Australasian Association of Writing Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES
Number 64 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

A very online subjectivity: Poetry, embodiment and digital spaces

Julia Cooper Clark

To cite this article: Cooper Clark, J. (2021). A very online subjectivity: Poetry, embodiment and digital spaces. In J. Wilkinson, C. Atherton & S. Holland-Batt (Eds.) *Poetry Now*. TEXT Special Issue 64.

University of Sydney

Julia Cooper Clark

A very online subjectivity: Poetry, embodiment and digital spaces

Abstract:

In 1991, Marjorie Perloff wrote, in her book *Radical Artifice*, that modern media challenges poetics to engage in a 'dialectic between the simulacrum and the other, a dialectic no longer between the image and the real ... but between the word and the image' (1991, p. 92). She further acknowledged how digital technology had altered the relationship between reader and text through new formats and possibilities of interaction, but also asked '[W]hat about its effect on our human interactions?' (Perloff, 1991, p. 188).

This article focuses on three contemporary Australian poetry publications, varying in format and presentation – Shastra Deo's 'Self-Portrait as Goro Majima' (2019); *Devotionals* by Marcus Whale (2018); and Holly Isemonger's digital chapbook *Deluxe Paperweight* (2016) – all of which navigate concepts of anonymity, authenticity, the (un)returned gaze, and the experience of physical alienation in digital spaces. Through close reading and analysis of these works, and drawing on interviews (conducted by the author of this article) with the respective poets, this article considers the possibilities of constructing self and subjectivity in the digital age in poetry and digital spaces.

Biographical note:

Julia Cooper Clark is a PhD student, poet, and reviewer based in Sydney, living on Ku-ring-gai and Darug land and working on Gadigal land. She is currently writing her thesis about the aestheticisation of bodies under consumer culture in contemporary feminist poetry at the University of Sydney. Her honours thesis titled '"Please consider me forever": The Cuteness of Fiona Hile and Kate Lilley' won the Dame Leonie Kramer Prize in Australian Poetry in 2017. In 2015, Julia won the University of Sydney Union Verge Award in Poetry for her poem 'Another Triptych'. Her criticism and nonfiction have appeared in *Archer*, *Rabbit*, *Plumwood Mountain* and *Audrey* Journal, while her poetry has appeared in *Scum Mag* and *ARNA*. If she's not reading or writing, she's at the theatre.

Keywords: Poetry, digital, subjectivity, aesthetics, affect

Poetry and the internet are not new bedfellows. For at least thirty years, poets, academics, and enthusiastic witnesses have been tracing the presence of poetry online and ruminating on the possible implications of digital technology infiltrating the canonical cultural arena of poetry. In *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff wrote that modern media challenged poetry to engage in 'a dialectic between the simulacrum and the other, a dialectic no longer between the image and the real … but between the word and the image' (1991, p. 92). Her argument identified the proliferation of curated, constructed images in advertising, television, and the new digital space of the internet as changing the world to which poets are natural responders. Using this provocation as a starting point, this article examines the positioning of the poet in the overlap of digital spaces and poetry.

Further, when considering the place of poetry in the digital age, Oren Izenberg reimagines a purpose of contemporary poetry that developed by moving away from traditional understandings of the poem as a literary or aesthetic project (2011, p. 9). Instead, Izenberg argues that contemporary poetry operates as an ontological project to re-establish 'the concept and the value of *the person*' (2011, p. 9). Reworking Perloff's conceptualisation of the dynamic world -> poet -> poem, Izenberg sees a more cyclical pattern in contemporary poetry of poem -> poet -> world -> poem.

