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Virtual Play, Visible Lives: The New Subjects of Online Environments

How are digital technologies affecting the composition, assemblage, and networking of our lives and life stories? Digital technologies and new media reorganize the presentation of lives and the kinds of stories people are enabled to tell on protocol-driven and user-authored sites inextricably linked to the resources and restrictions of technocratic late-capitalism. The analytical and theoretical frames of life writing scholarship provide helpful concepts and categories for thinking about these automedial modes of online lives. We focus on six key terms of subject formation that resituate coordinates of time and space, practices of self-study, and the boundaries of what analog media term the “self”: archives, memory, identity, authenticity, branding, and quantification. In each, digital technologies reshape the presentation of life stories, as well as networks of relationship and belief structures. But even as practices of digital encoding open up new fields of play, they may foreclose some established possibilities of self-representation.

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Smith and Watson have co-authored **Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives** (second, expanded edition, 2010 and co-edited **Before They Could Vote: American Women’s Autobiographical Writing, 1819-1919** (2006), **Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance**, 2002; **Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader**, 1998; **Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography**, 1996; **De/Colonizing the Subject: Gender and the Politics of Women’s Autobiography**, 1992. They have also co-authored several essays including

“Witnessing or False Witnessing? Metrics of Authenticity, Collective ‘I’-Formations, and the Ethic of Verification in First-person Testimony” (forthcoming, **Biography**, Fall 2012).