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## When I Write to You... The Precarious Promise of Inventing Subjectivities Online

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## When I Write to You... *The Precarious Promise of Inventing Subjectivities Online*

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### I. Self-writing-as-other

A little over a year ago, former Notre Dame Linebacker Manti Te'o, a college football star considered a favorite for the Heisman Trophy, underwent a grueling ordeal of public humiliation. After seeing Te'o suffer the death of both his grandmother and his girlfriend and then go on to lead his team to victory, everyone in America who cares about college football was both empathetic and impressed. But soon an inspiring story of perseverance and emotional strength became a twisted fable of the pitfalls of living and loving online: pulpy, embarrassing, and difficult to comprehend. It turned out that Manti Te'o's girlfriend, Lennay Kekua, was not real. [1]

Te'o and Kekua met on Facebook. Their relationship grew over Twitter and text message, and over the phone. Although she had a voice and a picture and a personality, the woman Te'o had fallen in love with, whose death he'd grieved, was not what could traditionally be referred to as "a person." She was a character, invented by a male acquaintance of Te'o's, Ronaiah Tuaisosopo.

Of course, when the whole mess was revealed—ostensibly as much to Te'o's surprise as anyone else's—a lot of people had a lot of questions. Was Manti a liar? Was he gay? Had he been playing the public for their sympathies, or did he really have no idea that Lennay Kekua did not exist? The talk shows went wild speculating as to the various nefarious desires and deceptions that had led to the construction of such a sensational illusion.

Setting aside Katie Couric-style nosiness, Te'o's story warrants consideration as an example of the risks and potentials of love and intersubjectivity as they exist in life online. While Tuaisosopo's fabrication caused significant emotional chaos for himself and Te'o, it's nonetheless possible to approach what he did with empathy, and from this perspective, certain questions emerge. What happens when relationships are born as much through text- and image-mediated interaction as through face to face contact? What social circumstances led Tuaisosopo to such a project, and what possibilities was he seeking to open up? The amount of life we live through various modes of digitized, textual interaction has the capacity to make it more possible to actualize an imagined, desired version of oneself, even when that

version is very far away from who one is in the non-mediated world. But what happens to subjectivity when it is decoupled from bodies? As far back as Cyrano de Bergerac, people have been living as fantasy selves through writing, taking advantage of the opportunity to engage in relationships not as strongly tied to their physically, socially situated identities. It's not a new phenomenon, and it's not a digital phenomenon, however, the potential for such fantastical relationships is both increased and complicated by the contemporary operation of social media.

In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler (2005) argues that my "I" comes into being only by speaking to another, to "you," and by the imperative that your presence poses to me: that is, to give an account of who "I" am, and thereby find a way to speak as myself. Butler writes, "...the 'I' that I am is nothing without this 'you' and cannot even begin to refer to itself outside the relation to the other" (p. 82). With each sentence I construct, I conjure a "me" that can say something to "you." Without this interaction, "I" would not exist.

One place where it may be uniquely possible to take control of this moment of self-assertion is in the context of correspondence. In his later writing and lectures, Michel Foucault (2005) discusses what he terms "technologies of the self," a collection of processes of "soul training," intended to bring one's desires and oneself closer together (p. 55). The practices Foucault describes in this context can be inserted into the formative scene of address that Butler outlines to enact a new kind of creative agency in self-formation. Letter-writing is an example

of a “technology of the self,” as Foucault discusses it. [2] In his essay “Self Writing,” (1997) he argues, “The letter one writes acts, through the very action of writing, upon the one who addresses it, just as it acts through reading and rereading on the one who receives it” (p. 216). The self takes shape through the eyes of another and a capacity for self-creation emerges from within that relationship.

Foucault’s understanding of the self-shaping capacity of correspondence when taken together with Butler’s socially contingent self, provides a model for the location and cultivation of agency in the context of subjectivization. Te’o, as the “other” at the scene of address, presents the opportunity for Ronaiah Tuaisosopo to take on a *new “I,” separate from his “self,”* to become Lennay Kekua, while remaining Ronaiah. Foucault’s “self writing,” is the process of forming and sculpting the self by writing to another. Tuaisosopo’s interaction with Te’o we could describe as “self writing as other,” as he builds and actualizes a new, separated from him-self through correspondence.