> When we describe a poem as having a 'speaker,' or as giving 'voice' to a person, we are not *assuming* anything about what a person is. Rather, we are taking the artifice of voice in the poem to offer something like a model or a theory of the person, or even a pedagogy of personhood. In its orchestrations of perception, conception, and affect, a poem elaborates upon or expands the possibilities of what a person can see, think, and feel. Through its constructive work with the sound and matter of language, the poem gives shape to the concept of the person who can think, say, and make *these things*. (Izenberg, 2011, p. 10)

Rather than the poem reflecting the world, the poem and its language are reflections of a person who exists in the world creating poetry. As such, using a selection of contemporary poets working in and around digital spaces in their poetics, this article considers the possibilities of constructing self and subjectivity in the digital age in poetry and digital spaces.

Marcus Whale, Shastra Deo, and Holly Isemonger are contemporary Australian poets writing about the internet and self-(re)presentation as digital subjects extended or separated from the physical self. In the works discussed below, they demonstrate the construction of the self and subjectivity as overlapping poetic and digital processes. Whale's poetry collection *Devotionals* (2018), Deo's poem 'Self-Portrait as Goro Majima' (2019), and the digital chapbook *Deluxe Paperweight* (2016) by Isemonger, vary both in relation to writing through and/or about the internet and also in publication format; however, they fit within the online and e-poetry aesthetics of adjacent internet-interested poets like Oscar Schwartz, Rory Green, and Mez Breeze. What is interesting about Whale, Deo, and Isemonger, and most compelling for this article, is the presence and positioning of the poet in their examination of digital subjectivity.

To start, Isemonger's digital chapbook *Deluxe Paperweight* introduces the gaze through the mediating screen as a reflexive self-mediation heightened through the process of self-representation online. Then, her poetry, which employs digital technologies to dissolve the presence of the poet, offers a counter-positioning to the hyper-self-referential. Similarly, Whale's *Devotionals* is a collection of poetry published in traditional print that focuses on online communication and relationships as an examination of the solitary subject. Drawing on forum conversation archives, pop songs, and online ephemera like avatars and celebrity paparazzi shots to challenge notions of authenticity and sincerity in digital spaces, Whale refocuses on the subject's perceptions, assumptions, and desires in shaping their online environment as a reflection of themselves. Finally, Deo's poem 'Self-Portrait as Goro Majima' turns to considerations of embodiment in the boundaries of self and other in video games. Originally published in an online journal, Deo's poem illuminates the complexity of synchronicity between digital and physical spaces. By reading the poetry through considerations of digital technology, narrative studies, and embodiment, these three poets demonstrate the complex overlap between digital and poetic spaces in the construction of self and subjectivity as a continuous, unstable process.

***

When Perloff wrote in 1991 about the influence of media on poetry, she was writing about the long-held belief that poets are natural responders or witnesses to the surrounding world. But the world was quickly moving away from Romantic notions of the natural world and, since then, the boundary between 'real' and digital worlds has only collapsed further, reshaping the world to which poets respond.

> There is today no landscape uncontaminated by sound bytes or computer blips, no mountain peak of lonely valley beyond the reach of the cellular phone and the microcassette player. Increasingly, then, the poet's arena is the electronic world. (Perloff, 1991, p. xiii)

As Isemonger confirms, 'Poetry is built from the world we live in, and we spend a lot of time living in digital spaces. Poems are not translating digital spaces, they are built from them' (H. Isemonger, personal correspondence, February 28, 2021). In considering the placement of the poet in relation to the digital world, the poet is implicated or entangled in digital space and its processes and limitations as participant and witness. In *Deluxe Paperweight*, Isemonger explores these processes and limitations with the mediating screen as a boundary between poet and poem.

