjectivity is always an under-construction process.

Maybe we as readers, also playing with the boundaries of genres, can read the multiple, polyphonic stories and fractional subjectivities on *RealSelf.com* as an "emergent posthuman novel" of shifting embodiment/s: since these narratives share many of the characteristics of the posthuman novel identified by Steve Tomasula: "malleability, ease of recombination, dependence on the image, interactivity, infinite linkage and therefore indeterminacy, dispersal of Origins, of Author/Authority, its grounding in pattern rather than presence, and material-informational entities" (2010, pp. 17-18). The textual body of *RealSelf.com* is also a multiplicity of interfaces and linkages. It is an emerging, dispersed narrative of quest by a "posthuman collectivity": "'I' transformed into the 'we' of autonomous agents operating together to make a self" (Hayles 1999, p. 6). The questing, questioning, hybrid, hyper-mediated self/s on *RealSelf.com* complicates and texturizes the existing discourse of the fe/male body, playing with the boundaries of bodies and identities, stereotypes and chronologies. Whether this quest will lead to a radical erasure of embodiment altogether as posited by posthuman theorists like Hans Moravec (1988) and Ray Kurzweil (1999), or whether it will remain trapped in an endless circulatory loop of erasing and re-making the body – data made flesh and flesh made data – is a conjecture for the posthuman future tense.

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