However, when correspondence takes place on Twitter, rather than through private letters or e-mails, different variables come into play. The heightened sociality of this forum and the continuous collective negotiation of subjective position and identity entailed can add to the potential to create a new self that functions in the world with a fully realized, social identity. But it also places the means for identity determination partially in the hands of an uncontrollable collaborating public.

## II. Fantastic self-creation in fiction and social media

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler draws from Foucault's writing on technologies of the self because he also argues that the fractured nature of the self can be addressed via language. A "technology of the self" is precisely that, a technology: a productive process that one enacts on oneself in order to shape one's subjectivity, or one's capacity to speak as oneself (or as any self). Foucault (1986) speaks specifically about the practices associated with the "care of the self" in Hellenic Greece, explaining that Stoic philosophers such as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius wrote letters as a part of their practice of self-care, building close relationships, and enacting a process of self-examination. He writes, "there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together" (p. 51). The "other" in these exchanges is not an abstracted other, as in the psychoanalytic scene of address, but a specific other whose identity matters, with whom one interacts in real, experienced life—either a teacher or a close friend (Foucault, 2005, p. 54). The nature of these specific relationships also affects the nature of the practice. In the process of writing to someone, the self takes shape before the other's eyes and, in a sense, through their eyes, as a kind of apparatus. It is not a process of purging secrets or uncovering buried desire, but of training and self-sculpting, it is a creative process, what the Stoics called "tekhne tou biou," or "the art of living" (p. 178).

We can imagine that Tuaisosopo did not choose Manti Te'o at random to be his interlocutor, although it is unclear whether Lennay Kekua was created specifically to facilitate conversation with Te'o or not. Nonetheless, the invention of Lennay not only made it possible for Tuaisosopo to have an intimate relationship with Te'o, but his relationship with Te'o—its apparent depth and intensity—also made Lennay possible. Functioning as a productive technology of selfhood, it brought her into being.

Writing on Foucault and subjectivity, Simon O'Sullivan (2012) describes the practices that are a part of the "Care of the Self" as serving "simply to increase our capacity to be" (p. 72). Considering the self as "practiced," in Foucault's terms, Butler's "account" functions as a phenomenon through which we can produce our own subjectivities continuously as we interact with others, and language is what makes this radical self-creating agency possible. This space of invention exists all the time, but can be approached in more and less intentional ways. Ronaiah Tuaisosopo's creation of Lennay did make it possible for him to be differently, for a time, but it also had dire consequences. How can certain kinds of text-based relationships be engaged with so that they serve to increase our capacity to be without such fallout?

Understanding and activating this kind of fantastic agency in subjectivity requires looking at how our text-based relationships have consequences, good and bad, on our being. Text-based interactions present particular possibilities and particular problems for self-

creation, or finding a way to speak as oneself. Considering Twitter and Facebook in the context of “The Care of the Self,” it appears we are all perpetually writing ourselves through the gazes of hordes of imagined others. The knowledge of those potential observers shapes what we say and who we are. This dynamic of me, thinking about you, thinking about me is similar to the relationships Foucault writes about in the context of “The Care of the Self,” except on Twitter, we are not engaging in an intentional process with carefully chosen interlocutors, as Marcus Aurelius and Seneca were, rather we are more often seeing ourselves through the eyes of the unkind masses, creating an ever more clearly delineated space for our subjectivities to occupy. And we can sense everyone else doing the same thing.

This sense of watching and being watched can be exhausting. Another invented subjectivity of a kind, @Horse\_ebooks, was a Twitter-based art project that for years was thought to be just a particularly genius algorithm, producing randomly generated brilliance in inhuman quantity. When it was revealed that @Horse\_ebooks was the work of a couple of conceptual artists, the Internet was shocked and saddened. [3] Writing in *The New Inquiry*, Rob Horning (2013) argued that @Horse\_ebooks was appealing because it presented a break from the awareness of perpetual collaborative self-crafting that social media engenders. In the cacophony of reflexive subjective observation, when similar practices to those at work in “The Care of the Self” are performed for the public rather than in the safe confines of intimate relationships, the result can be an alienation so deep that the only consciousness we feel we can trust is that of a computer—an entity



not reflexively performing itself, or determining our performances of ourselves with its gaze. We want to turn that operation of self-creation off.