Amongst the poems in Isemonger's digital chapbook are three collages composed of photographs, movie stills, and screen captures from YouTube videos. The first of these collages features images of eyes, eclipses, and photographs of people photographing paintings in museums with their smart phones (Isemonger, 2016, p. 4). The second collage is similar, with movie stills of eyes as well as other images of mediating seeing; people looking through peep holes, binoculars, cameras, and windows (Isemonger, 2016, p. 7). In the third and final collage,

Isemonger has grouped screen grabs from a YouTube video of John Berger's 1972 television series *Ways of Seeing*, based on his book from the same year, along with three versions of 'Mirror' by Paul Delvaux, and various images of women looking at themselves in mirrors (Isemonger, 2016, p. 12). These three collages form the chapbook's central theme of gaze and, more specifically, the mediated gaze as depicted or realised in art across film, television, photography, and painting, as well as how the mediated gaze manifests in people's relationships with these artworks.

The importance of gaze and digital spaces is first illustrated in the first collage's collection of photographs of people photographing paintings in museums with their smart phones. Social media has largely been held responsible for the habit of documenting and capturing as much of real life as possible for sharing online, and the irony of introducing a screen to mediate a 'real'-life experience is not lost on Isemonger:

> The internet is comprised of mediated seeing. We are constantly looking at a screen. People are documenting their experiences so much that [they] spend more time looking at the world through a screen than with their eyes […] Taking selfies, or presenting yourself on [I]nstagram etc. has this strange effect. We spend so much time documenting ourselves and our lives that it changes the way we think, there is a constant attention to how we are being seen, even if it is subconscious. (H. Isemonger, personal correspondence, February 28, 2021)

In the third collage, Isemonger reveals her particular interest in the gendered nature of gaze with repeated images of women looking at themselves as a reversal of the conventional male gaze. All four of the paintings in this collage, including 'Mirror' by Delvaux, 'The Toilet of Venus' by Diego Velázquez, and 'Vanity' by Hans Memling, picture the woman naked, evoking the age-old positioning of women in art as vulnerable, pretty objects to be looked at by the male artist. But, at the same time, the paintings include the women's own gaze in the mirror's reflection. In an interview about *Deluxe Paperweight*, Isemonger referenced Berger's statement on women's self-monitoring in *Ways of Seeing*:

> A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. (Berger, 1972, p. 46)

Berger explains how the male gaze and its prevalence in art and media has led to its internalisation in the gazed-upon women. In Isemonger's selected images, the women are surveyed and surveyor, watching themselves being watched. This process of self-monitoring can be seen playing out in digital spaces through the construction of identities on personal homepages or social media profiles as users perform their identities and see themselves being

seen by others. Rob Cover sees online spaces like these as spaces of 'ongoing reflexive performance and articulation of self' (2014, p. 55). Like the mirror of the paintings, the mediating screen of digital spaces is a reflective surface through which the subject has access to the external gaze of others and greater opportunities to integrate it into their construction of self.

Further, the mediating screen and reflexive gaze of digital spaces muddles the construction of self with consumerist and capitalist ideology. When asked about this motif of the mirror in the collaged images, Isemonger explained how the internet and digital spaces we occupy also work as mirrors, reflecting ourselves back at ourselves through algorithms that 'show us content that we already know or will like' (H. Isemonger, personal correspondence, February 28, 2021). It is worth noting here that the primary purpose of online algorithms is to maintain sustained engagement from the viewer to extend their time spent online and increase the opportunities for sales. The mirror of digital spaces is about capitalism and commodification, also known as the attention economy. When examining the construction of self online through a narrative studies lens, Anna Poletti and Julie Rak noted the frequent conflation between identity and product (2014, p. 9). They cite the two key related sources for this as, firstly, the transformation of the self from process into data vulnerable to 'identity theft' and, secondly, the proliferation of personal brands and celebrity identity, 'a cultural construction where the representations of one's person become a commodity, which is traded legally or stolen' (2014, p. 11). This commodification of self is possible for all users constructing online subjectivities; however, Poletti and Rak additionally see writers as prone to the conflation of online identity and commodity through the parallel conflation of narrative and product prevalent in literary studies (2014, pp. 9-10). Thus, the digital gaze is able to entangle poets as participants in the commodified construction of self and in their response to the digital world.

This commodifying process is made manifest in Whale's work as the circular, consumptive experience of looking at yourself echoes his conceptualisation of desire in digital spaces as a solitary, individual experience. Whale's collection features poetry and an autobiographical postscript regarding his experience as a teenager being catfished online. For about a year, teenage Whale developed a relationship through forums, emails, and phone calls with a boy who probably was not who he said he was. Titled *Devotionals*, Whale's collection hints towards a distanced yearning and expression of desire which he identifies in online relationships. Amongst the poems about forum conversations and online identity are a series of 'Devotionals' composed of pop song lyrics and references to celebrities.

> My skin
> My voice
> My heart
> You have all of it
> I have nothing left
> Yours
> My vision's blurred
> Come to me

> I'll take anything
> Lay it on me
> Let it all come down
> Turn me out
> Make me spent
> Slow my ache
> Til my body's gone (Whale, 2018, p. 11)

The language is exaggerated and heavy with angsty desire to be seen and wanted by the desired. At the same time as wanting to give away the self to love, the speaker equally wants to be consumed by the love, willing to 'take anything', but either outcome leads to the sacrifice of the speaker, their body spent and gone. This excessive form of sacrifice informs the 'Devotionals' throughout the collection and represents the extremes the speaker is willing to go to for the desired one. Whale uses this voice and borrows from the devotional form to explore online and specifically queer modes of address:

> In [*Devotionals*] I intended to create forms of writing that had a teenage character that resembled song lyrics of pop or punk music. This is perhaps a 'formula' for the book, which was intended to explore forms of writing that are excessive in a way that echoed the performativity of an amorous, online, epistolary address. Excess is a queer modality in my opinion, for its ability to destabilise accepted or acceptable forms of expression, particularly those that would deceptively offer us the myth of authenticity. I think of operating an online persona as a kind of exaggerated example of how self-expression is more generally performative. The use of excessive forms of writing in [*Devotionals*] is my attempt to bring attention to this performativity. (M. Whale, personal correspondence, February 16, 2021)

The various elements of the constructed online persona additionally turn the performance on itself, undermining and shifting the intended audience as 'the avatar and username are also analogues for how self-presentation is constructed in any context, the substructure of which is unknowable, even to our own selves' (M. Whale, personal correspondence, February 16, 2021).

Additionally, the performativity of self online often draws attention to its own construction as demonstrated in Whale's poem 'New Contact'. 'New Contact' takes the username as an example of identity-construction when the speaker announces, 'I'm re-spelling my / username. You can / call me 'whale' now' (Whale, 2018, p. 13). A name one chooses for themselves is a clear opportunity for self-expression and self-construction, but this act is complicated by the speaker's motivations as in reaction to their internet friend who recently re-named as 'me'. Cover specifically identifies the act of naming as part of the 'performative and reiterative play of "self"' online (Cover, 2014, p. 63). But '[r]ather than a subject coming into being when it is 'named', a subject performs his or her subjectivity in accord with a discourse in which the name or categorization occurs' (Cover, 2014, p. 63). So, the naming act is about fitting in, categorising, belonging to a digital space. The choice of the name 'me', then, is deliberately disruptive and unsettling to the understanding of authenticity in performing the self. While

acknowledging the irony of talking to a disembodied voice online called 'me', Whale uses this moment to challenge the disruption of authenticity by undermining it further: off-handedly the speaker responds to 'me' with 'I'm fully sincere, I promise. Then / again, who isn't?' (Whale, 2018, p. 13). The implication is that sincerity in online relationships and the presentation of self in these spaces is uncertain, interpreted through every individual's assumptions and choices more than any kind of metric.

For both Isemonger and Whale's work, the gaze operating in digital spaces is complicated and often reflexive, watching yourself being watched. The reflexive gaze then informs the performance of self. While Whale's 'Devotionals' draws attention to the distance between the self and other in feelings of desire, and Isemonger's illustrations of the mitigating screen echoes the male gaze of artists that has then been internalised and reversed in the motif of the mirror, they both navigate between the poet as process and the poet as consumable commodity.