It's clear that these mutually constituting, correspondence-based relationships when engaged with en masse can be as limiting and determining as they are liberating. Just as Twitter made it possible for Lennay Kekua to exist, it also uncovered the deception that created her. For epistolary exchanges to have the potential to "increase our capacity to be," interlocutors must be carefully chosen and the process must be undertaken intentionally. While the complexity of living via social media might make it more possible for an invented entity like Lennay Kekua to be animated as a social subject, for Tuaisosopo, just as for Seneca, it was more specifically in the space of the dyadic relationship that the most capacity for self-invention emerged.

The epistolary novel-from-life *I Love Dick*, by Chris Kraus (1996) can serve as an example of how the semi-fantastic social space can be activated to enable a more fluid lived experience of subjectivity. In *I Love Dick*, Chris Kraus is the author and Chris Kraus is the main character. The story is told primarily through the letters that Chris writes to Dick, which are documents of an actual correspondence. Through writing to Dick, Kraus carves out a new position from which to speak. Chris explains to Dick that she used to be unable to write in the 1st person because she felt that, quote, "In order to write 1st Person narrative there needs to be a fixed self or persona." Through her one-sided correspondence, she's found that, as she says, "There's

no *fixed* point of self but it exists & by writing you can somehow chart that movement” (p. 139).

She has to make her way to this subjective position, which is fluid and changeable, through a relationship that is not quite grounded in the day to day, and must exist in text because it’s based on *imagined* intersubjectivity. Dick almost never writes back. She creates her desired subjectivity by intentionally fictionalizing the scene of address, bringing the imagined thoughts of Dick into her own thoughts. While the fact of Dick’s existence is essential, his actual engagement is unnecessary.

As Butler argues, we are only anyone in conversation with others, and *I Love Dick* shows how that dynamic, when it is taken to a fantastical and fiction-infused place facilitated by text-based correspondence, can be used to find a more sure-footed position from which to speak as oneself. Counter-intuitively, this stability might come when one finds a way to accept the fractious nature of one’s “self,” as Chris does, and as Tuaisosopo, perhaps, did not have the opportunity to do.

### III. Coping with subjectivity

Further considering Tuaisosopo in contrast to Kraus, it’s necessary to ask what changes when this subjectivizing social dynamic is used to create a separate “me” that is entirely distinct from the facts of

my identity as I live it with my embodied self. Butler, Foucault and Chris Kraus all work from the assumption that the self is in motion. It's a process, and not a composed entity. And while this might be experientially true, and feels personally true to me, it's not actually the pervading idea of "self" that most of us must grapple with in our day-to-day lives. We generally must be some one, and disruptions in that public coherence can cause great difficulty. What's more, once some major alteration is made, a new identity, even if it fits better, can have its limitations as well.

Lauren Berlant, in her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), discusses the "fantasy" of personal sovereignty as lending itself to a "militaristic and melodramatic view of individual agency by casting the human as most fully itself when assuming the spectacular posture of performative action" (p. 96). Berlant argues that this imperative towards the consistent performance of a sovereign self becomes a burden on our being (p. 102-5). Creating a new, distinct, and parallel self like Tuaisosopo did can help alleviate this burden, but because of what it means for any one to "be themselves," it can also create a rift that's difficult to sew back up. Online, in hyper-social spaces like Twitter, it is possible to make a new, fantastic "I", and to employ the animating power of fiction in the social world. But the same qualities that make this self-invention possible, a fill-in-the-blank kind of personhood that requires only a picture and a few friends to get started, also demand a perpetual negotiation of identity, a continuous public self-assertion that might exacerbate the very imperatives that lead to the necessity for escapist avatars.

Berlant discusses attachment and desire in a way that takes our own capacity for choice and agency within those desires as multi-directional, marked by practices of, as she writes, “self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance ... that indicate people’s struggles to change, but not traumatically, the terms of value in which their life-making activity has been cast” (p. 27). Ronaiah Tuaisosopo used Manti Te’o, in a sense, to take an extended break from himself as a unified entity. While this is a dramatic example, it’s possible to identify all kinds of more innocuous ways we find to take breaks from the performance of our “selves.”