***

Returning to the idea of the construction of self as process, in a study examining a group of women's experiences creating personalised homepages online, Helen Kennedy noticed the prevalence of how the women would continue to edit and tweak the pages throughout the study. She identified this as a manifestation of the construction of self as a process, rather than a fixed position, in digital form:

> [T]hese polarized understandings of Internet identities – fragmented and anonymous *or* fixed and archived – are not helpful. After all, a web page is a media form, which is never entirely finished, just as identity composition is a continuous process – both are constantly 'under construction'. (Kennedy, 2014, p. 34)

This state of being 'under construction', fluid, impermanent, is a feature of digital spaces where the form, the site, the code, are always open and shifts and changes occur outside of the control of the user. The scaffolding of the digital spaces in which users construct their identities is termed 'Internet affordances' by Poletti and Rak and encompasses the coding, pathways, and connections in-built to digital spaces which guide users on how to interact with/in these spaces and even how to be (Poletti & Rak, 2014, p. 5). This tension in the process of digital identity-construction between the full subjectivity of the user and the limitations of the space is explored in Isemonger's translation poems.

Rather than using invented constraints on language, as exhibited by the Oulipo group, or physical constraints such as collage or concrete poetry, Isemonger uses digital technologies as tools to alter and influence her poetry. 'Free Online Translation Service' is a poem written through Google Translate where Isemonger repeatedly fed her original paragraph through a translation into another language and then back again into English (H. Isemonger, personal correspondence, February 28, 2021). Through this process, the language is broken apart and hobbled back together in a semblance of its original form. A line such as 'the purr of the computer and his stomach beneath the duvet' becomes 'below the belly computer quilts' and then 'breast love to get rid of the computer' (Isemonger, 2016, p. 6). Another, 'the smell of his

shirt she left in the hotel' translates to 'his shirt, he tastes of hotel' and 'they call a shirt taste, the hotel's sweat' (Isemonger, 2016, p. 6). From a rather melancholic first paragraph, Google Translate takes little time turning the poem into absurdity, shifting the tone haphazardly into silliness. In this poem, Isemonger uses digital technology as a tool for her writing in a way that demonstrates her playful approach to language, but it also illuminates two complicated elements of digital poetics: the position of the poet as writer and, relatedly, the unknown limitations or influences of digital technologies.

Operating between the illusion of control and the hidden limitations of digital technology, these poems make visible the process of poetry and the boundary between the poet and the poem. On the surface, Isemonger is translating the poem, copying it, and pasting it into the program. But the invisible work of the translation program produces the code that produces the words. Isemonger uses digital tools to create distance between herself and her work, defamiliarising and distorting it (H. Isemonger, personal correspondence, February 28, 2021). But to what extent do these digital tools complicate the relationship between the poet and the poem? The influence of the internet and digital technologies on the notions of originality and authorship has been written about extensively (see Goldsmith, 2011) but it is worth bringing up here to consider the position of the poet in Isemonger's work. Isemonger explains her take on the internet's influence:

> The internet has completely changed the way we engage with language and texts. In the digital era language has become more transmutable; it is a material that we can copy, paste, rearrange or translate on a whim. And this has changed our thought processes, the way we write and interact with each other. (H. Isemonger, personal correspondence, February 28, 2021)

As a result, she sees that 'it has made poetry more playful and tactile' (H. Isemonger, personal correspondence, February 28, 2021). So, in Isemonger's poetics, the tools available in digital spaces allow distance between the poet and language, which both allows more experimental poetry but also draws attention to the artificial control poets have over language. Isemonger's use of digital technologies displaces the poet from their poetry. Interestingly, though, Isemonger does not take a step into the digital melee of coding or AI to write her poems like other e-poets who write the generating code rather than (or in addition to) the final poem product. Rather, Isemonger, in using readily available online tools like Google Translate, allows digital technology to 'get in between' the poet and their poem to the degree that her authorial hand dissolves into the ether with every new translation.

In Whale's poetry, digital spaces have a similarly destructive influence on the poet but instead of targeting notions of authorship, Whale's poems dissolve the body. In 'Flood', Whale's speaker predicts the end of the physical world. The cause is ambiguous, at once at the hand of the speaker, 'One day / I think I will have dissolved the / entire Earth', as well as via the mysterious force of the internet,

> They
> call this a network, this dark

> spread of matter, which makes
> ruins of those already vacant
> bodies. (Whale, 2018, p. 37)

The image of a dissolving or decaying body is frequently evoked in *Devotionals* in post-apocalyptic scenarios like this one but also as a seemingly inevitable outcome of engaging with digital spaces. Whale explains, 'The virtual space allows for a breakdown in the connection of the body to the self. The poems that explore an ambivalence towards the body are also working through the unknowability of others' bodies and how their virtual representations also destabilise the fact of their physicality' (M. Whale, personal correspondence, February 16, 2021). The ambiguity of the body and self comes through in the language of 'Flood' where the speaker finds the future 'hard to predict' but speculates 'It could have been real. I might / have known how to stop' (Whale, 2018, p. 37). The dissolution of agency from the earlier 'My gaze hits skin / and the organic liquefies' culminates in the closing lines:

> They'll be
> me and I'll be them and maybe
> then I'll know what it was like. (Whale, 2018, p. 37)

This vague idea makes it seem possible that shedding the physical body could allow true communication and understanding, 'maybe'. For Whale, then, the disembodied world of digital spaces serves to both re-enforce and illuminate the distance between people and the self-delusion of authentic communication in physical spaces. While it may seem that digital spaces are more unstable sites of self and self-presentation, they merely highlight the unknowability of the other that is already true in physical spaces.

However, in the distinction between physical and digital spaces, it cannot be ignored that the digital space is entirely reliant on the existence of the physical world in terms of infrastructure, coding, and, of course, the body required to navigate these technologies. In Whale and Deo's respective works, the role of the body in constructing the self and in navigating through digital spaces in 'real' life and through poetry seem to sit on opposite ends of the spectrum. Whale's body is an illusion, dissolving into the back of the imagination, and demonstrating the limitations of physical perception in the process, whereas Deo's body takes centre-stage to blur the boundary between digital and physical, and to complicate the distinct subjectivity of self in video game play.

Whale addresses his interest in digital selves online, in an interview about the collection, where he compared online forums to 'a sort of epistolary address' or 'a devotional hymn, [where] the instant message or email or forum private message is a wish or a declaration before it's a dialogue' (M. Whale, personal correspondence, February 16, 2021). In this sense, the digital interface alters the experience of communication by disembodying the encounter as well as compounding the speaking subject's solitary physicality. He continues, 'I'm compelled by the ability of virtual space to collapse or scramble our perception of physical space, its ability to bring attention to the nature of intimacy, how physical encounters can be both less and more intimate than virtual ones' (M. Whale, personal correspondence, February 16, 2021).

Importantly, however, the physical body and its surrounding environment do not cease to exist in digital spaces but merely lose urgency or the pressures of proximity and immediacy. In her analysis of the development of cybernetics, N. Katherine Hayles argues against the contemporary construction of the posthuman digital subject as disembodied. From the Turing test, Hayles identifies the liberal ideology that divorced information from physical specificity, instead imagining it as a 'bodiless fluid that could flow between different substrates without loss of meaning or form' (1999, p. xi). However, erasing embodiment from the theory does not mean it ceases to exist as Hayles concludes, 'Information, like humanity, cannot exist apart from the embodiment that brings it into being as a material entity in the world; and embodiment is always instantiated, local, and specific' (1999, p. 49). In 'Tom's Avatar', Whale grapples with the disparity between his encounters with Tom as pixel avatar representation and the physical embodied reality of Tom that exists elsewhere.