Berlant argues that instances of “interrupted agency” are at work in what she calls “scandals of the appetite,” including food, sex, smoking, shopping and drinking, that are bodily desires individuals struggle to master, but find they cannot for myriad reasons (p. 102). Of course accepting that the performance of one’s sovereign self is a burden doesn’t necessarily mean becoming an alcoholic. Hellenic care of the self is a process meant, in part, to stop such “scandals of the appetite” from impinging on personhood (Foucault, 2005, p. 265). In *I Love Dick*, Chris Kraus lets a moment that would appear as a scandal of the appetite—the desire for sex outside of her marriage with a man who doesn’t want her—expand into what we could consider a novel-length moment of suspended agency, in which a new relation with agency is established. This happens through language, specifically text, and through fiction.

Lauren Berlant (2011) writes that in instances of imagined intersubjectivity, “The speaker [becomes] more or differently possible, because she has admitted, in a sense, the importance of speaking for, as, and to, two—but only under the condition, and illusion, that the two are really (in) one” (p. 26). Maybe it feels better to be *as two*, or as many, than to be just one, but there has to be something pulling these things together, to be *in one*. Ronaiah Tuaisosopo living as Lennay Kekua did not have this precarious unity.

While I don’t know very much about Tuaisosopo, and am not in a position to draw conclusions about his life and desires, I do know that Tuaisosopo who, like Te’o, comes from a religiously and socially conservative, Mormon Samoan community, [4] created the identity of a beautiful young woman in order to make it possible for himself to forge an emotional connection with another man, someone he would otherwise have not been able to interact with in the same way. But what was Lennay Kekua? She had a life: Manti Te’o has memories of speaking to her and loving her, and as Lennay, Tuaisosopo found intimacy and companionship with Te’o. What happens when the self-creating potentials of letter writing in the context of fiction are brought outside the space of literature to run wild in actual life, as sometimes happens on social media?

This kind of situation emerges from the same operations of self-care and self-creation that Seneca and Marcus Aurelius engaged with, and fiction is used in a way similar to how Chris Kraus uses it, to embrace a fractured “I” while nonetheless finding a way to occupy it.

However, the direction being moved towards is not a more coherent relationship with oneself. The kind of fantasy-living facilitated by social media, as in the case of Lennay Kekua, emerges as an essential, if desperate, coping mechanism in the constant struggle to exist as a sovereign self, to find intimacy not afforded by one's bodily existence while, in this case, staying within a specific community and its norms. Instead of negotiating a new position from which to speak and act, Tuaisosopo simply split himself in two, and social media facilitated that rupture. It can be read as a kind of last-ditch response to the strain of self-sovereignty.

The process Kraus undertakes allows her to continue to occupy her identity in a way that *feels better*. She makes herself "differently possible" (Berlant, 2011, p. 26) and "increases her capacity to be" (O'Sullivan, 2012, p. 72) without breaking herself into pieces. Chris Kraus was able to find a way to house a fractured "I" within her "self," but Ronaiah's Lennay, set loose in the mediated world, took on a life all her own, she stopped belonging to him, and wreaked emotional havoc on everyone she encountered.

In one way or another, however, we all need relief from self-sovereignty. Social media can be a kind of hyperreality, where life is like a lucid dream. The burden of this self-sovereignty might be felt more acutely, but the possibilities for its release are also greater. For better and for worse, in this space there is an incredible amount of agency in *who one lives as*, but unifying these various selves and

lives can pose a challenge. The possibilities go deeper and are more consequential for our being than we might realize.

## Notes

- [1] See Deadspin (2013), "Manti Te'o's dead girlfriend, the most heartbreaking and inspirational story of the college football season, is a hoax," <http://deadspin.com/manti-teos-dead-girlfriend-the-most-heartbreaking-an-5976517>.
- [2] For a succinct outline of Foucault's conception of technologies of the self, see Foucault, M. (1993), "About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self: Two lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory*, 21(2), 198-227.
- [3] See S. Wanenchack in *Cyborgology* (2013), "Unfortunately, as you already know, people," <http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2013/09/25/unfortunately-as-you-probably-already-know-people/>.
- [4] In an essay for *The Atlantic*, I. Gershon (2013) wrote in detail about the Lennay Kekua story in the context of the Samoan-American community, "The Samoan Roots of the Manti Te'o Hoax," <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/the-samoan-roots-of-the-manti-teo-hoax/272486/>.

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