> I think he must have no body.
> I disembodied him.
> I guess the projection is immortal.
> I know we're only holographic anyway.
> I'm not sure where his avatar resides.
> It's maybe no longer on the internet. (Whale, 2018, p. 47)

Tom's whole physical being has been flattened into the avatar as his representational form online, but Whale's speaker reverses this flattening, attempting to fill out the form with context and memories and re-embodying the person behind the information. He attempts to add specifics but struggles, turning Tom's avatar into 'it' absurdly vacationing, feeling ill, owning a hat. In the closing lines, the speaker turns their attention to the mechanism constructing the boundary between digital and physical: the technological infrastructure that translates bodies into data.

> Somewhere, maybe the Pacific, undersea,
> there's his mess of borderlines.
> A shell's groaning,
> gore encased, sunk deep in the fibre optic. (Whale, 2018, p. 47)

The physical of the digital is the technology and infrastructure that allows the creation and navigation of digital spaces. Hayles identifies the technology as a key element in representing bodies in digital spaces, one that has become a mediating presence between physical and digital, so integral as to be inseparable from the subject (1999, p. xiii). As such, the bodies of Whale's poetry remain entangled within and without digital spaces.

While Whale's bodies dissolve into pixels and imagination in relation to digital spaces, Shastra Deo's poem 'Self-Portrait as Goro Majima' compounds the physicality of the body in the synchronicity of video games. The poem details the poet's gameplay as the character Goro Majima in the *Yakuza* video games. The language is visceral in the description of Majima on screen with his 'hips, thew and sinew', 'taut belly', 'rind', 'blood', 'scars', and 'fine-boned

wrists' (Deo, 2019, n.p.). The description at times is nearly medical in tone, with scientific specificity. Additionally, Majima's body is animated by movement, filled out with bodily sensation like 'the throatful of sham / dialect' or 'Spit oozing' or the way the poem's speaker claims, 'Swell of you fits / better than I ever did' (Deo, 2019, n.p.). There is a fullness to the physicality in this poem that resists the reality of Majima as two-dimensional pixels on a screen.

Deo/the speaker's body exists in the poem, too, often in relation to inhabitation: 'I like trying on your body'; 'I want a change / of skin' (Deo, 2019, n.p.). Deo calls her poetry practice of adopting personas, whether writing with the voice of a known character or simply distancing her poet self from the poem's 'I', ventriloquism (S. Deo, personal correspondence, February 11, 2021). From the title, Deo introduces the poem with a paradoxical framework of representing the self as an 'other'. This continues into the language of the poem as the speaker shifts easily between pronouns 'I', 'you', and 'us' when describing the poet herself, Majima, and their joined identity.

> Have you noticed our body's
> all wrong? Remember
> when we could keep both eyes open? Flash back to April,
> before I could move you, when I could only
> pause or turn away, watermelon
> we smashed to pieces, our hand and its gesture toward the last
> days of spring, the sticky
> -hot joy of you before we knew
> exactly
> what we would do to each other. (Deo, 2019, n.p.)

Deo explains this fluidity as exemplary of how she speaks about video games while she is playing, sometimes condensing the movement of the hands on the controller and Majima on the screen into '"I did this"', '"I did that"' (S. Deo, personal correspondence, February 11, 2021). The action of game play involves the collaboration of movement between the character and the player that Deo represents in the poem as a collapsed, multifaceted, and shared subjectivity.

In this poem, the process of speaking as someone else in poetry maps well onto the relationship between character and player in video games and extends to adopting the character's body explicitly. In the world of the video game, the ability to align the player's perceptions and intentions with the avatar's is tied to their ability to overlay their bodies (Schröter, 2016, p. 196). When 'embodying an other – the supposed binary between self and other becomes blurry', as Deo describes. 'Our [Deo and Majima's] bodies often feel in sync; our attention to the game world's happenings is almost always equally matched. […] It's a faux embodiment, but nonetheless he moves when I am moving' (S. Deo, personal correspondence, February 11, 2021). Felix Schröter refers to a video game's 'actional' perspectives as the means that allow the player to experience subjective agency and embodiment in the game (Schröter, 2016, p. 197). He continues to explain that the player's body schema extends to include the avatar's

body in game play (p. 205). As such, it is the action, the shared movement of the player with their controller and the moving digital body of the avatar that creates digital subjectivity in video games. Through the shared, overlapping movements of the player and the character, Deo is able to bypass the screen that separates the physical and digital spaces, joining these two realities with a single body.

By turning the body into the locus of subjectivity for both game play and poetic lyrical subjectivity, Deo presents the complicated and overlapping experiences of self-presentation in digital spaces in a way that varies markedly from Whale's disembodied and dissolving ambiguous self. In comparing the two poets, the body takes on great significance in the process of constructing self online, and also in the conceptualisation of digital spaces in poetic renderings.

***

Digital technologies have infiltrated nearly every aspect of the modern world, shifting daily encounters between people and the world into digital spaces at an increasing rate. As such, digital spaces are sites of experimentation, construction, interrogation, and dissolution of the self and subjectivity through consideration of identity, narrative, and embodiment. Isemonger's collages in *Deluxe Paperweight* establish the terms of the poet's relationship with the mediating screen of digital spaces as a reflexive mirror, turning the subject's gaze back on themselves. But in her translation poems, the hidden limitations of digital technologies allow the poet to create a distance between themselves and their poetry. In either instance, digital spaces are able to get between the poet and the poem, disrupting the traditional dynamic of poets as natural responders to the world. Furthermore, Whale in *Devotionals* and Deo in 'Self-Portrait as Goro Majima' navigate the complicated boundary between the physical body and digital representation. While they come to differing conclusions, their explorations of embodiment are illuminating in unpicking the distinction between 'real' and digital. In the poetry of Whale, Isemonger, and Deo, digital spaces and poetic spaces overlap whereby the poet engages with the process of subjectivity through each realm, coming to new ways of being between the physical and digital self.

References

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books.

Cover, R. (2014). Becoming and Belonging: Performativity, Subjectivity, and the Cultural Purposes of Social Networking. In A. Poletti & J. Rak (Eds.). *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (pp. 55-69). The University of Wisconsin Press.

Deo, S. (2019). Self-Portrait as Goro Majima. *Peril*, *35*. https://peril.com.au/back-editions/edition-35/self-portrait-as-goro-majima/

Hayles, N.K. (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. University of Chicago Press.

Isemonger, H. (2016). *Deluxe Paperweight*. Stale Objects dePress, Tumblr, https://staleobjectsdepress.tumblr.com/post/147767800545/holly-isemonger-deluxe-paperweight

Izenberg, O. (2011). *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*. Princeton University Press.

Kennedy, H. (2014). Beyond Anonymity, or Future Directions for Internet Identity Research. In In A. Poletti & J. Rak (Eds.). *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (pp. 25-41). The University of Wisconsin Press.

Perloff, M. (1991). *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. University of Chicago Press.

Poletti, A. & Rak, J. (2014). Introduction: Digital Dialogues. In A. Poletti & J. Rak (Eds.). *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (pp. 3-22). The University of Wisconsin Press.

Schröter, F. (2016). Walk a Mile in My Shoes: Subjectivity and Embodiment in Video Games. In M. S. Reinerth & J. Thon (Eds.). *Subjectivity across Media: Interdisciplinary and Transmedial Perspectives* (pp. 196-213). Routledge.

Whale, M. (2018). *Devotionals*. Ruin Press.